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John Ford and the Author Theory: contribution of Anglo-Saxon criticism towards debate

John Ford y la Teoría del Autor: la aportación de la crítica anglosajona al debate

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ABSTRACT: Tradition in cinema criticism has given excessive importance to Cahiers du Cinéma in relation to Fordian authorship. However, it was in fact the 'Turkish youths' (Cahiers's critics) the ones who not only undertook radical theories as regards cinema auteur but they were also the ones who decided what was the appropriate moment in which to establish Ford as an author, developing wide arguments on that issue. On a rather discreet level, but much earlier in time, the British magazine *Sequence* defended with strong reasoning the Fordian cause in the late forties. That position also made *Sequence* critics face the main obstacles in the Author Theory, although from a less systematic point of view. The existence and importance of Peter Ericsson's article published in *Sequence* in 1947 in which the first reasons for the Fordian cause are defined, appears very clearly in the present article. From 1950 onwards and in the same magazine, the critic Lindsay Anderson would undertake once again the work that was raised by Ericsson.

Key words: John Ford, criticism, authorship, *Sequence*, *New Left Review*, *Film Quarterly*.

RESUMEN: La tradición de la crítica cinematográfica ha otorgado un papel excesivo a *Cahiers du Cinéma* en lo que respecta a la autoría fordiana. Si bien, fueron los "jóvenes turcos" (los críticos de *Cahiers*) los que radicalizaron las posturas sobre el auteur cinematográfico y decidieron en qué momento correspondía erigir a Ford en autor, desarrollando amplios argumentarios sobre la cuestión, en un plano más discreto pero muy anterior, fue la revista británica *Sequence* la que defendió a finales de los cuarenta la causa fordiana con razones sólidas. Esa postura también hizo acometer a los críticos de *Sequence* los principales escollos de la Teoría del Autor aunque desde un punto de vista menos sistemático. En este artículo, se pone de manifiesto la existencia e importancia del artículo de Peter Ericsson publicado en *Sequence* en 1947 con el que se definen las primeras razones de la causa fordiana y a través del cual se da pie al encumbramiento que retomará el crítico Lindsay Anderson a partir de 1950 en la misma revista.

Palabras clave: John Ford, crítica, autoría, *Sequence*, *New Left Review*, *Film Quarterly*.

1. Introduction

“John Ford is, in my opinion, the best director, the most complex one in the history of cinema. (...). He is an autobiographical film maker, whose view of the world transcends its limits and empties itself into his films”. Eduardo Torres-Dulce defined John Ford with such words, after publishing his last essay on the film maker¹. Torres-Dulce’s comment clearly highlights Ford’s most outstanding feature as a director, that of being his own author. However, the history of criticism in relation to John Ford’s authorship clearly shows many discrepancies and an important lack of agreement. Before co-founding the production company Argosy Pictures (1939-1940), John Ford mainly worked for the System in the big Hollywood Studios. The Authorship Theory presented the film maker’s creative freedom as a paradigm of authorship, thus turning certain type of films into a means of personal expression. On the opposite side, we find the so called mass cinema, understood as a cultural product that had been born into a restricted and commercial system.

The aesthetical peculiarities of Ford’s work can only be explained in the light of what the film maker’s personal genius provides². However, after World War II an open conflict between upholders and detractors of Fordian authorship took place, giving rise to a considerable number of letters and critiques in the most relevant film magazines during the fifties and the sixties. Some of this not so well known information on the dispute among critics has been uprooted in the present study, for instance a 1947 article written by Peter Ericsson for the *Sequence* magazine, in which an introduction to Ford’s authorship quality is being put forward. In his work, Ericsson not only analyses the arguments that were handled in each case as well as the stages the Fordian authorship question went through in order to either sustain or destroy John Ford’s reputation as a creative author, but also attributes to Lindsay Anderson the first criteria in categorising the film maker. Anderson, following Ericsson’s steps, established such criteria in another forgotten article published in *Sequence* magazine in the fifties, not in the sixties, at a time when both French and Anglo-Saxon critics multiply their eulogies towards John Ford’s work and mastership. The afore-

¹ Cfr. “John Ford is the best film maker in History’, says Torres-Dulce”, *El Mundo*, 8-31-2011, p. 37.

² Certain works with a historic outlook, such as those of McBride and Eyman have contributed towards accepting an ideologised (and mythical) paradigm on John Ford. Cfr. MCBRIDE, Joseph, *Searching for John Ford. A life*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2001; EYMAN, Scott, *Print the Legend. The life and Times of John Ford*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999.

mentioned work –by means of the *Film Quarterly* magazine³– also describes the recurrence of the conflict on the legitimacy of John Ford’s authorship in the years 1975 and 1976.

2. Some Preliminary Notes on Authorship

According to John Caughie, the Author Theory (or “la Politique des Auteurs”) starts with an article by François Truffaut entitled “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” published in January 1954 in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (issue 31)⁴. Although Caughie considers that article as the leading point on the authorship question, Alexander Astruc had cleared the way six years beforehand, when making the distinction between cinema as a personal expression and cinema as a commercial product geared towards the general public. He specifically established such distinction in the article entitled “Caméra Stylo” (in English “The birth of a new avant-garde: *la caméra-stylo*”), published in *L’Écran Français* (issue 144) on 30th March 1948⁵.

