

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

Level 2: Intermediate

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.

- a noun meaning a particular style used in cinema, writing or art _____
(paragraph 2)
- a plural noun meaning the money received from customers _____
(paragraph 4)
- a noun meaning the events in a film, book etc _____ (paragraph 5)
- a verb meaning to describe what happened in a series of events _____
(paragraph 5)
- a two-word adjective meaning continuously affected by bad luck _____
(paragraph 5)
- a noun meaning a sharp, pointed piece of metal _____ (paragraph 5)
- a verb meaning to attack someone after hiding and waiting for them _____
(paragraph 6)
- an adjective meaning extremely violent _____ (paragraph 6)
- a noun meaning a path or road that goes through an area of mountains
_____ (paragraph 6)
- an adjective meaning dishonest and likely to do illegal things to get money
_____ (paragraph 6)

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10. a verb meaning feel extremely sad because someone has died and express this in public

_____ (paragraph 7)

11. a verb meaning like something very much _____ (paragraph 8)

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. The soldiers plan to _____ the enemy when they cross the river.

3. She _____ her new puppy and plays with it all the time!

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

5. The entire country gathered to _____ the death of the beloved actor.

6. The film was terrible! The _____ was very slow and predictable.

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- 1 There were no Oscars in 1924, but director John Ford's epic western *The Iron Horse* would have won them all. This black-and-white silent movie is almost forgotten now but many people think it is the greatest of all time.
- 2 Ford won more Oscars than any other director, with four awards for feature films and two for second-world-war documentaries. 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. *The Iron Horse* was Ford's response: two and a half hours of history, drama and pictorial beauty – which went far over budget. "It was mostly shot in Nevada," says Ford biographer Joseph McBride. "It was freezing cold and conditions were harsh. But Ford liked to be on location away from the studios."
- 4 The *Iron Horse*'s big box-office takings made Ford famous within the film industry. "I always say *The Iron Horse* was for Ford like *Jaws* was for Steven Spielberg," says McBride. "It gave him a lot of influence and finally, at the age of 30, he was an A-lister."
- 5 The *Iron Horse*'s storyline follows 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 difficult progress in a dry, documentary style – the opening titles begin: "Accurate and faithful in every particular of fact ..." But the script is also dramatic: good guys, bad guys, and a hero and heroine who are also star-crossed lovers. The film's finale shows the last spike, one made of gold, hammered in in Utah in 1869, as well as the lovers' happy-ever-after embrace.
- 6 George O'Brien stars as Davy Brandon. The young Brandon and his father explore the Sierras to find a pass for the railroad. They are ambushed by a band of Cheyenne, and Brandon witnesses his father's vicious murder by Deroux, a 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.
- 7 Ford does not portray Native Americans as the bad guys. He shows Deroux encouraging 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 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 movie critic Jose Cuenca. "Ford had the capacity for capturing that beauty. He combines great landscapes with great characters."
- 9 "By the early 1960s, westerns were not taken seriously," says McBride. "It's not just westerns though," says Cuenca. "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."
- 10 In August 1973, John Ford died. He was 79 years old and is credited with making about 140 films in a 55-year directorial career. As Orson Welles said, "I prefer the old masters – by which I mean John Ford, John Ford and John Ford."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. John Ford won an Oscar for The Iron Horse.
2. No film director has won more Oscars for best director than John Ford.
3. The hero and heroine of The Iron Horse enjoyed a lot of good luck.
4. The railroad was completed in 1869.
5. Brandon was murdered by Cheyenne Indians.
6. John Ford loved the old west.
7. People no longer took westerns seriously by the early 1960s.
8. Ford made over 55 films.

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. feature | a. engineer |
| 2. childhood | b. cold |
| 3. chief | c. budget |
| 4. old | d. film |
| 5. over | e. master |
| 6. freezing | f. memories |

b. Use the expressions from Task A to fill the gaps in the sentences.

1. We went _____ on our last holiday. I've never spent so much money!
2. The expression ' _____ ' is usually used to describe a famous painter from long ago.
3. The director's latest _____ has received great reviews from critics and fans.
4. Despite the _____, they decided to go for a walk in the snow.
5. One of my favourite _____ is playing outside with my friends during the summer.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- What is your favourite movie genre? Why?
- What is a movie genre you don't like? Why?
- Do you enjoy watching "classic" movies? Why (not)?
- Do you think movies in were better the last century or this one?

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..