MUTUAL AESTHETICS

VISUAL STYLE IN THE FILMS OF F.W. MURNAU AND JOHN FORD, 1928-1941

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Introduction

F.W. Murnau wrote, "All great arts have had great artists born to understand them as no other men can, and the motion picture is the single art expression of our age."[1] Murnau made this remark shortly after his masterpiece, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), was released by Fox Film Corporation. *Sunrise's* production riveted the entire studio lot due to its scope and Murnau's international reputation; its subsequent critical success solidified Murnau's place in Fox's top-tier of directors. But John Ford, also one of Fox's top-tier directors, once brusquely remarked, "It's no use talking to me about art . . . I'm a picture man."[2]

At first glance, it may seem surprising that I've paired Murnau and Ford. Murnau is considered a modernist whose style is rooted in Germany's stylistic heritage and is best remembered for films noted for their artful aestheticism and technical innovation. Ford, on the other hand, is recognized as a classicist, best remembered today for his mastery of Hollywood narrative filmmaking, in particular the genre of the western, a position crystallized in his famous self-description: "My name's John Ford. I make Westerns."[3] Yet despite their diametrically opposed positions on the relationship of film to art, both directors were noted for their artistry. For instance, a 1927 review of *Sunrise* pointed to the German director's visual virtuosity: "Mr. Murnau shows himself to be an artist in camera studies."[4] From a point early in his career, Ford was also identified as an artistic filmmaker, succinctly noted in a review for his now lost *Jackie* (1921): "The production is remarkable for the insistent adherence to accurate and artistic detail which have distinguished director Jack Ford's contributions to the screen in the past."[5] Such artistry would prove a recurrent refrain in reviews of his films during the developmental years of the Hollywood sound film, culminating in reviews, such as this one, of *The Long Voyage Home* (1940): "There seems no way to describe the Wanger-Argosy production of *The Long Voyage*

Home other than 'arty.' It is that in every sense of the word and about as high an art of motion picture as one would find in many days of looking at pictures."[6]

Ford's films have more in common with Murnau's than simply "artiness," however. When the "German genius"[7] was signed by William Fox in 1926 and began filming *Sunrise* on the Fox studio lot, Ford observed Murnau's unique handling of lighting, framing, and camera movement.[8] After *Sunrise*'s completion in March 1927, Murnau left the US to return to Germany for the summer.[9] The following month, Ford himself traveled to Germany in order to film background footage for his upcoming production, *Four Sons* (1928).[10] Ford's grandson and biographer Dan Ford points out that when Ford with met Murnau there, he was allowed to examine scene renderings and design sketches from Murnau's German films.[11] Dan Ford claims Murnau "explained in depth the preproduction techniques of German expressionistic cinema."[12] Moreover, Ford screened many of Murnau's pre-*Sunrise* films and "studied them scene by scene, making mental notes on their techniques, their slow deliberate rhythms."[13]

Yet there have been no in-depth treatments of the connection between Murnau and Ford. Although many Ford scholars recognize Murnau's influence on Ford's style during the transition to sound, most of them acknowledge this connection in a passing reference. More thorough discussions have, by and large, been limited to *Sunrise*'s influence on *Four Sons*. Simply put, there has been no comprehensive study of Murnau's impact across a number of Ford's early sound films beyond *Four Sons*. This critical oversight is unfortunate because Murnau's influence came at a crucial period in Ford's technological and stylistic development.

