



The passage from classicism to modernity

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The lost highways of classicism

Under the creative power of the gaze as a vector which provides that immense narrative territory with its reason for being, classical discourse thinks of declared passion as the axis of a journey -a fundamental notion of the aesthetic and narrative core of Hollywood cinema-, repeated and formulated over a vast range of possibilities. The 1950s, especially the later years, saw the emergence of a series of works in which the great auteurs of classicism reflect on the mechanisms which have underpinned their discourse for over four decades, and reformulate their ideas. On occasions they provide genuine re-readings of the absolutes that structure the classical *weltanschauung*. That would not only be the case in films such as *Vertigo* or the later work of Douglas Sirk, but also, in the words of Jesús González Requena (1), films such as *Singin' in the Rain*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *The Honeypot*, *Rear Window* or *Psycho*.

Alongside that trend -christened "mannerist" by González Requena-, which carries the principles which until then had been the foundations of classicism so far that it calls them into question, another, which we will call the "twilight" trend, develops. In it, some of the leading American auteurs of the previous decades, who had lived through the development of the classical system and played a crucial part in its formation and glory, look back and imbue their last works, if not with a harsh formal self-reflection - as in the case of the works mentioned above-, at least with a strange feeling of melancholy towards a narrative universe which, on the threshold of the 60s, they rightly see as entering a decline. One of the most important films in that line, insofar as it is the swansong of a genre like the Western, which had become practically untenable as it had been understood for the five previous decades, is *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), directed by John Ford. A reflection on "the state of affairs" the classical view of the cosmos had reached is revealed through a reformulation of the terms and themes which had structured film narrative up to then. We need only compare the notion of journey behind one of Ford's last feature films and a work like *Stagecoach* (1939), which in a way represents the paradigm of a narrative adventure in classical style. From the iron structure that grips a journey between two towns -two homes- to provide a group of people in the enclosed interior of a vehicle with an ideal space to weave and resolve (surely, definitively, affirmatively) the story of their glances, their passions, their travels, to a device which, though it may have emerged firmly rooted in the classical universe, is at least announcing the end of that sure

route from A to B which all classical narrative had staged in the shadow of the fundamental structure of a passionate journey, or even trying to open up a passage between two spaces that is shaped more like a U.

Stagecoach: the journey as pretext, as an encounter of characters whose identities are fixed, firmly constituted -to the limit- as long as it lasts. First and foremost, a microcosm enclosed in a vehicle: sinners redeemed at moments of danger (an alcoholic doctor recovers the others' respect by saving the life of a woman giving birth, a misanthropic gambler sacrifices his life to save the small community of travellers who are with him, and, most of all, a love story: the love of a gunman who finds his way home with a prostitute after settling accounts with his past- the men who killed his family. In other words, the home rebuilt on the ashes of an original home, an unmistakably classical theme). Between town and town the characters disclose their identities in the light of a landscape that inevitably exposes -in the photographic sense of the word-, a landscape that becomes the metaphorical key to the Other (the dangers that eventually transmute the characters by granting them a new aesthetic -dramatic- and social personality which can call the plot closed in every aspect).

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance conceived, then, as a reflection about that highly dramatic universe which *Stagecoach* so perfectly encapsulates. The Western Ford shot in 1962 is framed by two journeys which open and close it: however, they have nothing to do with a classical conception of the journey. That arrival and that departure by the characters are an arrival from nowhere, a departure to nowhere: the only journey the film really embarks on is a journey into the past through a dusty stagecoach standing motionless in a room, as in a museum (a stagecoach that could be the very one that transported the characters in *Stagecoach*; it even has the same word, "Overland", written on the side). That vehicle, definitively withdrawn from a world which is no longer its world, is the engine of a journey, an impossible return to the past of characters who are reviewing a love story: the story of a mistake fostered by a buried emotional betrayal (the marriage of Senator Ransom Stoddard -James Stewart- to Hallie -Vera Miles- has been built on a lost love -that of Hallie for the gunman Tom Doniphon -John Wayne-, who paradoxically makes it possible for Stoddard, a man of the law, to triumph by anonymously killing the bandit Liberty Valance). Ford's genius in dealing with this material lies precisely in turning around the whole passionate density of the plot, converting it into a searing, deeply sad journey to emptiness. That is why, when the Stoddards arrive in the town where the events took place to attend the funeral of Tom Doniphon -who has died in poverty-, what should have been an exchange of loving glances between the hero and heroine becomes the heroine gazing into emptiness. Just after alighting from the train, Hallie asks to visit Tom's house, and when she arrives she sees the remains of the room he had built for her and which he burned down the night he realised he had lost her for ever. The tension with which Ford stages that gaze, which has no possible answer -all that remains is an empty space that stares back at her, with some cactus flowers that Tom was once going to give her and which represent the scent of the sad recollection that the loss of Tom means to her- is achieved by a perfect sequence in which he picks up the arrival of the buggy in a beautiful panning shot which first presents it from the front and then from the back

