



# Allan Dwan: Master of the American Folk Art of Filmmaking

If *The Last Picture Show* was Peter Bogdanovich's homage to John Ford, and *What's Up Doc?* his homage to Howard Hawks, *Paper Moon* is his homage to Allan Dwan.

Dwan represents an ethic of straightforward, non-neurotic entertainment and a command of the grammar of film — through an observation of which Hollywood might hope to regain that reliable level of pure fun that used to be the attraction of movies.

But Dwan should not be seen as representing the calculated mindlessness of an Eisenhower-era reactionary trend. While Dwan's cinema lacks cultural and sociological content, his total mastery of the medium is aligned with a vision whose simplicity borders equally on the ridiculous and the sublime.

Dwan was a director without pretensions. Put simply, he loved the activity of making movies, loved the medium itself. His theme of temporal resignation, implied only in the mathematical purity of his style, sustained his interest in the most dubious of projects regardless of the banality of a screenplay or the insipidity of a performance. His visual style sought out the archetypal truths that lay at the hearts of clichéd genres and the sympathetic innocence that made even the least skilled actor human, and thus beautiful.

Dwan's art was oblivious to all social and cultural evolutions. Yet the rhythms of his editing, the clear, precise, economical succession of shots, the detached, uncritical observation, suggest an abstract, meditative involvement more on the order of classical music — an art untouched by time. In applying a purity of cinematic syntax to clichéd stories and weak, often ludicrously incapable actors, Dwan has shown us the possibility of a transcendent ideal while simultaneously (and sympathetically) illustrating the very human inability to yet achieve that ideal.

Dwan's career, his self-exile in the world of B-pictures, defines a line-of-least-resistance philosophy. In subjecting himself to the medium he loved, in his willingness not to challenge the conventions of that medium, he maintained a happy low profile throughout some 50 years of extraordinarily prolific filmmaking.

The cinema of Allan Dwan has remained largely inaccessible to contemporary appreciation because Dwan's commitment to conventional subject matter refuses to call attention to itself as high art. Thus, perhaps the most fruitful approach to this extraordinary career is through terms of folk art — if for no other reason than because our recent obsession with

personal expression has temporarily blinded us to the possibility of selfless expression as an even higher option for the aware artist.

In a recent interview, Roberto Rossellini (surely the most profoundly evolutionary of all contemporary filmmakers) has stated that he no longer considers himself an "artist" of the cinema, seeing himself rather as a "scientist and craftsman." Rossellini no longer pursues personal themes, but strives for a "universality of discourse" attained directly through "cinematic themes and techniques."

Rossellini's function in the modern cinema is paralleled by Dwan's position in the classical American tradition of dramatic analysis. Above his position as an artist, Dwan was likewise a scientist and a craftsman. Andrew Sarris has pointed out Dwan's advanced craftsmanship in his encyclopaedic knowledge of film technique. It is in his mathematical ordering of these elements of the cinematic language that Dwan can be seen as a scientist. (He was educated as an electrical engineer.)

On an abstract level, Dwan can be readily appreciated by anyone aware of those universal beauties inherent in the medium of film itself — quite apart from the diverse methods and expressions of those film artists already isolated and heralded by the auteur approach. The effect of the auteur theory has been to applaud personalities for the degree to which they have rebelled against or reshaped the conventional elements of the cinema as evolved in the commercial Hollywood feature. Dwan has not yet found his rightful high place in the hierarchy of American filmmakers because the essence of his commitment does not readily reveal itself to auteur approaches.

We find Dwan classified with minor stylists, directors of high intentions struggling for moments of personal expression in a medium hostile to such expression. The assumption has been that these directors are minor only because they lacked the freedom of higher budgets and more significantly themed projects.

But Dwan does not belong in this category of struggle. There is no sense of conflict in Dwan's choices, no sense of a projection of inner obsession onto the screen, no sense of suppressed ambition. Instead, Dwan's style is marked by simple assured, quietly observing analysis. One is struck not by the moments of delirious escape from conventionality, but by a unified, rhythmic flow of images.

Like Rossellini, Dwan discovered a system of "essential images" — images which derive their meaning not from the

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subject matter of the screenplays they illustrate nor from the creative ingenuity of the performers whose movements they record. The meaning of Dwan's images is synonymous with their syntax as units in the cinematic language.

The vocabulary of the classical American narrative film of dramatic analysis constitutes a set form of visual conventions. This form corresponds with a way of looking at the world that defines all humanity and all action as prototypical of an elemental mythology of human existence. All variety can be encompassed in a unitary ideal.