In this study I propose to trace the influence of Murnau on Ford during the formative years of Ford's career as a filmmaker in the medium of sound, roughly from the years 1928, Ford's first sound film, through 1941, Ford's final film before WWII when he accepted a

commission in the US Navy. Three questions will guide my analysis. First, to what extent was

Ford experimenting with aspects of expressionism even before his introduction to Murnau? A

detailed exploration of Ford's early work in relation to expressionism should add greatly to our

understanding of the evolution of Ford's style as a whole. Second, to what extent did Murnau

influence Ford directly after the release of *Sunrise*? What stylistic and technological aspects of

Murnau's films began to emerge in Ford's work after he met Murnau? Ford's style underwent

substantial revision and modification to recalibrate for sound during the period from roughly

1928, at the beginning of the sound revolution, to 1933, the year that a model for the production

of sound began to coalesce in the Hollywood studio system. To what degree did Murnau's

influence impact Ford's style during these years? Third, what happened to Murnau's influence

throughout the remainder of Ford's pre-WWII output, from 1933 to 1941, when Ford emerged as

a celebrated and influential director? Ultimately, I will argue that Ford's encounter with Murnau

served as a catalytic influence in the development of Ford's artistic expression, and although it

would eventually be superseded by his own emerging classical style, Murnau was a determining

influence on Ford's artistic development in the pre-war era.

That the critical literature on Ford has not fully explored this crucial connection between

Ford and Murnau should not come as a surprise. As Charles Maland has pointed out, the

progression of Ford's overall reputation as a master of cinema has been oddly languorous among

film scholars.[14] In the 1950s, when *Cahiers du cinéma* began identifying some directors as

auteurs, the central creative force behind the production of their films, Ford was curiously

dismissed. Most startling are François Truffaut's comments that Ford represents an earlier

Hollywood, "the one when good health prevailed over intelligence, craftiness over sincerity."[15]

Furthermore, Truffaut singles out the westerns of Anthony Mann as "more clever than Ford," because Ford is "senile and repetitive, [and] bores us."[16]

Unlike Truffaut, British critics, including Lindsay Anderson, Andrew Sinclair, and Peter Wollen, embrace Ford as an auteur. However, they posit Ford's auteurism squarely within the western, thus hindering any discussion of Ford's non-western work and forestalling investigation of Murnau's influence. To his credit, Anderson mentions *Sunrise*, noting, "there seems little doubt that the example of Murnau and his colleagues inspired him [Ford] to a richer, more conscious conception of style."[17] While he points to *Four Sons* as reminiscent of Murnau, Anderson fails to note even a single example from *Four Sons*, or any other Ford film for that matter. Along the same lines, Sinclair mentions Murnau only once and also in relation to *Four Sons*: "He now displayed the influence of Murnau rather than Griffith or Flaherty, using misty German expressionism rather than earthy American or Irish realism."[18] Wollen omits Murnau entirely, and reduces Ford's style to one remark: "Stylistically, Ford has long carried the burden of being the great pre-Wellsian master . . . [such as his] carefully composed use of shadow and silhouette."[19]

Ford's reputation was eventually taken up by American auterist critics where any discussion of Murnau's influence is meager at best. Peter Bogdanovich, in his influential 1967 monograph, neglects Murnau entirely. Andrew Sarris, whose *The John Ford Movie Mystery* expanded on his earlier claim that placed Ford in the "Pantheon" of auteurs, identifies Murnau's importance to Ford's style but does not go beyond a passing reference: "Indeed, Murnau's *Sunrise*, the climatic masterpiece of studio expressionism, had been shot at Fox the year before *Four Sons*, and it would have been unusual for Ford *not* to have been influenced by the German master of camera *mise en scène*."[20]

A number of texts have emerged since Ford's reputation as an auteur solidified and they too largely do not mention or only briefly consider the impact of Murnau.   In his 1971 study, John Baxter does not acknowledge Murnau at all. In 1986, Peter Stowell, in his book on Ford, argues that Ford's tenure at Fox includes "the Expressionist dramas" *Four Sons* and *Hangman's House* but does not mention Murnau.[21] Janey A. Place recognizes Ford's expressionism but bypasses Murnau. Regarding *The Informer* (1935), Place remarks, "Ford adds understandable motives and a romantic notion of fate contained in the expressionistic visual style of the film."[22] Similarly, her discussion of *The Long Voyage Home* credits the style to "Gregg Toland's dark, expressionistic, foggy, and above all, long depth-of-field photography."[23] Even those critics who attend to Ford's "artiest" films often fail to mention Murnau, such as Matthew Bernstein, who compellingly argues that Ford re-tooled his style for a more artistic approach in *The Long Voyage Home*, but omits Murnau.[24] Most recently, Brian Spittles recognizes Murnau's impact on *Four Sons* and *Hangman's House*: "One of the photographic features of the post-1927 films is the debt they owe to the influence of the German director F.W. Murnau . . ."[25] As Spittles offers no analysis of either film, he takes this observation no further.

