

ECHOES OF VIOLENCE: HOWARD HAWKS AND THE END OF THE PRODUCTION CODE

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It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the evolution of the American nation has been shaped mainly by economic factors and interests, and that the grand moral narratives that have pervaded its history have the function of farce. However, it seems unlikely that many of the changes that American society has undergone would ever have occurred without being preceded by a major shift in the national attitude.

In this respect, neither the creation nor the abandonment of the Motion Picture Production Code were exceptions. From its inception as a means of protecting the oligopoly of the major studios to its replacement with the ratings system in the late 1960s, the so-called Hays Code faced numerous challenges as it came into conflict with different economic, political, social, and of course aesthetic circumstances.

In this study, I will focus mainly on the period of its final abandonment, when the film industry realised that a potential audience that it had been ignoring for years was turning its back on mainstream movies in favour of underground and independent cinema, in search of what Holly-

wood productions could not offer. A particularly striking example, although by no means the only one, is *Chelsea Girls* (Andy Warhol, Paul Morrissey, 1966), which came to receive offers of up to 100,000 dollars from the major distribution networks (Noguez, 2002: 180).

This makes it all too clear that the decision to abandon the Hays Code was marked by a crisis afflicting the industry, which resulted in a drop in audience numbers by 3.18 million between 1946 and 1971 (Guarner, 1993: 13). This drop has been explained by the birth of television, which gave the cinema some formidable competition, and also by state intervention. In 1948, the “Paramount decision” forced the major studios to separate production, distribution and exhibition, a bitter blow to their business model that would particularly affect the Production Code, as its implementation depended on internal economic sanctions. When they lost control of the distribution networks, the studios also lost the ability to punish disobedient distributors directly (Maltby, 1996: 194). And in 1952, as an extension of the Paramount decision, the legal status of the film industry was changed

from a mere business to a medium covered under the right to freedom of expression (like the press), thereby overturning the decision of 1915 that had given municipalities the legal authority to censor films (Maltby, 1996: 203).

This change effectively robbed the Hays Code of its *raison d'être*, although it would linger on weakly until 1968. Its delayed death was the product of the decisive role that the Production Code and its precursors had played in the establishment of Hollywood cinema as an art form and, at the same time, in its economic expansion as a business, which served to contain the criticisms of censorship and the calls for greater freedom of expression. It was impossible to understand Hollywood cinema without the Code, which was why the industry was so reluctant to let it go. Thus, although the main factor was economic, we should not underplay the importance of certain events, films and filmmakers in the Code's final death.

The depiction of sex and nudity was obviously a key factor, on the one hand, because it was independent cinema's biggest drawcard, and on the other, because within the industry it was one of the main targets of censorship. The most sig-

The death of Tony Camonte in *Scarface*
(Howard Hawks, 1932)



nificant case in this respect is the film *The Pawnbroker* (Sidney Lumet, 1964), which contained Hollywood's first explicitly nude scene since the establishment of the Hays Code, a scene that escaped censorship thanks to a decision on appeal that ultimately ruled in favour of the film's director and producer in 1965 (Guarner, 1993: 51). That decision necessarily gave rise to an attempt to adapt the Code, leading to a period of confusion and virtual lawlessness until it was finally replaced by the rating system.

Although sexual liberation very probably constituted the most important front in the war against censorship, we should not underestimate the significance of its other main target: violence.

It is important to bear in mind that the 1960s was a truly tumultuous decade, whose widespread violence was encapsulated in one event (among others) that shook the very foundations of the collective imaginary: the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas on 22 November 1963, and its aftermath. The president's violent death had a huge influence on American filmmakers, who would never tire of evoking it on the big screen. This was especially true of the generation of filmmakers that followed the classical era: scenes recalling the event by Coppola, Scorsese, or De Palma at once come to mind.

Although I do not mean to suggest that this specific event was the sole factor behind the transformation of American cinema, it is important to analyse the contribution and the particular aesthetic elements it gave rise to. These elements would be intensified with Washington's definitive entry into the war in Vietnam and, in the United States itself, with the policies of violent repression of racial equality movements.

For this analysis, I will focus on one of the icons of American cinema, who, as it happens, also played a decisive role in the implementation of the Production Code, given that his film *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932) was one of the films that suffered most at the hands of government cen-

sors and was one of the most widely condemned by the most moralising detractors of the cinema.

The end of Hawks' career and of the other iconic filmmakers of his generation marked the end of classical Hollywood. The aesthetic mutations of the transition that the industry had to undergo, combined with the attitudes of the American society of the day (the climate of violence, sexual liberation, the civil rights movements, etc.), would ultimately spell the end for the Hays Code. In this respect, the analysis of Howard Hawks' last films can be truly enlightening because, although they were not box office successes (the major studios would end up dropping him), he was one of the classical directors who fought hardest to adapt to the new times.