The author question in French thus begins as a debate not in 1954, but in the early post-war years. According to Astruc, the determining feature that establishes the difference between the author cinema and that of the masses is that the Author cinema reflects the personality of the film maker in a considerable way and does not take so much into account how the public receives that work. Such features, established on behalf of the New Wave in the French cinema, coincide –in Cuevas’ opinion⁶– with the main feature in the *Author Theory*, that which has been divulged later on, above all by the critics in *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

³ Cfr. CAUGHIE, John (ed.), *Theories of Authorship*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, pp. 35.

⁴ Cfr. CAUGHIE, John (ed.), *Theories of Authorship*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, pp. 35.

⁵ Cfr. GRAHAM, Peter, *The New Wave*, Doubleday & Company Inc., New York, 1968, pp. 17-23. Also in *L’Ecran Francais*, Roger Leenhardt stood out for his contribution towards authorship as a critic and a member of the Nouvelle Vague, together with the critics in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette and Jean Luc Godard. Cfr. MENBA, Xavier, *La nouvelle Vague*, T & B Editores, Madrid, 2003; NOZAL, Teresa, “La Nouvelle Vague vista desde un siglo nuevo” (“La Nouvelle Vague from the view of a new century”), in http://www.pcb.ub.es/filmhistoria/Nouvelle_Vague_1.htm, September, 2011.

⁶ Cfr. CUEVAS, Efrén, “Notas sobre la teoría del autor en ficciones audiovisuales” (“Notes on the Author Theory in Audio-visual Fiction”), in *Comunicación y Sociedad*, VII, nº 1, 1994, pp. 155-164.

The subsequent theoretical development on the Author's creativity in the cinema is well represented by François Truffaut when he comes to conceive the artistic validity of a film in terms of personalism. Such personalism, however, has more links with a vindicative tendency in the cinema world than with a methodological need to recognize film makers and the work they create.

From the point of view of films, authorship rises from the interest there is to relate the context and textual aspects within a work so as to calibrate their artistic value. Thus, it seems important, firstly, to find out in what way the film maker has an influence on his (or her) own films and what are the film elements that allow the interpretation of such features. In the second place, it is necessary to see how the social and cultural features are reflected and contemplated within the film context in both the production of an isolated work and that of the filmography as a whole.

According to Bywater and Sobchack, the study of those two aspects brings forward two types of analysis in films, which are the formal and the cultural analyses. In the case of the Author Theory, such levels would seem to melt into just one analysis. On the other hand, Bywater and Sobchack understand that the adequate valuation of a film director cannot be made outside the limits of his (or her) work as a whole. Therefore, in order to sustain the aesthetic quality of a film maker it is necessary to discover a continuity in the poetic quality of his (or her) films. The partial study of someone's filmography cannot be taken as a criterion that would make a film director an Author in his (or her) own right⁷.

It is a fact that Bywater and Sobchack's main aesthetic argument in criticism deals with discovering the merit and artistic responsibility in a film as well as paying attention to the stylistic features which give coherence and unity to any filmography. However, the *Author Theory* found an obstacle when evaluating directors who, just like John Ford, had worked for the Studios' System⁸. Such question would be determinant in the discussion about his condition as an author.

⁷ Cfr. BYWATER, Tim & SOBCHACK, Thomas, *An introduction to film criticism: major critical approaches to narrative film*, Longman, New York, 1989, p. 51.

⁸ Cfr. MCBRIDE, Joseph, *op. cit.*, 2001, pp. 135-136.

2.1. John Ford and the Studio System

John Ford understood his assignment to the System of the great Hollywood Studios as the logic of profitability⁹. According to Ford, a profitable film was a guarantee for the producers, as they would continue to trust the work of a film maker:

It is necessary to struggle non-stop...You never get to the point in which you can be sure you have complete freedom so as to get on with your own ideas...Films should definitely be controlled by those people who are actually making them. The ideal thing is to establish a firm cooperation between scriptwriter and director, just the way it is between Dudley Nichols and myself¹⁰.

However, it is true that John Ford had the advantage of being able to choose his own film projects and to negotiate bills with producers:

Although he worked within a commercial system, John Ford earned sufficient freedom within the movie industry to perfect a personal style. He balanced studio assignments with productions he selected himself, always keeping in mind that the making of motion pictures was a business¹¹.

Even though Ford only wrote the scripts of the first two films he directed (*The Tornado* and *The Scrapper*, both from 1917)¹², his involvement in the scripts, through the suggestion of new dialogues on the spot while filming, or by working on the characters' profiles –which he demanded before writing up the script– explain the importance of such involvement in the scriptwriting process and in the making of his films¹³. In fact, it was that capacity of choosing projects and identifying himself with them that made him a master

⁹ ANDERSON, Lindsay, *Sobre John Ford. Escritos y conversaciones*, (*On John Ford, Writings and Conversations*), Paidós, Barcelona, 2001, preface.