with the farm in the background. A pan, therefore, which sums up a rediscovery of -not a reconciliation with - the past, where the grave, solemn camera movement seem to be trying to capture the movement of an eye -the eye of Hallie arriving- and convey the full intensity of that gaze which, a few seconds later, will be triggered by the cut between two shots (of her looking from the vehicle and of the house with the friend picking her a cactus rose), reminding us that all that remains of the burnt out passion is a ruin through which we can see the landscape beyond. A rediscovery, and not a reconciliation: that is why Ford used the cut (first a general shot and then one of her and one of the house) to show a passion doomed to remain permanently disconnected, gaping like a wound that will never heal between a passionate, questioning gaze and the mute response of an uninhabited space from which no story can ever emerge.

The recourse to flashback that makes up the body of the film is neither gratifying nor useful for the characters. That return to a phantasmagoric past is fruitless because none of the people who lived the events have learned any lesson from them or have gone anywhere (the final departure of the train means nothing more than the continuation of sadness and emptiness, entering a circle from which the characters will never be able to escape, bound by a legend born from a huge lie). It is hardly surprising, then, that within the flashback the arrival of the young Stoddard in the town where Hallie and Tom live is signalled by a play of shot-countershot which shows the young man's face, after he has been thrashed by Liberty Valance, coming round and seeing the face of Tom, the man who has saved his life, and then the face of Hallie, the woman he will eventually take away from Tom. In that triple exchange of glances the whole course of the story is coded: significantly Ransom only looks for an instant at the man who has saved him, whilst he fixes a much longer gaze on the young woman who is solicitously looking after him. There is no way that a scene like that can lead to any kind of "happy end". Tom will lose Hallie and she will never cease to regret her mistake: the countershot of Tom, inserted between the glances that Ransom and Hallie exchange for the first time, will leave a mark which looms over the whole film and the relations between the characters (no look from Hallie ever evokes anything other than Tom's wished for presence and its loss).

A dense film, imbued with a searing nostalgia for a cinema which was no longer possible by 1962 -like the useless stagecoach, now a motionless memory of what was once action, movement and, of course, passion-, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is one the peaks of Ford's work. It is no accident that the director called on the actors who had starred in the films he made at the height of his career and who represented a way of making films that he felt was doomed to perish. That is why he exaggerates the *mise en scène* devices to the point where the theatricality, the long dialogues and the unrealistic and almost unreal statism that pervades the whole film endow the work with a distanced, revisionist character, a reconstruction dominated by scepticism, the predictable death of an aesthetic representational universe which had shaped four decades of cinema.

It is therefore no surprise that Ford's last but one Western is expressed as an open *representation*: a vanished mythology can only be reviewed through images at one

remove, which rather show how things *should be* than how they *are* (a linguistic awareness that goes beyond the narrative transparency of classicism and ends in a twilight or mannerist split - as was the case, in a quite different order of things, with the representation deferred through the multiplication of mirrors in the work of Douglas Sirk). Among them are the gesturality of the actors -Valance *represents* almost a caricature of what a bandit might have been like, Doniphon seems to be a compendium of the aggressive and heroic characters who have presided over the mythology of the Western throughout its history-; the *mise en scène* which, with the help of the ghostly photography, investigates the main mechanisms that have sustained a cinematic world - and here it is essential to mention the first confrontation between Doniphon and Valance, where Ford leaves them literally standing face to face for endless seconds whilst Stoddard moves between them and talks to them: they have both been turned into effigies of those opposing values, Good and Evil, which have until then sustained a whole universe of aesthetic codes. Images, then, which mix Ford's always limpid gaze with a disturbing "one remove" in the look, a representation that runs through the traces of a language which has abandoned the virginity of classical images for ever. A visual discourse which, moreover, serves to stage the story of a false legend, recalled by characters who come out of nowhere to review a lost time and then fade back into the absence they came from, on a fruitless journey that serves only to rub salt into the bitter wounds of nostalgia. The train that takes the characters away at the end of the film -just as they arrived- is, far from a celebration of classical continuity, a metaphor for that permanent passage, for an oblivion formulated in rootlessness, the non-resolution of a mutilated and therefore permanently open passionate intrigue, not to the continuity of the "happy end" but to the abyss of perpetual wandering: an even more valuable metaphor if we bear in mind that Ford states it from as essentially classical a narrative resource as the vehicle that carries the characters away at the end of a film. The use of the classical vocabulary to go beyond it is the definitive key to the twilight treatment of the universe of film provided by the Fordian gaze in this decisive work in the history of the cinema.