HOWARD HAWKS' FAREWELL: THREE VERSIONS OF THE SAME STORY

Just before the 1960s began, Hawks made *Rio Bravo* (1959), a film which, as will be shown below, constitutes a paradigmatic example of classical Hollywood cinema. Conversely, his last title, *Rio Lobo* (1970), released just after the 1960s had ended, bore more of the features of an exploitation film. The two pictures are variants of the same story, also told in *El Dorado* (1967), a film that will receive special attention here due to its production at a decisive moment for the end of censorship.

Of the three, *Rio Bravo* is the one that is the most economical in its approach, in the sense Robert Bresson describes.¹ It shows only what is necessary; or in other words, it is stripped of frills and words or situations that could be avoided. Even the singing scene adheres to this principle, serving as a light-hearted counterpoint that helps convey the fact that Dude (Dean Martin) has recovered, and to bring out on screen all the feelings that had been brewing over the course of the film. This is essentially what Bresson means by economy: being able to contain the excitement so that it will be more intense at the right moments.



The final dynamite explosion in *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959)

Right from the beginning, in the first scene after the opening credits, Hawks introduces what will be the tone of the film, holding back on the use of dialogue for as long as possible in the presentation of the protagonists and the main conflicts. For a director like Hawks, recognised for his verbosity and the overlapping dialogues of some of his comedies (Wood, 2006: 5), this may seem strange. However, in reality this stylistic peculiarity is related, on the one hand, to his rejection of the model of theatrical overacting² that had prevailed in Hollywood until the beginning of talking films and, on the other, to the rhythm he sought to impose on his films, making the actors cut off each other's sentences to speed up the scenes (McBride, 1988: 51). In other words, it had to do with containment and economy,³ doing more with less. This is why there is no speaking in the opening scene, because dialogue is not essential; on the contrary, the scene possesses a crystal clarity thanks to the presence that the visuals acquire without it. Every expression and gesture demands our attention and infuses the scene with emotion and meaning. In this way, the moments of silence underscore the refinement of the cinematic language achieved in *Rio Bravo*. In the words of Núria Bou and Xavier Pérez, it is "as if the hard lessons of the old codes of heroic silence had finally constituted the construction of an alternative

language, made up of gestures, gazes and complicit smiles that ultimately express an ocean of powerful feelings” (2000: 175). Along similar lines, Robin Wood suggests that “*Rio Bravo* is the most traditional of films. The whole of Hawks is behind it, the whole tradition of the Western, and behind that is Hollywood itself” (2006: 29). And in the words of Jean-Luc Godard: “The great filmmakers always submit and respect the rules of the game. I have not done so because I am a minor filmmaker. A good example is the work of Howard Hawks, *Rio Bravo* in particular. It is a film characterised by an extraordinary psychological lucidity and aesthetic intelligence, but Hawks has directed it so that this lucidity goes unnoticed, so that it doesn’t bother the viewers who have come to see a Western movie like any other. The achievement of slipping all the themes that interest him most into a traditional story doubles the brilliance of Hawks” (Bogdanovich, 2007: 200).

Those lessons, that tradition and that adherence to the rules of the game at once bring to our minds what has come to be known as classical cinema. And from that perspective, we should understand *Rio Bravo* as a swan song, not only because that same year (and earlier) the classical ideal would begin to be subverted, but because in Howard Hawks’ filmography it represents that ideal. If we view his work from a distance, everything seems to gravitate around *Rio Bravo*: the natural evolution of his career leads to this film, and once he achieved this degree of precision and formal rigour, he had nothing left to do but to break with it. In addition to being as imperfect as they are upbeat, his next films would try out different structures which, despite occasionally recalling earlier films by the director,⁴ had very little of a conventional story and even less of the refinement and concision of *Rio Bravo*.

Hatari! (Howard Hawks, 1962) seems to attempt to do without a narrative thread, emphasising instead each of its parts to offer what is more a series of episodes than a single story. While it

is true that Hawks rarely gave much attention to plot, allowing it to emerge out of the relationships established between the characters, in *Hatari!* the main conflict that would normally carry a film along seems to be forgotten altogether. We are shown the everyday happenings of the characters both at work and at play; there is thus no single conflict that drives the story, but instead various conflicts that come and go, that are forgotten and remembered, forming part of their day-to-day lives. This led François Truffaut to consider *Hatari!* a film about film (metacinema), in which hunting was a metaphor for the film shoot (McBride, 1988: 162). This description highlights the distance from *Rio Bravo* that Hawks decided to take, practically turning his work method into the theme of the film.

Man’s Favorite Sport?, however, did not continue with the idea in *Hatari!* Of the three films Hawks made between *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado*, it is probably this one that is most reminiscent of his earlier work; Wood is critical of the film, suggesting that it resembles the work of an imitator (2006: 132). This disappointment is perhaps due to the fact that Universal butchered the film; after noting the positive response it received in previews, the studio decided that it would work even better as a much shorter film, and cut out as much as forty minutes of footage so that the theatres would be able to screen another film with it and thus charge two admissions for the show (McBride, 1988: 39). Obviously, such heavy editing of the original cut changed the rhythm of the film; yet despite this, the version that was distributed has a noticeably slower pace than a typical Hawks film. The work with the gag, while still clearly *Hawksian*, is similar to what Jerry Lewis was developing in those days, drawing it out for comedic effect. In *Man’s Favorite Sport?*, such drawing out is not, as it was in the classical model, a concept that we can deduce from certain editing tricks (inserting a clock with its hands moving quickly) or a general approach (an idea that is referred to



7000 (1965). This was another picture that fell far short of success at the box office. Its originality consisted in the attempt to interlink three stories which, as Hawks admitted (McBride, 1988: 161-162), were not big enough on their own to make a whole picture and which together obstructed and interrupted each other.