Of those scholars who clearly regard Murnau as a crucial influence, four come to mind. But in each case, the connection remains less than fully explored. The first is Joseph McBride. In his 1975 study on Ford (co-authored by Michael Wilmington), McBride makes no mention of Murnau. But in his biography, *Searching for John Ford*, published in 2001, McBride cites a connection between the two directors in characterizing *Four Sons* as "Ford's overt, even slavish, Murnau imitation."[26] However, he fails to identify any specific examples. In a 2007 essay featured in the *Ford at Fox* film collection, McBride expands his earlier remarks, asserting that *Four Sons*, *Mother Machree* (1928), and *Hangman's House* (1928) are filmed in "Murnau-like

patterns."[27] But again, there are no specifics - only the assertion that Ford's expressionism "would persist throughout the director's career, surfacing more strongly in some films than others but always enriching his visual style and helping give deeper emotional resonance to his work."[28]

A second Ford biographer, Scott Eyman, attends to Murnau's impact in both his 1999 biography *Print the Legend* and his 2004 retrospective *John Ford: The Searcher*. In the former, Eyman remarks, "For Ford, Murnau's films were a revelation."[29] After Murnau's arrival in Hollywood, Eyman argues, Ford saw new potential in filmmaking, "that film was plastic, that light could be sculpted, and that the essence of cinema was a rhythmic succession of striking images."[30] In the latter, Eyman looks deeper into the influence, claiming:

> Ford's response [to *Sunrise*] was to endeavor to meld his own interests – family, community – with Murnau's style – stylized studio art direction and flowing tracking shots – the antithesis of the technique that Ford had been utilizing only a few years before. The student quickly became a master.[31]

Eyman, like those before him, recognizes Murnau's influence, but once again, there is no analysis of any Ford films to elucidate his argument.

A third Ford scholar, Patrick Sheeran, in his book on *The Informer,* covers Murnau's influence with more depth, claiming, "Ford's self-apprenticeship to Murnau was far more extensive than is generally realized."[32] Sheeran groups Murnau with D.W. Griffith as having equal inspiration on Ford's style, and unlike most other scholars, discerns a group of Ford films that are indebted to Murnau, including *Four Sons*, *Hangman's House*, *The Informer*, *Mary of Scotland* (1936), *The Long Voyage Home*, and *The Fugitive* (1947).[33] Nevertheless, Sheeran does

not identify the stylistic links between Ford and Murnau, stopping short at arguing, "the two young directors established something of a mutual admiration society."[34]

A fourth scholar, Tag Gallagher, has explored the connection between Murnau and Ford in more depth than anyone else. According to Gallagher, "Ford was enchanted by the intense stylization of Murnau's painterly invention."[35] Further, Gallagher suggests that in the wake of *Sunrise*, "Ford's cinema became totally stylized."[36] Claiming Ford's previous films had been "relatively unstylized," Gallagher goes on to assert that Murnau initiates a period in Ford where "compositions, camera movements, and montage, previously pretty, logical and rudimentary, now aspire to expressive force."[37] Similar to Sheeran, Gallagher argues that there is a discernible group of films that illustrate Murnau's influence, although his group is somewhat different from Sheeran's: *Four Sons, Mother Machree, Hangman's House,* and *Riley the Cop* (1929), a series of films that come to fruition, according to Gallagher, in *The Black Watch* (1929). While Gallagher spends considerable time describing these films, his analysis is cursory at best and detailed examples are absent. While Gallagher suggests that Ford is clearly imitating Murnau in his early sound films, he neglects to probe specific instances across these films. Although the stylistic nexus of Murnau and Ford has been recognized in the critical literature on Ford, there has been no in-depth study that identifies the sustained legacy of Murnau across the crucial period of Ford's development as an artist from 1928 to 1941.

