

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Match these films with the years they were released.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------|
| 1. Frozen | a. 2000 |
| 2. Star Wars (Episode IV) | b. 1997 |
| 3. Avatar | c. 2023 |
| 4. Titanic | d. 2009 |
| 5. Barbie | e. 2013 |
| 6. Gladiator | f. 1977 |

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

arduous citation clout genre inextricably
lauded manipulate pass plot spike
star-crossed vicious

1. If a work is _____, it is widely praised.
2. A(n) _____ is an official statement praising someone or something.
3. A(n) _____ is a particular style used in cinema, writing or art.
4. _____ is the authority to make decisions or the power to influence events.
5. If something such as a journey or a task is described as _____, it is extremely difficult and involves a lot of effort.
6. If people are _____, they are constantly affected by bad luck.
7. A(n) _____ is a sharp piece of metal.
8. A(n) _____ is a path or road that goes through an area of mountains.
9. If something is described as _____, it is extremely violent.
10. When two or more people _____, they make a secret plan to do something bad.
11. If you _____ someone, you influence them in a clever or dishonest way.

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 3: Advanced

12. If two things are _____ linked, it is impossible to separate them.

b. Use some of the key words from task A and complete the examples. You may have to change the form of the word.

1. The dog was _____ and barked loudly to protect his home.

2. Romeo and Juliet are the most famous _____ lovers in literature and film.

3. Climbing a mountain is an _____ task that requires physical endurance and mental toughness.

4. The scientist was _____ for her groundbreaking discovery in renewable energy.

5. The history of the two nations is _____ linked, with their cultures and economies deeply connected.

6. The influencer used his social media _____ to raise awareness about environmental issues.

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 3: Advanced

Filmed in the freezing Nevada Desert under studio pressure, Ford's 1924 epic was a huge hit. It was the springboard for the director's astounding career of westerns, idealism and high drama

Linda Laban

27 August, 2024

- 1 Had the Oscars been around in 1924, when director John Ford's epic western The Iron Horse was released, the critically lauded film would have won them all. Though it might be largely forgotten now, this black-and-white silent movie, which turns 100 on 28 August, marked the point where Jack Ford became master film-maker John Ford, the director many still regard as the greatest of all time. When The Iron Horse was inducted into the Library of Congress film archive in 2011, the official registry citation stated that it "established Ford's reputation as one of Hollywood's most accomplished directors".
- 2 Ford remains the most Oscar-decorated director ever, with four awards for feature films – The Informer (1935), The Grapes of Wrath (1940), How Green Was My Valley (1941), and The Quiet Man (1952) – and two for second-world-war documentaries The Battle of Midway (1942) and December 7th (1943). None of these were westerns, a genre Ford adored, shaped and left his mark all over.
- 3 Three years after Ford moved to Fox Film in 1920, producer William Fox asked Ford to make a western to rival Paramount Pictures' 1923 box-office hit The Covered Wagon. The Iron Horse was Ford's response: two and a half hours of history, drama and pictorial beauty – which went way over budget. "It was mostly shot in Nevada," says Ford biographer Joseph McBride. "It was freezing cold, harsh conditions. But Ford liked to be on location away from the studios."
- 4 The Iron Horse's big box-office takings elevated Ford's status within the industry. "I always say The Iron Horse was for Ford like Jaws was for Steven Spielberg," says McBride. "It gave him a lot of clout and finally, at the age of 30, he was an A-lister."
- 5 The Iron Horse's storyline tracks the construction of the US's first transcontinental railroad, comprising the Union Pacific (west from Omaha, Nebraska) and Central Pacific (initially east from Sacramento, California). Ford's film traces the railway's arduous progress in a dry, documentarian style – the opening titles begin: "Accurate and faithful in every particular of fact ..." But Charles Kenyon and John Russell's script is also dramatic: good guys, bad guys, and an idealistic hero and heroine who are also star-crossed lovers. The film's finale shows the last spike, one made of gold, hammered in at Promontory Point, Utah in 1869, as well as the lovers' happy-ever-after embrace.
- 6 George O'Brien stars as dashing Pony Express rider Davy Brandon. The young Brandon and his father explore the Sierras to find a pass to ease the creation of a railroad. Triumphant, they find one. They are ambushed by a band of Cheyenne, and Brandon witnesses his father's vicious murder by Deroux, a two-fingered white man dressed as a Cheyenne. Years later, after construction begins, Brandon offers to search for the pass lost in his childhood memories, and finds his childhood sweetheart Miriam engaged to the UP's crooked chief engineer, who plots with Deroux against the railroad.
- 7 Ford does not portray Native Americans as the bad guys. He shows Deroux manipulating the Cheyenne to attack. In one such scene, a chief is fatally shot and falls to the ground, and a dog appears (from nowhere!) and lies by his body, mourning his death. Is Ford humanising the attacking "Indians"? It looks like it.
- 8 Ford does not portray Native Americans as the bad guys. He shows Deroux manipulating the Cheyenne to attack. In one such scene, a chief is fatally shot and falls to the ground, and a dog appears (from nowhere!) and lies by his body, mourning his death. Is Ford humanising the attacking "Indians"? It looks like it.
- 9 But there's one character Ford adored: the old west, a landscape vast and unknowable. "It takes a particular eye to present a western," says critic Jose Cuenca. "Ford had the capacity for capturing that beauty. But he had these complex characters. Ford, much like

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 3: Advanced

Hitchcock, wasn't just creating adventure movies. He combines great landscape with intimate character studies."

- 10 By the early 1960s, Ford had fallen out of favour. "By then, westerns were not taken seriously," says McBride. Nor was Ford, who was inextricably linked to the dusty old west. "It's not just westerns," Cuenca points out. "It's impossible to love films and not love John Ford. He is the greatest director in the western genre – but *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are two of the best movies ever made."
- 11 In August 1973, John Ford died from cancer at his home in Palm Desert, California. He was 79 years old and is credited with making about 140 films in a 55-year directorial career, an astounding body of work. As Orson Welles said, "I prefer the old masters – by which I mean John Ford, John Ford and John Ford."

© Guardian News and Media 2024
First published in The Guardian, 27/08/2024

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 3: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What was John Ford's real name?
2. How many Oscars for best director did John Ford win?
3. How many of John Ford's Oscar-winning films were westerns?
4. How long is The Iron Horse?
5. What is the main theme of The Iron Horse?
6. What two things does the final scene of the film show?
7. Who killed Brandon's father?
8. What does UP stand for?
9. Which "character" in the film did Ford adore?
10. Why was John Ford not taken seriously in the 1960s?

4 Key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|------------|----------------------------|
| 1. release | a. the beauty (of a place) |
| 2. win | b. a murder |
| 3. leave | c. an award |
| 4. witness | d. someone's death |
| 5. capture | e. your mark |
| 6. mourn | f. a film |

b. Use the expressions from Task A to write personalised sentences.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

'It made him an A-lister': John Ford's breakthrough film The Iron Horse at 100

Level 3: Advanced

5 Discussion

a. Discuss.

- What is your favourite movie genre? Why?
- "Westerns are a dead genre. No one watches them any more."
- Do you enjoy watching "classic" movies? Why (not)?
- "No film should be longer than 90 minutes."

6 In your own words

a. Use an internet search engine to find more information about a famous film director or actor.

Find the following information:

- What was their first film?
- When did they get their first successful film?
- How many films have they made?
- Have they received any awards for their films?

b. Add any other information you find interesting and report your findings to the class.