Beyond a few specific scenes, what makes this film interesting is the fact that it was the first picture Hawks made after the Kennedy assassination and the beginning of the US military intervention in Vietnam, and there are signs that it was affected by these events. The relationships between the characters are among the most violent in any of Hawks' films, and the main reason behind that violence is not their individual megalomania and greed, as it was in *Scarface* or *Land of the Pharaohs* (Howard Hawks, 1955), but a kind of collective hysteria. Although this is associated in the film with the

Above. First fatal accident in *Red Line 7000* (Howard Hawks, 1965)
 Below. Last shot in *Red Line 7000* (Howard Hawks, 1965)

world of car racing (the competitive atmosphere, the danger and the adrenaline), it is still rather unusual for *Hawksian* characters to be so dominated by their environment, or to reach such levels of histrionics. And then there is the filming of the accidents. In the first fatality, we are shown a shot of the car in flames that is exactly the same as the one that Godard would later use in *Weekend* (1967) to represent society's collapse. And stranger still is the shot that Hawks uses to end the film: a spectacular accident from which the protagonists

in successive gags, as in *I Was a Male War Bride* [Howard Hawks, 1949]), but something palpable that occurs within the scene, where repetition and failure produce a certain discomfort in the spectator, which is cranked up until it is finally released with laughter. This produces a much more physical relationship with time.

The box office misstep of *Man's Favorite Sport?* led Hawks to begin preparing a remake of *Rio Bravo*. However, John Wayne's lack of availability left him with no alternative but to film *Red Line*

manage to escape alive, but which leaves death hanging in the air. It is a shaky and blurred shot, taken with more sensitive film, a lighter camera and a powerful telephoto lens that eliminates the needs of light and stability of a Hollywood production, producing a grainy frame that gives it a fragile, documentary quality.

Of all the violent events of the 1960s, Kennedy's assassination was surely the most "cinematic", not because it has had the most prominent presence on the big screen (the Vietnam War has been revisited countless times) but because of its mise-en-scène—both in the Zapruder film and the media coverage—and because of its capacity for producing narratives. On the one hand, these formal features led to a reworking of the classical genres. The most obvious case was its dramatic effect on film noir and the crime thriller, which recovered and reinvented the idea of the conspiracy, subsequently reinforced by the Watergate scandal. Conspiracy would now be a visual rather than an exclusively narrative concept: intensifying the off-screen space, and also through the painstaking analysis of the sounds and images to crack an unsolved mystery that struck at the very pillars of the nation. This would be a direct relationship, in which most films make their source of inspiration clear and draw on the different hypotheses that were posited.

On the other hand, everything suggests that the assassination and its filming influenced cinema in an equally spectacular way, flooding the screen with violence. From the proliferation of a new genre, the splatter film³ according to Jean-Baptiste Thoret (2003: 76-77), Abraham Zapruder's footage of the JFK assassination was the first "realist" expression of gore⁵ to the increased violence in genres that were already violent previously. The violence would be intensified with the final abandonment of the Hays Code, Washington's increasing military involvement in Vietnam and, on American soil, J. Edgar Hoover's savage campaign against the Black Panthers.

In this case, there is no direct relationship with Kennedy's assassination: the upturn in violence could have been the product of social tensions, of periods of less strident censorship (arising from the decision in favour of *The Pawnbroker*, for example), or from the influence of filmmakers who had found a niche in the industry or who were working on the independent circuit. However, as will be shown below, some filmmakers did imitate the depiction of the assassination in certain violent scenes of their filmography.

In the case of Hawks, we have seen that already in *Red Line 7000* his images were marked by a slight increase in violence, and his characters were markedly more aggressive. However, the real test comes with the comparison of *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado*: the same story before and after the president's assassination.

In reality, *El Dorado* was not originally going to be another *Rio Bravo*. Apart from its relationship to *The Stars in Their Courses*, the Harry Brown novel vaguely evocative of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* which Hawks never attempted to adapt entirely (he always rejected the fatalism of Brown's book and tried to turn it into a comedy⁶), the film gives the impression that *Rio Bravo* was the solution they found during shooting to the problems with the original screenplay (Wood, 2006: 147). The alcoholism of Sheriff Harrah (Robert Mitchum), which he has been suffering for years and which is central to the plot, is suddenly discovered well after the character has been introduced (nearly thirty minutes after his first appearance), as if his drinking problem had been an afterthought. Despite being a late addition, the differences between the two drunks, Dude and Harrah, are highly revealing: first of all, the change of roles, as while in the first film it is the deputy with the problem, in the second it is the sheriff. Secondly, and more significantly, Dude's condition is spiritual, while Harrah's is purely physical (Wood, 2006: 151). Dude's affliction holds him back because of fear; it humiliates him, and his recovery consists of a

moral decision to give up his role as a drunk. Harrah's alcoholism, on the other hand, is purely physical; it is revealed in his grimaces, in his face, in his swollen gut and his physical malaise. The cure, using the wild concoction offered by Mississippi (James Caan), results in a long and painful hangover.