Before turning to Ford, it's crucial to understand Murnau's example – the stylistic elements that characterize his work and the techniques he developed for achieving them. Although he is often described as a German expressionist director, Murnau's style often deviates from expressionism and accommodates other aesthetics. Thomas Elsaesser, for example, warns of "a common assumption: that Murnau was an expressionist director."[38] Brad Prager argues

along similar lines: "It has been claimed that the works of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau form a coherent and unified oeuvre, but it would be inaccurate to ascribe a singular authorial vision to such a heterogeneous collection." Instead, Prager suggests there are a "number of Murnaus" that can be viewed as a "synthesis of a number of traditions."[39] Even Murnau himself points to this estimation regarding his ambitious, experimental style: "No one really knows how to make pictures yet. I do not know how to make pictures. Developments of the future will make our present day efforts appear as the play of children, as the stuttering of an unsure tongue."[40]

This does not mean that one should dismiss the expressionistic influences in Murnau's body of work. German film scholar Sabine Hake informs us that the expressionist movement in the film industry "aimed at a radical transformation of the visible world, a projection of psychological states into a highly constructed filmic process."[41] Expressionism, then, is a movement that produced works of art in which the representation of reality is distorted for the sake of conveying a character's inner vision. Several qualities characterize expressionist films, all of which privilege the mise-en-scène: chiaroscuro lighting, artificial sets, an overtly theatrical acting style, and an abstract clash of shapes and tonalities.[42] Such techniques aim to distract from realistic details and contingencies through a subjective viewpoint.

Perhaps with the exception of his last two productions, *City Girl* (1930) and *Tabu* (1931), Murnau clearly utilizes expressionist qualities. Needless to say, expressionism in his films often functions differently from the movement's more overt examples, such as Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*] (1919) or Fritz Lang's *Destiny* [*Der müde Tod*] (1921). Whereas those two films exploit mise-en-scène to achieve the stylistic qualities of expressionism, Murnau primarily uses the camera often through elaborate camera movements and manipulations of the image. This is suggested by Marilyn Fabe, who claims,

"Murnau achieved expressionistic distortions of the cinematic world not by photographing painted expressionist sets, but by capitalizing on the expressive capacities of the cinematic apparatus: extreme camera angles, special optical effects, and exuberant camera movements."[43] This coalesces in *The Last Laugh* [*Der Letzte Mann*] (1924), which includes unchained camera movements, superimpositions, and defocused images, all of which produce an atmosphere that is radically detached from reality. Among the most expressionistic moment of the film occurs when the doorman (Emil Jannings) exits the hotel humiliated by losing his job. When he looks back at the building, Murnau distorts the image to make the building appear to be ominously leaning over the doorman. This approach to expressionism differs from other films of the era because the film, as Fabe argues, portrays "a convincingly real mise-en- scène" and is still able to convey the doorman's inner state-of-mind. Murnau, then, projects expressionism not only through a film's mise-en-scène, but also by exploiting the technical potentials of the cinematic medium.[44]

An evaluation of Murnau's overall style must consider influences other than expressionism as well. One such influence is realism, which Elsaesser contextualizes as Murnau's "poetic treatment of landscape, and a very controlled, understated portrayal of psychological or even frankly melodramatic conflicts."[45] In *The Haunted Screen*, Lotte Eisner notes Murnau's naturalistic influences and places them in direct contrast to the era's more obvious expressionistic films, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. According to Eisner, "Nature participates in the action,"[46] demonstrating his "innate love for landscape."[47] Important to note is that, as Sabine Hake suggests, "combining naturalistic landscapes and stylized studio interiors, the Murnau films systematically resist conventional definitions of filmic realism."[48] Moreover, as Elsaesser observes, "if one were to summarize his own unique contribution to the cinema, it would be the evocative, utterly realistic depiction of a natural environment, blending almost

imperceptibly with exquisitely crafted artifice . . ."[49] This contrast between realism and expressionism is already apparent in *Nosferatu* (1922), where naturalistic features in exterior shots are contrasted with the more expressionist images inside Count Orlok's castle.