¹⁰ EISENBERG, Emanuel, "John Ford: Fighting Irish", *New Theater*, New York, April, 1936. STUDLAR, Gaylyn, BERNSTEIN, Matthew, *John Ford made westerns: filming the legend in the sound era*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001, pp. 255-260.

¹¹ DAVIS, Ronald, L., *John Ford. Hollywood's Old Master*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, p. 5.

¹² John Ford directed 134 films from his first incursion in the cinema industry in 1914 until 1966, date of his last premiere: *7 Women*.

¹³ Cfr. ANDERSON, Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 138; CASAS, Quim, *John Ford, el arte y la leyenda*, Dirigido por, Barcelona, 1998, pp. 471-472.

in *westerns*, the genre with which the defending critics identified John Ford. In 1950, in his appearance before the members of the *Director's Guild of America*, the American Trade Union for film makers, Ford mentioned that personal aspect which linked him to *westerns*, before defending Joe Mankiewicz from his presumed anti-Americanism and treason to the United States of America: "My name is John Ford. I make westerns"¹⁴. On the other hand, his seniority, his exclusive dedication to the cinema and to the film awards¹⁵ he received are the most solid guarantee towards the thorough study of the style that gives cohesion to his filmography, just as the defenders of the Fordian authorship claimed.

From the chronological point of view, it is possible to date the oscillations of his creative freedom. John Ford had a greater freedom of movement during the time in which he wrote for the Universal production company, from 1917 to 1921. In that period he was able to become detached from the traditional style other film makers had established when making westerns. However, and paradoxical as it may seem, it was when he joined the Fox production company in 1921 and had to accept more rigid tasks, that he reaped his reward, with silent films such as *The Iron Horse*, 1924 and *Three Bad Men*, 1926¹⁶. With the arrival of sound films, John Ford worked indistinctly for the three production companies: the Fox, the Columbia and the United Artists. In 1939 and after the success of *Stagecoach* that same year, John Ford co-founded an independent company together with Merian C. Cooper, Argosy Productions, which was finally taken over by the RKO. From that moment onwards, Ford would work for the Republic production company.

3. *The Authorship Theory and John Ford*

With the social uprising of young film makers in France during the 1950's, a new anti-system movement was born. Being led by François Truffaut¹⁷, such movement strongly opposed patronizing cinema. The "Turkish youths" (name by which they were known) celebrated the discovery of some not well respected film makers; they were always ready to make statements, to com-

¹⁴ PARRISH, Robert, *Growing up in Hollywood*, Bodley Head, New York, 1976.

¹⁵ John Ford obtained six Oscars from the American Academy for the following films: *The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *The Battle of Midway* (1942), *December 7th* (1943) and *The Quiet Man* (1952).

¹⁶ Cfr. BOGDANOVICH, Peter, *John Ford*, Studio Vista, London, 1968, p. 26.

¹⁷ Cfr. CAUGHIE, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-47.

ment on films and to reflect –in a self-conscious manner– on the director’s creativity. The French anti-system movement also had an equivalent within the Anglo-Saxon world. Its instigators were known as the “Angry Young Men”. John Ford –a prestigious director at the time– embodied, nevertheless, some features that were utterly incompatible with the new style: his silence over film criticism and his open aversion to provide any explanations about his films. John Ford liked making films, but he hated to speak about them. As a consequence, he was never recognised as a film maker who would search for public acknowledgement as a means of professional improvement¹⁸.

When the Authorship Theory was born, John Ford was underestimated by the critics. However, with André Bazin’s article “La politique des auteurs”, published in April 1957 in *Cahiers du Cinéma* (issue n° 70), the Fordian cause made a U-turn.

3.1. *The Fordian Authorship question in France*

The first stage in the Fordian Authorship question has two starting points: the French and the Anglo-Saxon. Traditionally, the origins of the debate around John Ford are found in France, with the directors of the Nouvelle Vague. The fact that the Author is the free director of an Art and not of a product of mass Communication begins to take shape with Astruc in 1948 and will be confirmed by Truffaut in his 1954 article. From this point of view, Ford does not fall into the category of a director who is submitted to the parameters and demands of the cinema industry. On the contrary, Ford is considered a director who is immersed in the commercial wheel, lacking a strong creative initiative¹⁹. On that same line, Jean Luc Godard finds intention as a clue to take into account when evaluating the Author²⁰. The significant fact is that those critics, detractors of the industry system in which Ford was involved, did not stand aside from commercial interest or reject the work production companies offered them when they acted as film makers²¹.

The reasons that some of the “Turkish youths” used were only examples of the radicalisation of their own opinions and personal tastes. In that respect, the emotion that certain films arouse in them was for these critics a solid

¹⁸ Cfr. FILMOTECA ESPAÑOLA, *John Ford*, Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales, Madrid, 1991, p. 265.

¹⁹ Cfr. BYWATER, Tim, SOBCHACK, Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 64-65.