Rio Bravo, once again, is a model of the classical style: a few simple gestures convey the gravity of Dude's condition, without the need to overstate his suffering or resort to any other type of exhibitionism. *El Dorado*, in this respect, is the diametrical opposite. It had almost three times the budget of *Rio Bravo* (Perales, 2005: 316) as the result of an aesthetic decision: both Hawks and his cinematographer, Harold Rosson, wanted almost everything to be a night scene from the moment that Thornton (John Wayne) returns to the town. This interest in underscoring the idea of a constant twilight required the construction of suitable sets and an investment in more sensitive (and therefore more expensive) film technology. But it is not just economic or stylistic questions that separate the two films. Wood argues that age is the main theme of *El Dorado* (2005: 174-183). This, in addition to justifying Thornton's ailments and his relationship with Harrah, is posited as an explanation of the film's form: the old age of the filmmaker himself, after *Rio Bravo*, leads him to the exaltation of the moment, the need to shout that he is alive. "Beside the austerity and rigour of *Rio Bravo*, *El Dorado* seems a colourful, even flamboyant film: there are extremes of violence and comedy, there are such picturesque details as James Caan's shotgun or Arthur Hunnicutt's trumpet and bow-and-arrow; there is the gun battle in the church, with bells repeatedly rung by being shot at, the altar blast-



The spectacular death in the bell tower in *El Dorado* (Howard Hawks, 1966)

ed, bodies falling down the bell-ropes (with one shot—camera underneath, looking up—that apart from its intrinsically startling quality, comes as a great shock in a Hawks film)" (Wood, 2006: 149).

In addition to the shot from below in the church that he highlights—a strategy that would be repeated by Francis Ford Coppola in the conclusion to *The Godfather: Part III* (1990)—Wood points to another detail worthy of our attention: Mississippi's shotgun. Hawks didn't just repeat ideas; on the contrary, in most cases he turned them on their heads. *Río Bravo*, for example, was his response to a film he detested: *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952). And through its cinematographic language, *El Dorado* would be something like an inverted negative of *Rio Bravo*. John Wayne turns from sheriff into deputy, the drunken deputy becomes the sheriff, day becomes night in the final climax and Colorado (Ricky Nelson), a master gunslinger, turns into Mississippi (James Caan), whose aim with a gun is terrible.

Mississippi's clumsiness prompts Thornton to buy him a sawn-off shotgun, which blows away everything that comes into its range. Although the use of this shotgun, as Wood points out (2006: 149), provides the only moments in the film when



The effect of Mississippi's gunshot. *El Dorado* (Howard Hawks, 1966)

humour and violence are combined (a common feature of the director's other work), there is one shot that is anything but comical. In the second attempted ambush by Nelson McLeod⁷ (Christopher George) and his men, Mississippi, who has learned from the last time, stops Thornton from going out the cantina door where McLeod's men are waiting to shoot him down. Thornton reacts with disproportionate violence bordering on sadism (unimaginable in a hero of classical cinema), shooting at one of McLeod's gang inside the cantina to force him through the door so he can be gunned down by his friends waiting outside. The other character who had taken part in the trap to get Thornton to go through the door would have met the same fate if not for Thornton's collapse when he is suddenly paralysed from the pain of an earlier bullet wound. In this moment of confusion, Mississippi decides to fire his shotgun. On screen we see the effect of his shot on the victim's body, a blast that fills the whole frame and blemishes the image itself. Smoke and splinters fly and the actor's body is thrown against the wall.

The way the shotgun blast is edited resembles what Sam Peckinpah would later make his own: a shot showing the gunslinger firing his weapon,

then cutting to the reverse shot of the consequences. In *El Dorado* there is none of Peckinpah's graphic blood or slow motion,⁸ but the excitement elicited is very similar; the violence of the scene is undeniable. Thoret suggests that the opening scene of *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) creates the sensation of "watching a film by a war reporter" (2003: 77-78). American society could no longer close its eyes to the war in Vietnam. *El Dorado* perhaps does not reach this extreme; however, if we compare it to *Rio Bravo* we can

detect a stronger documentary feel, already present in the structure of *Hatari!*, in the physicality of the gag in *Man's Favorite Sport?*, or in the visual noise of some of the shots in *Red Line 7000*. *El Dorado* seems to bring all these ideas together: a development that strips the filming process bare, a physical treatment both of alcoholism and of the cure for it, and a violence that muddies the shot and disrupts the story.