The meeting of that classical world with a European cinema that was beginning to yield its first great fruits, at the very moment when American cinema had reached a crucial stage as regards a reflection on the language and the medium of cinema, leads us to a relation established between: a) an American cinema that has sown the seeds of a distancing from classical rules, effective, but never taken to its limits, impregnated with self-awareness, and b) a way of conceiving cinema -the way of the European auteurs- which, precisely because of the creative freedom that moved it from its beginnings, can take up the baton of the investigation of classicism and, while taking the discoveries of the classics as a starting point, germinate the seed that American cinema was hatching, carrying to extreme lengths the expressive and narrative research begun by the key filmmakers of American classicism.

A crossroads: the late fifties in American and European cinema

A unique collection of masterpieces appeared in the late fifties; we only have to skim through the list of auteurs on both sides of the Atlantic who produced some of their

outstanding films or launched their careers with works which are undeniably reference points, all within the brief span from 1958 to 1963. The culmination -and therefore also the beginning of the decline- of American classicism corresponds to the emergence and consolidation in Europe of a "modern", reflective cinema, free from any rigid production structure and consequently more flexible in terms of the aesthetic categories that articulate the films. A creative moment, whose first outstanding event was the emergence of the French Nouvelle Vague, made up of a generation of critics who had worked for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Godard, Rohmer and Truffaut, among others, began their careers -with landmark films, especially in Godard's case- in that period, but always with their eyes fixed on the great auteurs of American cinema (it could be said that the first major reflection on classicism drew its impulse from that moment).

Without leaving France, we should mention such crucial works in the development of a modern narrative as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) or *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* (1961) by Resnais, *Pickpocket* (1959) by Robert Bresson, or the first films by François Truffaut, *Les 400 Coups* (1959), and Erich Rohmer, *Le Signe du Lion* (1959).

Meanwhile, in Italy auteurs like Fellini or Antonioni produced key works in their careers such as *La Dolce Vita* (1958) and *Otto e Mezzo* (1963), and the "non-communication" trilogy formed by *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961) and *L'Eclisse* (1962). At the same time, Visconti reached the peak of his aesthetic adventure with *Rocco e Suoi Fratelli* (1960) and *Il Gattopardo* (1963), and Pier Paolo Pasolini began his film career with *Accattone* (1961). For his part, Luis Buñuel released two great films which won international recognition, *Viridiana* (1961) and *El Angel Exterminador* (1962). In the same period, Ingmar Bergman made his impressive "silence of God" trilogy: *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *The Communicants* (1962) and *The Silence* (1963). And in Eastern Europe new voices who were to carry great weight in the world of "auteur cinema" were heard: the Pole Roman Polanski (*Knife in the Water*, 1962), the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky (*The Childhood of Ivan*, 1962), and the Hungarian Miklós Jancsó (*The Bells Have Gone to Rome*, 1958) made their first features around that time.

A limit and a border, therefore, condensed in a cluster of works which, from quite heterogeneous points of view, revolve around common obsessions with restructuring and reformulating the narrative and aesthetic rules which had made the cinema possible up to then. A group of auteurs -especially in the case of the Nouvelle Vague- who saw themselves as the threshold between the "before" and the "after" of a cinema in an inevitable process of transformation. Indeed, the European question cannot be restricted to a simple mathematical equation "Classical cinema + Self-awareness (from outside, from Europe) = Modern Cinema". The process involves a whole set of concerns and investigations that began in America, from a series of auteurs who, while working within the classical system, brought to light crucial questions which support and give form and meaning to the universe of classicism. The new European film-makers took up that discourse, but that was not their only starting point. The orchestration of the many voices of cinema modernity cannot be understood without reference to the scores carefully composed to provide a new vision of the world through the lens of a camera by a unique creator, who revealed new meanings and a very special aesthetic in his approach to reality (postulated by the Neorealist

movement, in which he should theoretically be included): Roberto Rossellini.