²¹ Cfr. ANDERSON, Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 325; MEMBA, Xavier, *ibid.*, p. 32.

aesthetical reason, or else they valued the number of times they had watched a film as a valid argument for its quality. Eric Rohmer, for instance, did not appreciate John Ford because he did not like the type of films Ford made and found his cinema quite boring. Years later, Rohmer acknowledged Ford's mastery and authenticity stating that 'maybe us, the critics, are more inclined to get tempted by new ideas than by the strict law of equity, which should be our rule'²².

According to Anderson, the postulates that were defended, among others, by Truffaut, Rohmer or Leenhardt respond to two reasons: in the first place, that these critics are obsessed by that what is different, new or controversial, which is something that usually defines seldom mentioned film makers. In the second place, these critics wanted to become directors by disregarding previous traditions:

"One could not gain anything by claiming the *auteur* title for a director towards whom the world had not shown any signs of rejection" and Ford, who was considered "an artist who had always, in a clear and committing way, shown his inclination towards goodness, was far less *interesting* than an artist showing more ambiguity in his likings or who would have obsessions that could only be grasped by the *auteurist* critical eye"²³.

According to Buscombe, another feature highlighted by the creators of the Authorship Theory is that the Author should manifest an extraordinary capacity to distinguish between material that is relevant and that which is indifferent so that –by following certain rules and sensitivity guidelines– it is possible for any author to provide unity to his or her work²⁴. In Astruc's opinion, the director's intervention in all the stages of the process is a symptom for authorship that leads to the consideration of screen language autonomy with respect to reality²⁵. Fordian films would be excluded, within this view, for the realism they emanate.

Nevertheless, according to Anderson, the Authorship Theory changes its perspective in France during the sixties. As the film industry starts being considered an art, each one of the film production stages gain new relevance. Directors and scriptwriters are judged as potential gravity centres of the whole film making process. The fact that the director's role loses importance –as it

²² Cfr. ROHMER, Eric, *El gusto por la Belleza (The Taste for Beauty)*, Paidós, Barcelona, 2000, pp. 185-217.

²³ ANDERSON, Lindsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 324-325.

²⁴ Cfr. BUSCOMBE, Edward, "Ideas of Authorship", *Screen*, vol. 14, nº 3, otoño, 1973.

²⁵ Cfr. GRAHAM, Peter., *op. cit.*, pp. 18-20.

happened at the early stages of the Authorship Theory— leads to some discrepancies among the “Turkish youths” as regards the *auteur* concept. Bazin considers that the author should not be placed above his work²⁶ and that a screen work could not be regarded as a personal product²⁷. It is essential to consider not only the subjective action of the creator but also the objective situation of the cinema industry before one could actually appreciate the aesthetical quality in any film. Only by taking into account both aspects it is possible to speak of a *politique des auteurs*²⁸.

Within that change of view, the *Cahiers du Cinéma* approach John Ford and his work in a different way during the sixties. In fact, according to Anderson, the *Cahiers* interpret the last stage of Fordian production as a release of the old values. Thus, it is not unusual in this period to underestimate important works while praising lesser ones²⁹. The director who had been encased within “traditionalism” is now the romantic patriot concerned about deepening into the History of his ancestors and has suddenly become representative of the North American culture through *westerns*³⁰. It is Truffaut himself, in fact, the critic who seems to contradict his previous statements when he acknowledges Ford as a master of the invisible technique and entertainment³¹. With that in mind, it is possible to see Fordian work as a fragmented view of two or even three works at a time.

3.2. *The question of Fordian Authorship within the Anglo-Saxon world*

The Anglo-Saxon reflection on John Ford and his work is substantially different from the French view. To begin with, according to Croft, John Ford belongs to the preliminary stages of the Authorship Theory, which starts in the 1920's and counts on Lindsay Anderson as the most paradigmatic critic after World War II³². On that same note, and as a proof for the early recognition

²⁶ Cfr. GRAHAM, Peter, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-138.

²⁷ Cfr. GRAHAM, Peter, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-143.

²⁸ Cfr. GRAHAM, Peter, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-154.

²⁹ Cfr. ANDERSON, Lindsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-329.

³⁰ Cfr. MALAND, Ch. J., “From Aesthete to Pappy. The Evolution of John Ford's Public Reputation”, in STUDLAR, Gaylyn & BERNSTEIN, Matthew, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-252.

³¹ Cfr. TRUFFAUT, François, “John Ford. ¡Que Dios bendiga a John Ford!”, in *Las películas de mi vida*, (“John Ford, May God bless John Ford!”, in *The Films of my life*), Editorial Mensajero, Bilbao, 1976, pp. 83-84.

³² Cfr. HILL, John & CHURCH, Pamela, *American Cinema and Hollywood. Critical approaches*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, pp. 84-100.

of Ford's talent, there is an advertisement published on 9th February 1928 in *The Bioscope* about the film *Four Sons* of that same year, which reads as follows: "Four Sons will be a sensation. This wonderful picture has been directed by John Ford who made *The Iron Horse* and *Three Bad Men*". Hence the critic Peter Wollen stated that John Ford had always been an unquestionable film maker³³. In Wollen's opinion (hidden under the pseudonym of Lee Russel) it was that exaltation of Ford as a film maker what made him go unnoticed in the assessments of the "Turkish youths", even though –as we have already seen– it was not exactly like this³⁴.