El Dorado is thus posited as the antithesis of *Rio Bravo*, perverting its apparently impeccable classicism. Of course, the trajectory, although winding, is not sudden, except in the case of the violence; and yet even this was present under the surface in *Rio Bravo*, as Martin Scorsese would make clear in his first feature film, *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967), when, to maintain and illustrate the violence of one of the scenes, he used some black-and-white still-frames from *Rio Bravo*: frozen images shown in a montage to the rhythm of gunfire. These details from Hawks' film, together with the sound of the gun shots, suggest a film that is explicitly violent.

On 29 November 1963, *Life* magazine included thirty stillframes from the Zapruder film in its report on the assassination of President Kennedy

(Thoret, 2003: 27). The sensation produced by the stills from *Río Bravo* in the Scorsese film is rather similar to the effect of the printed images of the assassination: a (re-)editing process is needed to understand the violence present within them, like the shower scene from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), which presaged the growth of violence in the 1960s. In *El Dorado* such a process is unnecessary, as what was once concealed behind the “rules of the game” has now broken out onto the surface.

In this respect, it is interesting to observe how moderate the violence appears in *Río Bravo*, for which one completed (and costly) scene in which Colorado dives under horses like Mississippi does in *El Dorado* was cut out because Hawks believed that the film already had more than enough violent moments (McBride, 1988: 156).

It is the vitality of *El Dorado* that produces this upturn in violence, while in *Río Lobo* it would emerge out of resignation and disappointment, as Hawks, excited about the project initially, ploughed through the restrictions of the studios, partly because they didn't fit with the style that would win at the box office. *Río Lobo* cost a million dollars less to make than *El Dorado*, and instead of being shot in the United States it was filmed in Mexico to reduce the budget (Perales, 2005: 320-321). Moreover, Hawks had to content himself with only one big star, John Wayne, who tried to hold up the tone of the film despite the questionable acting talents of the rest of the cast.

All these difficulties inevitably compelled Hawks to return to his recurring motifs, and of course, their association with *Río Bravo*, which he would end up remaking once again. This time, the sheriff is the corrupt one, in alliance with a landowner reminiscent of the villain in *El Dorado*, and the heroes are the ones who rebel. Of course, this comes after a prologue set during the American Civil War that addresses issues like the spoils of war and the reintegration of the losing side, which lays the foundations for the conflict. All

of this gives the impression of an unfocused film, marked by an attempt to incorporate as many attractive elements as possible but that ends up lurching from one to the next. In this sense, it might be considered reminiscent of an exploitation film.

The final showdown repeats the formula of *Río Bravo*, adding the point of view of the villains and ratcheting up the violence in keeping with the times. Even the dynamite scene has its reflection here, when two of Sheriff Hendricks' (Mike Henry) men try to blow up the protagonists. McNally (John Wayne) is faster and shoots them with the dynamite just lit in their hands. The explosion is shown first in an extremely brief close-up shot followed by a wide shot in which the camera shakes with the blast. It is a moment reminiscent of the ending to *Red Line 7000*, although as it is a scene so close to *Río Bravo* it acquires a different meaning. The fragility here reveals how much cinema changed between these two films: from a controlled, aesthetic explosion to one that is shocking and grimy. This is a filmmaker who, after his greatest work (in terms of both box office returns and personal satisfaction), began coming up against obstacles raised by the studios, who saw him and his films as a thing of the past. *El Dorado* would be the only concession he would get, something like a severance payment for a career of impeccable service, only to be left for dead just a few years later in what would be his final film. After the abandonment of the Hays Code, there was hardly a place anymore for “classical” filmmakers.

Moreover, in the sixties the studio model that had marked the golden era of Hollywood cinema began showing obvious signs of wear. The brief attempts to shift production to Europe aggravated the crisis, with Rome and Madrid as symbols of this failure. In this context, the prominent filmmakers of the period were faced with interruptions to their work rhythm, in many cases being forced to leave the United States to pursue their projects.

The two iconic filmmakers of the classical era who, like Hawks, maintained a certain routine in their production, John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock (Guarner, 1993: 21-28), also showed signs of being affected by the social context. Shortly before Kennedy's assassination, in *The Man Who Shot Liberty*



The dynamite explosion in *Rio Lobo* (Howard Hawks, 1970)

Valance (1962) and his segment of *How the West Was Won* (1962), Ford turned the spotlight on the violence that had marked the birth of the nation. The following year he would release his last comedy, *Donovan's Reef* (1963), and then, after the assassination, he would bring the Vietnam War into an apparently conventional Western, *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), which would also be his most focused and serious work on the native Americans. Finally, he would end his career with the austere and bitter *7 Women* (1966).

Hitchcock, who had opened the door for on-screen violence with *Psycho*, brought an end to his golden era just after 1963 with *Marnie*, (1964). This would be the last of his films to fully reflect his characteristic style.⁹ It was also a work that would cast a shadow over his subsequent projects, not only because of its muted reception, but especially because of the impact in the industry of his abuse and harassment of Tippi Hedren, the film's star (Guarner, 1993: 25).