Each element of this vocabulary, each kind of shot, has a corresponding singular meaning that coexists with and informs

### Allan Dwan: An Incomplete Filmography Born in Toronto, Ontario on April 3, 1885

- 1915. *The Good Bad Man*
- 1923. *Robin Hood*  
*Zaza*
- 1925. *Wicked*
- 1927. *While Paris Sleeps*
- 1929. *The Iron Mask*
- 1931. *Chances*  
*Man to Man*
- 1933. *The Mayor of Hell*
- 1939. *The Three Musketeers*
- 1940. *Trail of the Vigilantes*
- 1941. *Look Who's Laughing*  
*Rise and Shine*
- 1942. *Friendly Enemies*  
*Here We Go Again*
- 1943. *Around the World*
- 1944. *Abroad with Two Yanks*  
*Up in Mabel's Room*
- 1945. *Brewster's Millions*
- 1946. *Getting Gertie's Garter*
- 1947. *Calendar Girl*  
*Driftwood*  
*Northwest Outpost*
- 1948. *Inside Story*
- 1949. *Sands of Iwo Jima*
- 1950. *Surrender*
- 1951. *Belle Le Grand*  
*Wild Blue Yonder*
- 1952. *I Dream of Jeanie*  
*Montana Belle*
- 1953. *Flight Nurse*  
*The Woman They Almost Lynched*
- 1954. *Cattle Queen of Montana*  
*Passion*  
*Silver Lode*
- 1955. *Escape to Burma*  
*Pearl of the South Pacific*  
*Tennessee's Partner*
- 1956. *Hold Back the Night*  
*Slightly Scarlet*
- 1957. *Restless Breed*  
*The River's Edge*
- 1961. *The Most Dangerous Man Alive*

the secular meaning of the shot within the context of the particular story that is being told. If a director is aware of this elemental meaning which is aligned with each shot, he selects these shots (makes his directorial decisions) in such a way as to bring out the mythological basis inherent in the subject matter of his screenplay.

The meaning of the cinema of Allan Dwan resides first and foremost in the correspondences between choice of shot and Platonic existence. Thus, to argue that Dwan's syntax has significant meaning for us (that we should be deeply moved simply by a camera movement or juxtaposition of otherwise apparently banal shots) is to suggest that the cinema itself has some profound significance on the evolution of human consciousness and that Dwan's directorial purity most directly makes us aware of this significance.

Again to quote Rossellini: "These essential images contain the potential for a universal discourse that can unite people."

If the concept of personal expression has an ultimate inherent limitation, it is in the use of cinema to work out essentially neurotic deficiencies in consciousness. The fascination of the whole career (as opposed to any single film) of an auteur director lies in an autobiographical recording of the process of working out the artist's obsessions. A later work by such a director is almost invariably morally superior to an early work, as the artist has made progress in his personal pursuit of a destiny that eventually has attained universal significance.

There is no such progression in Dwan's work, but an implied and unwavering high level of moral awareness. There is no conflict between freedom and determinism, as the two concepts have become synonymous. Dwan's totally permissive attitude toward his performers and his apparent obliviousness to the weaknesses of the screenplays allows for the introduction of elements of chance, of spontaneity, and of free will. But Dwan's visual treatment, his choice of shots, provides the framework of determinism that sees all variety as conforming to some cosmic plan or unity. His visual choices correspond with the hidden forces which regulate men's lives.

If the moral cinemas of Griffith, Ford, and Hawks exist to teach and inform (to bring about change), the cinema of Allan Dwan fulfills a meditative function. Dwan's implied moral stance accepted all human activity equally. His only self-assertion was expressed through a zen-like sense of humour — an affection for the divine ridiculousness of human foibles.

When to use a long shot, a close-up, a trucking shot, a dolly or a zoom was governed by certain standard usages in the Hollywood film industry. These standard usages were the basis of the American folk art of filmmaking. Allan Dwan was the great master of this folk art. As this classical American cinema existed both as a form complete and harmonious in itself and as a medium open to evolving personal expression, Dwan represented that completed, harmonious form.

It was no mere coincidence that the late work of all major directors of the classical tradition (Griffith, Ford, Walsh, Hawks) moved toward a simplicity of image (a cessation of struggle) not unrelated to Dwan's achieved style. The classical form was home to these directors, simultaneously sustaining and permissive over their years of exploration, but finally complete and self-sufficient for the aging artist who approached that point of infinity that was his destiny.

Dwan's cinema is the secured plateau of the first evolution of the medium of film. In a quantum theory of historical evolution, Dwan is the purest representation of that first step in the cinema's destiny of bringing self-awareness and unity to mankind. The synthesizing visual styles of Orson Welles and Otto Preminger represent a second step moving the cinema toward a forum of ideas. Rossellini's recent historical films suggest a third leap forward into a cinema simultaneously analytical and synthesizing. The rest of the cinema consists of transitions and the popularization of these quantum leaps. **END**

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