Murnau's authorial vision also incorporates aspects of romanticism, which Angela Dalle Vache credits to his years studying art history at the University of Heidelberg.[50] Among the components of romanticism that Jo Leslie Collier has identified in Murnau's films are: "a concern with the individual, not the social group. . .a special emphasis on Nature. . .an opposition between Nature and culture. . .[and] the privileged place afforded to emotions.[51] *Sunrise* offers a good starting point for the distillation of Murnau's romantic tendencies. Referencing the scene where the Wife (Janet Gaynor) runs from her Husband (George O'Brien) into the wood, Prager links Murnau's tableau to Caspar David Friedrich's *Chasseur in the Forest* (1813-14).[52] By reproducing images of German romantic painters, Prager argues, "Romantic representations become an antidote to expressionism."[53] Alternately, Robin Wood comments that "several shots in the film immediately suggest paintings," among which include "the second-honeymoon image of the boat sailing home by midnight."[54] Thus, the film is rendered in a style that suggests both romanticism and expressionism, both of which are key to understanding Murnau's style as a whole.

I aim to investigate the stylistic and technological influence of Murnau on John Ford's style, a style that in many ways has been presumed to be fully understood within the discipline of film studies. In examining multiple facets of their connection I hope to affirm the importance of Murnau in the development of Ford's pictorial artistry. This artistry, even after abandoning his overtly imitative forays into Murnau's style, remained a crucial aspect of Ford's pre-war visual

design. This study will take a closer look at how Ford saw in Murnau an opportunity to employ an eye-catching expressive style that would determine the visual look of Ford's film for more than a decade.

Ford Before Murnau (1917-1920)

Nearly a decade before Murnau arrived in Hollywood, Ford was already experimenting with expressionism. In his formative years, Ford's earliest features illustrate a propensity for stylized compositions. In what follows, I will show how Ford exhibited expressionistic tendencies through both chiaroscuro lighting and an attempt at externalizing the psychological states of his characters through subjective camerawork.

Ford's biographers note Ford's expressionist bent in the period before *Four Sons.* For instance, Joseph McBride in *Searching for John Ford* observes, "Ford's own ingrained tendency toward visual expressionism was already clear in rudimentary form as early as 1917."[55] Similarly, Tag Gallagher's biography of Ford notes "anticipations of expressionism in early Ford movies" and includes a still from *Desperate Trails* (1921, presumed lost), which clearly reveals Ford's use of dramatic shadows and chiaroscuro lighting, and descriptions of *Hoodman Blind* (1923, presumed lost) that "suggest Murnau's *Nosferatu*." Gallagher argues that these early films show a "predilection in Ford for what he was to find in Murnau."[56] Scott Eyman in *The Searcher* includes a still from *Hell Bent* (1918) that even more dramatically features an intensely stylized composition and emphatic contrasts of black and white produced by low-key lighting.[57] In each case, however, no specific examples or detailed analysis accompany these claims, likely

the result of key films in Ford's early oeuvre being lost or presumed lost when these books were

being written.[58] I will argue that the development of Ford's expressionistic bent can be traced

across three of his earliest films, *Straight Shooting*, *Bucking Broadway* (1917, rediscovered in

2002), and *Just Pals* (1920) in one of two ways: lighting to accomplish chiaroscuro effects and

subjective shots to render an altered state of mind.

Chiaroscuro lighting has long been recognized as integral to the expressionist aesthetic.

As Norbert Wolf points out, "German Expressionist films caused a sensation not least on account

of their tense chiaroscuro, their harsh contrasts of light and dark, and their sharp illumination of a

single figure or object while the surroundings remained plunged in gloom."[59] Similarly, Neil H.