His career certainly did not end there, however, and as was the case with Hawks, violence, which

had been more of a constant in Hitchcock's work, boiled up to the surface in the 1960s. After Kennedy's death, in *Torn Curtain* (1966) he would film the longest and most complex murder scene of his career (in terms of the difficulty the characters have to finally kill the victim). And after the abolition of the Code, he would end his career with three films which, in one way or another, would transgress the rules that classical cinema had always exemplified. With *Topaz* (1969), he would make a strange political thriller whose screenplay was not even completed when shooting began; in *Frenzy* (1972) he gave free rein to violence and eroticism; and in *Family Plot* (1976) he further explored certain ideas that he had developed in previous films, such as narrative and character duplicity.

Although the end of Hawks' career was similar to Ford's and Hitchcock's, he seemed more aware of his place in the industry and of the direction that it was taking.

At the end of *Rio Lobo*, Amelita (Sherry Lansing), in revenge for his scarring her face, kills Hendricks with two gunshots. After doing so she breaks down and cries, and when McNally approaches her to console her, she asks him whether she has done the right thing, whether her violence was justified. In his swan song, Hawks himself seems to be asking us whether he has acted correctly, whether violence has a purpose, whether there were moments when it really was necessary. There is a hint here of regret over the excessive violence of *El Dorado*, and a wistfulness for the days of *Rio Bravo*.

It is beyond question that the end of the Hays Code meant the end of classical Hollywood and vice versa. In turn, these two events are associated with a farewell to a generation of filmmakers who had defined this era of the industry. But in the specific case of Hawks, apart from the outdatedness of the "classical" forms, how did his films contribute to the abandonment of censorship? And finally, what role did Kennedy's assassination play in it all? In fact, although it has been a

hypothesis that has informed the analysis here, the connections between Hawks and the death of JFK are tenuous at best, and of course, it can hardly be claimed that the latter constituted a hidden motive behind the variations between *Rio Bravo*, *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo*. Signs of the connection thus need to be looked for in the work of other filmmakers who, in one way or another, are associated with Hawks.

EL DORADO, KENNEDY'S ASSASSINATION AND THE END OF THE PRODUCTION CODE

In 1965, the year of the legal vacuum opened up by *The Pawnbroker*, production began on *El Dorado*. At almost the same time, work began on two other Westerns, both produced by Roger Corman, that would contain direct allusions to the tragic event in Dallas. Both were directed by Monte Hellman and, on the basis of minimalist plots, they effectively emptied the genre of meaning to the point that their characters seem doomed to wander the West with no apparent destination. The first, *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1965), the slightly more conventional of the two, has its protagonists stumble into the company of a gang of horse thieves on the day that the latter will be caught and hanged by vigilantes. It is a coincidence that will condemn the two survivors of the vigilante raid to a life on the run. The second is *The Shooting* (1966), filmed back-to-back with the first in accordance with the Corman model, with the same tech crew and some of the same actors. The conflict in this film begins when a hidden gunman kills a man before the "astonished gaze" (Benavente, 2017: 257) of one of the two protagonists. Later, a mysterious woman hires the two men to search for a man that she wants dead. The hunt, which is drawn out over the whole film, is a journey to nowhere through the desert. In the end, one of the two men, Willett Gashade (Warren Oates), will discover that the unknown man was in fact his twin brother, who had disappeared after the first murder.

Hellman himself acknowledges the allusion to Kennedy's assassination in both films. In the first, in which it is less obvious, he points out that the protagonists' "guilt by association" is a reflection of the feeling in American society after the president's death (Ciment, 1973: 56). In the second, more relevant to my analysis here, in addition to offering a reproduction of the assassination, with the killer shooting Leland Drum (B. J. Merholz) in the face from a hiding spot on a hill, we find in the ending a reflection on the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald.

On finding Gashade's twin, the woman starts shooting, and at this moment Hellman begins slowing down the scene until the image is practically frozen at the moment of the character's death. Hellman and Thoret (2003: 50-51) explain that this editing technique is associated with the way Oswald's murder was analysed on television, replaying the footage and pausing on the moment of the gunshot. The cinematic experience, however, is quite different. The sensation produced is that the film itself has been broken by the confrontation between Gashade and his double. The cathartic essence of the violence has vanished: rather than liberating the characters it causes the projection to seize up. "Revenge functions as a pure driving force for a movement that in a way leads back to the starting point, tracing a circu-

The death of Gashade's twin. *The Shooting* (Monte Hellman, 1966)





The death of Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967)

lar line, which thus reveals the uselessness of the action, a kind of meaninglessness, violence dispensed in vain” (Benavente, 2017: 263).

In this sense, if there is one idea that illustrates the transition that Hollywood cinema underwent in the 1960s, it is not so much self-awareness as the cheapening of the violent act. The Hays Code had contributed to keeping classicism alive by serving as a firewall against excess, something that Hawks kept very much in mind in *Rio Bravo*. Because after all, it was for cases of excess that the censors would get out their cutting knives. In this respect, it is also interesting to consider how the need to deal with a censorship process that was applied equally to all filmmakers resulted in a kind of uniformity of production. And perhaps many of the features that we have come to recognise as distinctive of the classical era were simply strategies for getting past the censors.