3.2.1. *The Sequence pioneers: Peter Ericsson and Lindsay Anderson*

It was Peter Ericsson in the article "John Ford", published in *Sequence* (issue n^o 2) during the winter of the year 1947 who interprets in a positive manner the inclusion of John Ford in the Studio System. Ericsson explains the reasons why Ford's films fit in the Studio System, being the work of a team –as opposed to European films, made around a director. He also defines the features that allow us to speak of a defined creative author: the style, the themes and the technique including photographic composition³⁵. To Ericsson and Anderson, among others, the perception of a series of features common in a filmography is a clear symptom for the presence of a film makers' personality in his/her work. John Ford's films present a unity based on their subjects and film rhetoric. Ericsson and Anderson understood that it was thus possible to obtain film quality by working for the Studio System. At the same time, they maintained that irregularity in the quality of a filmography did not diminish its value. Such was John Ford's case.

Anderson was leader in two controversies on the value of Fordian works. The first one took place after his article entitled 'They were expendable and John Ford', published on issue No.11 of *Sequence*, during the summer in 1950. In this text –whose title is taken from its homonymous film– Anderson clearly spoke about Fordian art and style. The vindication made by Anderson of what is Fordian resulted in controversy in Great Britain on the three following matters:

³³ Peter Wollen developed his theory extensively in WOLLEN, Peter, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1970.

³⁴ Cfr. RUSSEL, Lee, "John Ford", *New Left Review*, n^o 29 January-February, 1968, pp. 69-73.

³⁵ Cfr. ERICSSON, Peter, "John Ford", *Sequence*, n^o 2, winter 1947, pp. 18-24.

- a) How to demonstrate that coexistence of excellent, mediocre and bad films was possible that within the filmography of a prestigious film maker.
- b) How to attribute the merits of teamwork to a director
- c) Who is the artist: the director or the scriptwriter³⁶.

Anderson's answer to the first question was that mastership can only be appreciated within the *chiaroscuro* of any work, since it is by acknowledging the shortages that we realise there are achievements too. To the second question, Anderson declared that the personality and style belonging to a director are appreciated in how well all the creative and technical departments taking part in the making of a film are being controlled. On the last question, Anderson referred to the sensitivity the director shows when counting on the creativity of the whole team³⁷.

The second controversy led by Anderson took place after his article "The Director's Cinema?", also published in *Sequence*, on issue n° 12 in the autumn of 1950. In this article Anderson had to defend himself from a letter to the Editor in which someone wrote on the dubious quality of the Fordian film *She wore a yellow Ribbon* (1949). It was clear by then that certain sections of the public fought against the purism with which a film director was either praised or despised³⁸.

As opposed to the initial hatred of the "Turkish Youths", the British critics –through the *Sequence* magazine and led by Lindsay Anderson– understand that Fordian cinema is a model for creativity, especially revealed in the characters' qualities³⁹. Anderson's arguments went deeply into the critiques of the American magazine *Movie*⁴⁰. In contrast with French criticism, Anglo-Saxon criticism did not theorise on the authorship question. However, in relation to John Ford, the Anglo-Saxon critics settled the strongest opinions on his professional mastership without systematising, except in the case of Sarris, a corpus of aesthetical reasons the way the French critics had done.

Through *Sequence* journalists tried to reveal and explain, occasionally by using a shy approach, the relationship there was between John Ford's personal and professional world. The same arguments used by the French critics to underestimate Ford were handled by the Anglo-Saxon critics to justify his

³⁶ Cfr. ANDERSON, Lindsay, "They were expendable and John Ford", *Sequence*, n° 11, verano de 1950, pp. 8-10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ The colloquium published by the magazine *Nickel Odeon*, issue n° 26, in spring 2002 should also be considered here.

³⁹ Cfr. ANDERSON, Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁴⁰ Cfr. GAUGHIE, John, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-50.

authorship, like for example the fact that John Ford worked for the Studio System. The maturity of this thesis comes from the personal relationship Anderson had with John Ford during the filming of *Mogambo* (1952)⁴¹, in which the critic had the opportunity to verify Ford's forceful nature and his integrating working method. As a support for the recognition of Fordian authorship before controversy appeared on the scene, we should mention Dudley Nichols' statements on his experience through working with Ford. The scriptwriters' experience confirms the possibility of combining working within the Studio System with poetic diligence in order to create a genuine piece of work. Dudley Nichols was interviewed by *Sequence* for an issue dedicated to the best twenty film scripts written before 1943. Nichols had written the scripts for three of Ford's most successful films: *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941). He understood that the making of a film consists in the harmonious addition of the different stages of specialisation and that it reaches its highest point with the director's work: "Implicated in this is the personality of the director, who creates the film by combining (in his own style which may not be the style of the writer) contributions of the writer and actors". Such work entails, in certain measure, an artistic knowledge or at least enough intuition so as to be able to integrate all the parts in a film without ever losing its unity⁴². This constitutes, in the last analysis, the axis of the authorial style⁴³.