Donahue credits "the Expressionist film for cultivating the art of chiaroscuro lighting, which

distinguished foreground and background and highlights figures and objects, and, in doing so,

animates and mobilizes narrative space."[60] Expressionist style also works to externalize the

mental state of characters. Brenton Priestley argues that the goal of an expressionist film, "taking

its cue from Expressionist painting and theatre, was to make the shot itself subjective. . . .

Expressionism, with its rejection of objectivity and emphasis on making subjective states visible,

is such an apt aesthetic form for these films to take."[61] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson

divide filmic subjectivity into two categories: perceptual subjectivity and mental subjectivity.

Whereas perceptual subjectivity allows the audience to see and hear exactly what the character

can, mental subjectivity occurs when we "see the character's inner images, representing memory,

fantasy, dreams, or hallucinations."[62] Of these, mental subjectivity is crucial for any

expressionist analysis because of its attempt at cinematographically depicting inner states, as

seen in *The Last Laugh*. Whereas certain shots suggest perceptual subjectivity, in depicting what

the doorman sees, other shots suggest mental subjectivity, depicting the inner-workings of his

mind, such as in the dream sequence. In his earliest films, Ford was experimenting with

perceptual subjectivity but *also* mental subjectivity, illustrating his propensity for expressionist

imagery.

   Straight Shooting is filled with both chiaroscuro lighting and subjective camerawork. In

his first study on Ford, McBride justifies the inclusion of *Straight Shooting* in his analysis

"because of the invaluable and unexpected light it throws on Ford's evolution."[63] I would argue

this unexpected "light" is literal and that lighting throughout the film serves as a vivid window

into Ford's development as an artist. Interestingly, Ford's command of lighting is done without

the benefit of a studio set and artificial light. Throughout the film, Ford composes shots with

various fields of light as if to create a quasi-chiaroscuro effect. Joan Sims's (Molly Malone) first

entrance in the tree illustrates this dappling of light, creating a strong contrast between the black

and white tones in the shot **(fig. 1)**. Similarly, after Joan has alerted the farmers of the imminent

attack, Ford uses a long shot to show Black-Eye Pete's (Milton Brown) gang riding horseback

through a plain. However, the action is captured from a wooded area at the edge of the field, and

therefore both branches and members of the gang are placed in the foreground **(fig. 2)**. The stark

contrast of light and dark between the foreground and background shows how Ford is advancing

typical shots to an artistic level by manipulating natural light and without the use of artificial

illumination.

   Another important characteristic of expressionism can be seen in Ford's use of a

subjective shot that is both perceptual and mental, which occurs after the death of Ted Sims (Ted

Brooks). Cheyenne Harry (Harry Carey), having just emerged from the woods, notices

Sweetwater Sims (George Berrell), Joan, and her boyfriend Sam (Hoot Gibson) gathered around

Ted's grave. In a close-up, Harry's eyes are completely obscured by the brim of his hat,

reinforcing his mercilessness **(fig. 3)**. Then, after he removes his hat, an overexposed point-of-view shot shows Harry is in fact overcome with emotion **(fig. 4)**. The following reaction shot of Harry shows him wiping tears away from his eyes **(fig. 5)**. McBride argues this "visual device Ford uses to dramatize Harry's moment of decision is strikingly expressionistic, evidence that a tendency so prominent in Ford's later films was present in a latent form well before he was influenced by German expressionist cinema in the 1920s."[64] Indeed, what Ford accomplishes in this moment is effectively expressing Harry's inner feelings cinematographically. Even more significant is that this moment of perceptual and mental subjectivity represents Harry's redemption, confirmed in an intertitle later where Harry explains the family "opened his eyes."