The modern cinema and Rossellini

Alain Bergala says: "The *Viaggio* is the first modern film" (2). *Viaggio in Italia*, the film the French critic is referring to, was made in 1953 and is both the preliminary project for all cinematic modernity and the work which crystallises a new stance vis-à-vis film narration, the visual way of telling a story and the reality in which it is set (or rather from which it emerges). A vision that was to impregnate the postulates of the whole of modern European cinema (at the centre, the French Nouvelle Vague), and which -we must not forget- starts from that peculiar operation with Reality which everyone has agreed to call 'Neorealism'.

Neorealism, with Rossellini's investigations at the head, as a starting point for cinematic modernity. Without overlooking the fact that before the liberation that Rossellini's cinema (which we shall take as a paradigm which summarises and carries to the limit the dialogue with reality opened up by the Neorealist movement) means to the forms set in classical discourse, there are two European reference points. The first is to be found in the work of Jean Renoir -what François Truffaut called "cinema in freedom". The second, passing almost unnoticed but with its own fundamental importance within the creation of a clearly European vocabulary and syntax, is the brief but intense career of Jean Vigo -who, with films like *L'Atalante* (1934) or *Zéro de Conduite* (1933), laid down the rules for a dialogue with reality which adopts a poetic rather than a narrative approach (hence the term "poetic realism", often used to refer to Vigo and other directors such as Grémillon, Carné or Duvivier, great recreators of the water or night-time universe of French cities, in an overt tribute to the spaces which the gaze of the young film-maker sketched so lyrically in his work before his untimely death).

But it is in Rossellini that we should look for the true seed of modernity in the European cinema: Rossellini and his *Viaggio in Italia* (the word "journey" in the title is not there for nothing: the concept of the narrative journey is what made the break between the way of seeing and narrating of classicism and that of the modern cinema).

The idea behind Alain Bergala's approach to the work starts from the very circumstances in which it was produced: the director and the whole production team were in Naples to shoot an adaptation of Colette's story *Duo*. Just then, they found out that the rights of the book were not available and so it was impossible to make the film; suddenly there was no script on which to build. However, contrary to all expectations, Rossellini decided to make a film: it was from that circumstance that he was to launch a new vision of modern dramatic art. The director of *Roma, Città Aperta* chose to manage with a "minimum script" which would enable him to work in freedom as regards the very act of making a film and the way in which the cinematic device would come into contact with existing reality (that is why Rossellini ended up by reinventing cinematic forms). That minimum vehicle, that fundamental narrative cell on which

Rossellini based a whole film is -and it could not have been otherwise- a love story.

A *viaggio* which is a love story, the story of an English married couple who travel to Naples to close a deal (the sale of a family home): their contact with the stark reality of the south of Italy brings out a latent crisis between them, though they are finally reunited -almost miraculously- during a religious procession through the streets of Naples. From that material -almost as sketchy as the kind that had sustained generations of classics- Rossellini's discourse consists of monitoring the progress of the leading characters, separately, through the Neapolitan landscape, on a journey which ends -as in the case of the characters in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*- by confronting their gazes with emptiness. It is an exercise in self-awareness which takes them back, though not to the past as in Ford's film; the image of emptiness is literally inside them as beings. And so, unlike what happened in classical cinema, it is not any rigid structure of the script that sets up passion as the measure that rules the human universe. Nor is it a *mise en scène* which, with the mathematical precision of a passionate mechanism, catapults the bodies, the gazes, the beings to a definitive, safe encounter at the end of the film. Indeed, the narration is shot through with signs of fragility, of temporal instability (in relation to classicism, we might say: time is not oriented towards the sequence-shot that closes the film).

The person watching the film is therefore obliged to walk beside the characters along the road back to a passion eroded by the passage of time and miraculously recovered after crossing the opacity of an inner time which reveals emptiness to them: a time which is stretched in disturbing moments of leisure (her tourist visits, his amorous skirmishes) which make up a journey in time far from the vectorialisation which is characteristic of the classical universe.