3.2.2. *John Ford's creative exaltation: main voices*

Jean Mitry, on the other hand, turned the cultural aspect in Fordian works into a universal category when he contemplated the sense for justice through the political features in John Ford's films. In his article "John Ford Thinks the Greatest of all Themes the Way Individuals withstand the Blows of Fate", published in 1955 in *Films in Review* (vol. 6, issue 7), explains that the value of Fordian works is to be found in the characters' actions and gestures⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Cfr. ANDERSON, Lindsay, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

⁴² Cfr. NICHOLS, Dudley & GASSNER, John, *Twenty Best Film Plays*, Crown Publishers, New York, 1943, pp. 32-33.

⁴³ Cfr. ZUMALDE, I., "El autor y su sombra" ("The Author and his Shadow"), *ZER*, n° 12, May 2002, pp. 187-188.

⁴⁴ Cfr. MITRY, Jean, 'John Ford Thinks the Greatest of all Themes the Way Individuals withstand the Blows of Fate', *Films in Review*, vol. 6, n° 7, 1955.

Nevertheless, history reviews on Fordian authorship have not taken into account either such debate or the appraisals that were pointed out previously. While it is true Pye hints that critics in the *Sequence* magazine⁴⁵ are to be held responsible for the enthusiastic acknowledgement and general acceptance of criticism towards Ford, he does not admit that it is in that same post-war period that Anglo-Saxon criticism started to question Fordian authorship, and not much later when *Cahiers du Cinéma* began its own debate on this issue. Following Caughie's steps Pye postpones the birth of these evaluation criteria on Fordian authorship to articles and works that were written from 1960 onwards and during the seventies⁴⁶.

Ericsson defends Fordian authorship within the Studio System; Anderson takes a step forward when meditating on the difficulties inherent in Ford's works. Mistry highlights the value of what is considered Fordian. In the early seventies Andrew Sarris, from the *Film Culture* magazine, establishes the bases for authorship and applies them to Ford's case. Sarris defines the figure of the director as the one who controls the entire making of the film and explains the importance of what becomes the characteristic sign in any work. To Sarris, it is important that (1) the director knows his job; (2) his or her personality can be distinguished in features that are common to all films, and (3) the stories have an internal meaning resulting from the tension generated between the director's action and the working material⁴⁷.

Peter Wollen, on the other hand, differs from Anderson and the French critics in his conception of authorship. Wollen's greatest contribution was the use of structuralism in the valuation of authorial quality. He discerned between the cultural frame in which any work is conceived and the 'structures' that define it⁴⁸. In this regard, he lamented in his article 'John Ford' published in *New Left Review* (issue 29, January-February 1965) that Ford's work should have been weighed down by certain ideological considerations with regard to the way the director handled the Conquest of the West, social problems and the three great wars in which the United States of America took part. Looking at the contradictions presented by John Ford's films, Wollen fought against the most biased interpretations of history, thus recovering the place

⁴⁵ Cfr. PYE, Douglas, 'Writing and reputation: *The Searchers* 1956-1976', in BIGNELL, Jonathan, *Writing and Cinema*, Longman, Edinburgh, 1999, pp. 195-209.

⁴⁶ Cfr. PYE, Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁴⁷ Cfr. SARRIS, Andrew, "Notes on the auteur theory in 1962", *Film Culture*, n° 27, winter, 1962-1963.

⁴⁸ Cfr. LEHMAN, Peter R., *John Ford and the Auteur Theory*, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, 1979 (Ph.D. Thesis).

western movies occupy in Fordian filmography⁴⁹. Whereas Wollen wanted to do justice to a specific director, Sarris abstracted the identification criteria for authorship, within the director's working frame, by applying such criteria to Fordian works later on.

3.2.3. Final settlement in Fordian Authorship

Apart from the numerous cinema critiques on each one of his films, the debates each one aroused⁵⁰ and the reviewing essays on Fordian films⁵¹, there was from the early seventies a multiplication of studies on John Ford's working method. In *Film Comment*, (issue 5, vol. 12 September-October 1976) Janey Place published "A family in a Ford", where she analysed one of the great Fordian issues, the family and, as an extension, the nation and the people, issues that have generated some controversy in the eyes of criticism. Also in *Film Comment*, Mc Bride explained in his article "Joseph McBride on Three Godfathers" (July 1973) the unity there is within spiritual qualities through the physical world. He also pointed out the ability to breathe emotional tension into self-contained scenes as a Fordian quality⁵². As a finishing touch to the Fordian features briefly pointed out here, the film *The Man who shot Liberty Valance* (1962) confirmed Ford's great stylistic and poetic inclination towards 'myth' over History, even more so when his handling of History through the western genre had caused some disputes among the academics. On this, David Bordwell's article "The Man who shot Liberty Valance" published in

⁴⁹ Cfr. RUSSEL, Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-73.