In the mid-sixties, with the nation immersed in a climate of violence, and with a weakened regulatory apparatus, the film industry had liberated itself, just as it had tried to do in the 1940s when it came up against a much more stable censorship system.

The legal battle over *The Pawnbroker* marked the beginning of the end for the Production Code. Just a year earlier, a film as provocative as *The Naked Kiss* (Samuel Fuller, 1964), instead of shaking the foundations of the Hays Office, sent its director into exile. And yet it is a film that could have been emblematic of the end of the Code.

Similarly, the death of Gashade’s twin constitutes an image that encapsulates the resistance against censorship. Although it is important to bear in mind that *The Shoot-*

ing enjoyed a fairly successful run on the festival circuit, it was far from getting an immediate commercial release: the exhibition rights passed from one holder to another and it was not seen in theatres until 1968, and even then only in Paris thanks to an event organized by the magazine *Positif* (Tatum, 1988: 24). Meanwhile, in the United States the film’s rights were sold directly to television, also in 1968 (Walker, 1970-1971: 35), by which time the Hays Code had already been abolished.

El Dorado’s release was also delayed, but in this case it was for commercial reasons, as the distributor wanted to keep it from sharing a theatrical run with *Nevada Smith* (Henry Hathaway, 1966), which featured the rising star Steve McQueen (Tejero, 2015: 457). As a result, its first commercial screening in the United States would be on 7 June 1967, in the middle of a key year for the end of the self-censorship system, in which violence can be said to have played a somewhat more decisive role than other fronts. It was a year that saw the release of the biggest box office successes of Robert Aldrich and Arthur Penn: *The Dirty Dozen* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, respectively. Penn’s film

very probably possesses the most violent ending of any Hollywood movie up to that time, at least since *Scarface*, to which it appears to pay homage. And it is not the only homage it contains: in that same final scene, Penn acknowledges a reference to Kennedy's assassination (Comolli, 1967: 30). It is therefore the first scene in which Hawks and JFK's murder are brought together, linked by a filmmaker who cannot help but allude to two images that were so firmly ingrained in the collective imaginary.

Bonnie and Clyde was released on 13 August, just two months after *El Dorado*. The American spectator could practically have heard Mississippi's shotgun firing almost simultaneously with the shots that killed Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) and Clyde (Warren Beatty), thereby keeping the echoes of violence resounding in movie theatres.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

It is a striking fact that it was a Hawks film that would instigate the moves to implement the Hays Code and another Hawks film that may have dealt it the final blow; a quintessentially American story.

Beyond this coincidence, there are some interesting similarities between the final scene in *Scarface* and the scene of Mississippi's shotgun murder, as there are with the ending to *Bonnie and Clyde*. In a sense, cinema has always had a certain revanchist (and in certain cases, revisionist) inclination. The violent scenes of the sixties, on the one hand, were reacting to the climate of violence that had taken over society; but on the other, they served as acts of vengeance. The reproductions of the assassination seemed to have the intention of exploring the nation's wounds, in order to begin to heal them; at the same time, the films located on this hairpin turn away from censorship seemed to be evoking pre-Code films, and prominent among these is *Scarface*. They remind us of the cinema that could have been and

to which, because of censorship, we will always be in debt.

Hawks himself acknowledged on numerous occasions that *Scarface* was his favourite of all the films he had directed. The reason for his fondness for it was none other than the freedom he enjoyed, because it was a production made together with Howard Hughes in which he didn't have to answer to any other producers (McBride, 1988: 54). This absolute freedom during shooting would result in a whole host of problems with the censors later, which meant that a film made in 1930 would not see the light until 1932.

In the film's ending, Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) is gunned down by the police and collapses in defeat in the middle of the road. The burst of gunfire that ends his life is filmed in a manner similar to the gunshot in *El Dorado*: a shot of Tony facing his death, a shot of the policeman pulling the trigger, and then the final shot of the film, showing the bullets riddling the protagonist's body as he falls to the ground, at which point the camera pans up to a neon sign that reads "The World Is Yours". In this scene, which takes place at night, we perceive the impact of the gunfire thanks to the bullets striking the wall, as the space of the frame explodes in the darkness.

This is the ending that we can see today, recovered from the original negatives kept by Hawks in his home (McBride, 1988: 57). Shortly after its release, the film was confiscated by Howard Hughes, who was disappointed with its box office performance and with the decisions of the censors, which meant that until 1979, when the original film was re-released, only pirate versions were available. Some of these versions had alternative endings, as at that time films were censored by regional jurisdictions and censors in some states demanded that Tony Camonte be tried and executed rather than shot in the street. Hawks was thus required to film another final scene, this time without Paul Muni, in which a gallows suggests that Camonte faced justice in accordance with the law (McBride, 1988: 55).

Arthur Penn must have seen a version with the original ending, to which he owes such a great debt. In reality, every gangster film made since the end of the 1960s evokes *Scarface* at some moment—even *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), a film that would bring an end to the crisis in Hollywood, at least temporarily, and that would transport us back to Camonte’s death with the killing of Santino Corleone (James Caan).