On that journey, passion becomes an erratic, disoriented movement: that is why Bergala talks about an Ingrid Bergman "wandering" in *Viaggio in Italia* (and all the films the Swedish actress made with Rossellini). A character in a perpetual state of anxiety, waiting for an unexpected revelation, with no preset itineraries or routes to give meaning to her physical and/or moral movement. We are far indeed from Hitchcock's Ingrid Bergman, who was emotionally rescued by climbing a flight of stairs of light in *Spellbound*, or who became the object of a rescue crystallised in masterly fashion in a slow, extremely dense and endless descent of another staircase in *Notorious* (1946). That Ingrid Bergman anchored by Hitchcock in the seas of an exact mythology, passionate to the point of delirium (we are in the universe -classicism- where the wound of passion -shot-countershot- is the sign that orders the cosmos, under the dictates of the act that engenders gods who look at and believe one another, in an operation as simple "as a musical phrase" -as Rimbaud would say- but as powerful as the most overwhelming of classical cosmogonies), that Ingrid Bergman installed at the heart of a universe centred on the Gaze, is confronted in *Viaggio in Italia* with a radically different space and time. Here time is often suspended, outside the fiction, where the gaze must follow an apprenticeship, constitute itself through contact with duration, with a necessary time (allowing a look that is therefore no longer nourished by the flash of the shot-countershot: there is no place for direct revelation -ingenuous to

the point of artifice- of the gaze as trigger of passion in modern cinema). The density of time must be brought into play so that the gaze can perceive the world, without lighting on objects and beings, transforming them indiscriminately: that is one of the conditions that modern cinema imposes on the gaze so that it can find its meaning in the staging of a time of the characters which, according to Bergala, is "vivant, tremblant, où se jouent les hésitations, le sentiment d'incomplétude, la vacuité, l'ennui, l'inachevé, le contingent, avec sa cohorte de doutes et d'angoisses, bref le présent vécu des protagonistes et du spectateur" (3).

A reformulation of the role of the gaze, and therefore an ontological reformulation of the medium of film. Rossellini ends up by attacking the isotopy and autarchy of the classical fictional universe, of the imaginary homogeneous universe (for the gaze will no longer be what it had been in the cinema until then).

Viaggio in Italia is, first and foremost, the physical and moral itinerary of an Anglo-Saxon couple who come into contact with a reality which, contrary to all expectations, ends up transforming them radically. The journey of those two characters (not for nothing played by two legendary performers of American classicism) within the film begins with a dramatically empty journey in which all that matters are the most insignificant events (the odd banal conversation, a mosquito squashed on the windscreen of a car). What we are given in that beginning drained of time, therefore, is an image of two Anglo-Saxons side by side looking at an endless Italian road: a direct metaphor for all those classical films that begin with vehicles in motion as a visual equivalent to the beginning of the narration itself. But suddenly Rossellini's narration finds itself in a landscape where movement is empty, stripped of any primary dramatic interest (underscored by the tiredness of the characters themselves; a few minutes after the start of the film, he asks her to let him take the wheel to stop himself falling asleep).

Alex -George Sanders- and Katherine -Ingrid Bergman- as two parallel gazes: obviously, there can be no initial exchange of glances if they are a couple -a passion- which has been institutionalised for some time (that initial parallelism of the gazes points to a whole fundamental direction in European cinema: an analysis of the relations between a couple). From those two looks which never converge at any point there will emerge a plot which stages the characters' divergent itineraries (they will only come together thanks to what they have learned on their solitary journeys, with the final impulse of revelations set in the ruins of Pompeii and the procession through the streets of Naples). It is in the Pompeii sequence that we find the image that tells us that we are far from classicism: a shot-countershot of the two characters looking at the plaster moulds of a couple charred in an embrace during the eruption of the volcano. The two images that Rossellini brings together -Alex and Katherine on one side and the two plaster figures on the other- are absolutely opposite in all respects. Alex and Katherine, two dark figures picked out against the white of the sky, are looking down. The two plaster figures are white against a surface of dark earth and are looking up in a perfect inversion of the gaze of the two tourists. Alex and Katherine, who have finally become characters of the modern cinema, discover passion as solidification, as emptiness, as the perfectly inverted trace of a past -and a passion- which they need to

reinvent, once they have discovered -perfectly reproduced in a buried cavity- the faces of the inversion, of that ominous thing which, for a variety of pressing reasons, had also -in an act of obstinate, radical abolition- buried cinematic classicism.

Notes:

(1) González Requena, Jesús, *La metáfora del espejo. El cine de Douglas Sirk*, Madrid, Hiperión, 1986.

(2) BERGALA, Alain. *Voyage en Italie de Roberto Rossellini*, Belgium, Editions Yellow Now, 1990, p. 32.

(3) "Alive, vibrant, with its play of hesitations, the feeling of incompleteness, vacuity, boredom, the unfinished, the contingent, with its host of doubts and anxieties, in short, the lived present of the characters and the spectator." BERGALA, op. cit. p. 35.