⁵⁰ For example, the film *My Darling Clementine* (1946) has traditionally generated some debate on the handling of the Indian situation in Fordian cinema as well as the mythical representation of evil characters in western movies. Cfr. GALLAGHER, Tag, 'John Ford and the Indians', *Film Comment*, vol. 29, n° 5, September-October 1993; ELLIS, Kirk, "On the Warpath: John Ford and the Indians", *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 8, n° 2, 1980; LUHR, William, "Reception, Representation, and the OK Corral: Shifting Images of Wyatt Earp", in BRAEN-DLIN, Bonnie, *Authority and Transgression in Literature and Film*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1996, pp. 23-44; NICHOLS, Mary P., "Heroes and political communities in John Ford's westerns: the role of Wyatt Earp in my Darling Clementine", *Perspectives on Political Science*, vol. 31, n° 2, spring, 2002, p. 78.

⁵¹ In this sense, Everson's digression as regards *Boule de Suif* was very interesting, since he rediscovers, among other things, the value of the influence Hollywood films had in French films, such as it happened with *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939). Cfr. EVERSON, William K., 'Rediscovery', *Films in Review*, n° 2, February, 1977, pp. 100-103.

⁵² Cfr. MCBRIDE, Joseph, "Joseph McBride on Three Godfathers", *Film Comment*, July, 1973, pp. 53-54.

Film Comment (issue 7, autumn 1971) is an interesting example. The sense of invariability of criteria in order to evaluate Ford's films seemed tangible, among Anglo-Saxon and French critics alike.

3.2.4. *Short-lived Controversy among Anglo-Saxon critics*

Although, as it has been seen, the statute of Ford's authorship was definitely settled in the sixties and throughout the seventies, a new short-lived crisis erupted among the Anglo-Saxon critics between 1975 and 1976, two years after Ford's decease.

In those years the critics Michael Dempsey and David Coursen established an epistolary dialogue within the section *Controversy and Correspondence* in the *Film Quarterly* magazine, which questioned once more John Ford's artistic validity. In his article Dempsey went through the entire Fordian filmography, exposing to merriment some of the thematic choices John Ford had made in his films, such as American society, militarism, community and family, tradition, religion, or "the Irish theme"⁵³. With that, Dempsey wanted to raise once more the question on the validity of Ford's work. For instance, while he acknowledged in Ford the merit of having avoided the strictness of the Studio System, he suggested that the beauty and mastership that can be found in Fordian films did not make Ford's work interesting in itself. However, Dempsey's hardest criticism was probably found in the fact that he blamed Fordian films of dictating the audience's feelings and of tending towards naïve idealism in relation to the concept of community. He also accused Ford of paternalism and of presenting women as slaves of men⁵⁴. Besides accusing Ford of being a sensationalist, Dempsey described him as visionary and vulgar. Dempsey concluded that, in spite of Robert Chappetta's words ("John Ford's films are simple and traditional in meaning, but we lose something in not being able to respond to them"), [...] "when criticism turns to idolatry, when it tries to overinflate the films' real qualities into proofs of artistry equal to that of Shakespeare or Beethoven or whatever truly great artist in whatever medium you care to name, disappointment is the inevitable response".

Such attitude and the series of simplified arguments and opinions hastily established with regards to John Ford and his filmography motivated

⁵³ Cfr. DEMPSEY, Michael, 'John Ford: A Reassessment', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 28, n° 4, summer, 1975, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Cfr. DEMPSEY, Michael, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-15.

David Coursen's strong reaction, within the same section in *Film Quarterly*⁵⁵. Coursen tried to dismantle Dempsey's harsh opinion by highlighting the main mistakes in the text of his opponent.

To begin with, Coursen pointed out that Dempsey's strategy in order to discredit Ford was unsustainable: he had chosen some scenes at random and had taken them out of the context of the film in which such scenes appeared, thus breaking their true significance. For instance, about Judge Priest Dempsey had written the following: "The movie's problem is not political fantasy but emotional facility; it never stops telling what to feel [...] in almost every scene, the movie plays shamelessly on our most readymade responses"⁵⁶. On the other hand, Coursen warned readers that Dempsey's comments were not very original. In Coursen's opinion, Dempsey had merely repeated the old simplistic stereotypes used when referring to Ford before the *auteur* theory. Among Dempsey's most simplistic accusations against Ford were those of labelling him a racist, a male chauvinist and a patroniser, features which –according to Coursen– only hid a profound lack of analysis on the true complexity of Fordian characters.

Ford's vision is not amenable to such facile treatment. One of the things that most clearly defines his films is the depth and vitality he brings to their characterizations, their extraordinary sense of complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions of life. To paraphrase Dempsey, this incisive rich, and comelling vision is not the saving grace of a new Ford film but the hallmark of almost all⁵⁷.