The memory of *Scarface*, the masterpiece that was snatched out of Hawks’ hands, also pervades *El Dorado*. This becomes more obvious if we add into the equation the ending to *The Big Sleep* (1946), where a character who has set up an ambush for the protagonists ends up being gunned down by his own companions, an idea very similar to the scene discussed above from *El Dorado*. But unlike *Scarface*, where we are taken outside with Camonte to see him gunned down, in *The Big Sleep* we witness the shooting from inside the house, where we are only able to see the holes that the bullets make in the door. The violence is kept outside, because in those years the Hays Code prevented it from being shown explicitly. So what happens in *El Dorado*? Rather than taking us outside to see the violence unleashed beyond the door, the violence itself is brought inside. This was Hawks’ way of paying back the censors, allowing the gunshots to invade every space, with the good fortune, perhaps, of choosing just the right moment to exact his revenge.

Penn, his ally against the censors, dropped the dialectic between indoors and outdoors, filming his ending in an open field, where there is nowhere to escape from the violence.

This gives the impression that one of the most representative filmmakers of the industry had made a weapon that would go off with such force that it would take with it everything that remained of the Production Code, albeit through the work of another filmmaker who sought to imitate him. ■

NOTES

- 1 “Here we have another basic principle, a principle that only very few, the greats, the greats like Chaplin, understand: economy, making something big with nothing. That’s it. Instead, there’s a tendency to do the complete opposite: to show absolutely everything, whatever, anything goes, and in the end there’s no excitement because there’s no economy. Economy of everything; for example, economy of gestures; so that the gestures that appear say a lot” (Martialay, Pala, Méndez Leite and López Echarri, 1977: 178).
- 2 Somewhat sarcastically, Hawks himself suggested that this formula was brought back by Elia Kazan and the Actors Studio (McBride, 1988: 36)
- 3 In the case of Hawks, the concept of economy is also meant in a literal sense: his work method reduced the cost of the film as he invested less time and film footage than the vast majority of directors.
- 4 José Luis Guarnier (1993: 23) points out the similarities between *Man’s Favorite Sport?* (Howard Hawks, 1963) and *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), as well as between *Red Line 7000* (Howard Hawks, 1965) and *The Crowd Roars* (Howard Hawks, 1932), in addition to the different versions of *Río Bravo*.
- 5 Thoret uses the term “realist” to differentiate it from the “gore” of the splatter film, the first example of which is *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963), made shortly before the assassination, which, unlike a “realist” film, did not exploit the moral implications of gore.
- 6 This provoked the indignation of the writer, who asked not to be credited in the film.
- 7 The hidden danger of the ambush might bring to mind the sniper who killed Kennedy from a concealed place, although Hawks never made this connection.
- 8 Hawks’ opinion of Peckinpah and *The Wild Bunch* is anything but positive; after seeing the film, he had this to say: “Well, he doesn’t know how to direct. I can kill four men, take ‘em to the morgue and bury them before he gets one to the ground in slow motion” (McBride, 1988: 130).

- 9 “It would be Hitchcock’s last film with a blonde heroine; it was also his last collaboration with his faithful cinematographer Robert Burks and it contains the last musical score that Bernard Herrmann, the most creative and decisive of Hitchcock’s accomplices, composed for the director” (Guarner, 1993: 25-26).

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ECHOES OF VIOLENCE. HOWARD HAWKS AND THE END OF THE PRODUCTION CODE

Abstract

Focusing on Howard Hawks' last six films, especially *Río Bravo*, *El Dorado* and *Río Lobo*, this article explores the factors that led to the abandonment of the Hays Code. The changes that Hollywood cinema underwent in the 1960s can help us understand the essence of classical cinema in contrast with the film tradition that was born out of the fight against the censorship. The analysis will focus mainly on the increasingly explicit depiction of violence as one of the decisive fronts of the battle against the Production Code, considering its relationship with the social context and, more specifically, with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963.

Key words

Classical Hollywood cinema; Motion Picture Production Code; Hays Code; Howard Hawks; John F. Kennedy; Monte Hellman; 1960s; violence; Western.

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ECOS DE VIOLENCIA. HOWARD HAWKS Y EL FINAL DEL CÓDIGO DE PRODUCCIÓN

Resumen

A partir de las seis últimas películas de Howard Hawks, con especial atención a *Río Bravo*, *El Dorado* y *Río Lobo*, el presente artículo pretende indagar en las causas que llevaron al abandono del código Hays. Las transformaciones que vivió el cine hollywoodiense durante la década de los sesenta nos ayudan a comprender el ideal de cine clásico en contraposición al que nació del enfrentamiento a la censura. El análisis se centra, sobre todo, en el crecimiento de la violencia como uno de los frentes decisivos contra el Código de Producción, y se examina su vínculo con el contexto social y, más concretamente, con el atentado que supuso la muerte de John Fitzgerald Kennedy en 1963.

Palabras clave

Cine clásico; Código de Producción de Películas; código Hays; Howard Hawks; John Fitzgerald Kennedy; Monte Hellman; años sesenta; violencia; *western*.

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