In Coursen's opinion, Dempsey's method consisted in hurling a series of diatribes against John Ford taking gullible arguments as a basis, which only made the contradictions in Ford's characters and films even clearer. Coursen understood that Dempsey had wanted to be literal in his film analysis. Such literalness would be like judging John Ford by some of his scandalous statements, as he had ironically declared, for instance, that he did not want to become a film maker⁵⁸. Although Coursen agrees that sometimes the sociological considerations in Fordian films could be accurate, Dempsey's criticism discredits Fordian poetry. Against Dempsey's simplistic view, Coursen argues

⁵⁵ Cfr. COURSEN, David, "John Ford: Assessing the Reassessment", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 29, n° 3, Spring, 1976, pp. 58-60.

⁵⁶ DEMPSEY, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵⁷ COURSEN, David, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁵⁸ Cfr. COURSEN, David, *op. cit.*, p. 59

how the strength in Fordian art leans precisely on the apparent simplicity of its characters.

Irrespective of the variations which belong to personal tastes, the epistolary dispute between Dempsey and Coursen proves the existence of internal difficulties as regards Fordian work, which was open, thanks to its charisma and popularity, to contradictions and complexities. Even though Dempsey discovers certain flaws in John Ford's films, his assessment is clearly biased, as the sense of Fordian contradiction had been previously pointed out by Peter Wollen as a positive sign for the quality of Ford's work⁵⁹. The critical correspondence concluded with a harsh retort from Dempsey in which, once again, he complained about the exaggerated feelings of idolatry that existed towards John Ford's personality and work⁶⁰.

Since then, it can be agreed that opinions in favour of John Ford's authorship are practically unanimous among the critics. There are still some arguments to the contrary, which are generally based on ideological or subjective assessments, just like Dempsey's opinions in the past⁶¹.

4. Conclusions

The conflict on authorship, as a strict emblem of criticism towards film directors, has established for and against arguments about the unquestionable quality of John Ford as a film maker (with or without the 'author' label) as an almost editorial force of habit. It is within that critical frame that John Ford was considered an author for the first time thanks to the Anglo-Saxon critics, under the light of Peter Ericsson's *Sequence* article in 1947. Years later, through Anderson, the *Sequence* magazine took up and reinforced Ericsson's main arguments once again.

It can thus be stated that the critics in *Cahiers du Cinéma* magazine throughout the sixties and seventies only signed and sealed the paradigm of John Ford's authorship. Even though such authorial rediscovery –through the

⁵⁹ Cfr. RUSSEL, Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-73.

⁶⁰ Cfr. DEMPSEY, Michael, "Michael Dempsey replies", *Film Quarterly*, v. XXIX, n° 3, spring, 1976, pp. 60-62.

⁶¹ As regards negative criticism towards Ford in Spain, the most outstanding example is found in Ezeiza, as he represents the old argument against Fordian defenders. Ezeiza provides a likely explanation on the opposite view towards John Ford and believes the perception of the aesthetical quality in Fordian films as unjustifiable. Cfr. EZEIZA, Antxon, "¿Nos repugna John Ford?" ("Do we hate John Ford?"), *Nosferatu*, n° 40, April, 2002, pp. 65-71.

rational verification of appreciation towards John Ford by some of the Anglo-Saxon critics— was presented as the author’s cinematographic “baptism”, it only indicated a change of attitude in such critics.

The most important difference between Anglo-Saxon and French views on authorship is based on the assessment on *how* a film director works, not only on his geniality and his sensitivity to take the essence out of apparently anodyne material. The rediscovery of John Ford during the sixties and seventies in *Cahiers du Cinéma* takes place much later than the defence made by Peter Ericsson and Lindsay Anderson in *Sequence*, and it is parallel to the sistematization of Sarris in *Film Culture* and that of Peter Wollen in *New Left Review*.

As well as John Ford’s labelling as an author, the establishment of the first sistematization of reasons and arguments that allow Ford to be included in a greater creative category —through a theory corpus that constitutes the origin of the Author Theory— has also been falsely attributed to the critics in *Cahiers*.

Nevertheless, as it has been previously mentioned and, even before Lindsay Anderson would start his defence on Fordian authorship through *Sequence*, the first article referring directly to the main reasons why it was possible to consider Ford an author was written by Peter Ericsson in the winter of 1947 (issue 2) also for the *Sequence* magazine. Its title was “John Ford”. What was determining and new in that article was that, through such positive criticism of Fordian films, Ericsson established the authorial paradigm and smoothed the way for the arguments that would endorse later on —mainly in *Sequene* and in the *Cahiers*— the creative statute of a director that had been stigmatised by the Studio System.

As a general rule, the Anglo-Saxon critics were reactive to the contempt towards John Ford and his work. The most paradigmatic example is that of *Sequence* magazine, pioneer in considering John Ford as a film author. Just as it is perceived in the first critiques —substantial in the firmness of Authorship later on as a common feature— the consideration of some Anglo-Saxon critics, such as Ericsson, Lindsay Anderson or Peter Wollen were determinant in labelling Ford’s authorship. The debates that took place later on, such as that of Dempsey and Coursen only confirm the complexity and richness of Fordian production, wich is alien to any simplistic classification.

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