Released just shy of four months after *Straight Shooting*, *Bucking Broadway* clearly illustrates Ford's expressionistic employment of chiaroscuro lighting. In fact, an early scene, shot in low-key, minimalistic lighting to heighten the mood, strikingly anticipates Tom Joad's (Henry Fonda) return to his house in Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Cheyenne Harry is showing his love interest, Helen (Molly Malone), the house he has built for the two of them. Close-ups of Harry and Helen are enhanced by the low-level of light emanating from a single source, which simulates the effect of a lit match **(fig. 6)**. The dramatic weight of this particular scene relies on the lighting, and it becomes nearly impossible not to notice the scene is dark. At one point, a close-up of Harry has a slightly sinister connotation due to the sharp contrast between the hard light and dark shadow in the shot, as if Ford is still not quite in control of his expressionism as he explores its potentials **(fig. 7)**. Later in the film, once Helen has left Cheyenne and is in Eugene's (Vester Pegg) apartment in New York City, the lighting once again has strong chiaroscuro effects. Yet this time the lighting seems to be an outward manifestation of Helen's discontent with Eugene and her longing for Cheyenne. A low-key light below Helen suggests her inner

thoughts at the notion of marrying Eugene **(fig. 8)**. Curiously, Ford uses a low-key light not to highlight the nefariousness of a character, but rather to make the spectator empathetic to Helen's plight. By going against the normative connotations of low-key lighting, it becomes clear that Ford's experiments with expressionism are still fluid and volatile.

The depiction of expressionism in *Bucking Broadway* extends also to Ford's use of mental subjectivity in one scene. Cheyenne has arrived in New York to save Helen from Eugene. When he arrives at her hotel, he meets Gladys (Gertrude Astor), who, unbeknownst to him, is a grifter who works for Eugene. When Gladys asks Cheyenne why he has traveled such a far distance to New York, an intertitle reveals his response: "I have come here to find my fiancée. A snake of a man took her away . . . and her father all alone and upset out in Wyoming." In the following shot, Ford shows Cheyenne, while discussing Helen's father, staring intently off screen. A fade-out follows, and then there is a fade-in to reveal Helen's father on his homestead in Wyoming, grieving Helen's abandonment. What appears initially to be a simple eyeline match takes on expressionistic force as Ford uses it to explore the possibilities of subjectivity. Although Ford uses a standard eyeline-match, cutting from a shot of Cheyenne looking to a shot of what he sees, he does so by violating spatial continuity. Instead of literally showing what Cheyenne is looking at, Ford is revealing what Harry sees in his mind, which makes this a moment of mental subjectivity. This shot demonstrates Ford's knack for exploring the potential of subjectivity through editing by externalizing the thoughts and mental images of his characters.

Ford uses a similar strategy to represent subjectivity in *Just Pals*, released three years after *Bucking Broadway*. Much of the film is photographed in high key lighting, allowing Ford to save his most expressionistic shots for a few significant emotional moments. The film depicts the unlikely friendship between Bim (Buck Jones), the town loafer, and an adolescent drifter named

Bill (George E. Stone). A major emotional moment occurs when Bill, during an afternoon nap,

dreams of Bim, who is unemployed, sporting different uniforms. Bill is awakened by a nearby

train, and decides to get onboard and steal a uniform for Bim. When the train begins to move,

Bim is forced to run after it and save Bill, who eventually jumps off. For this moment of the

film, Ford shifts his style to a darker tonality, resulting in expressionistic images. The shot of the

oncoming train features a stark contrast between light and dark **(fig. 9)**. Furthermore, when Bim

runs to Bill after he has jumped from the train, Ford composes the shot with an emphasis on low-

key lighting **(fig. 10)**. What is most interesting about this scene is that when Bill begins to nap,

there is plenty of sunshine outside. However, when he runs and jumps off the train, it is as

though it has become nighttime due to the scarcity of light. This is a clear example of what

Patrick Keating designates as "selective emphasis," a strategy utilized by directors and

cinematographers in which "a strong version of a particular style"[65] would be used to emphasize

dramatic shifts in the film. According to Keating, "As artists have known for some time, using a

device selectively can actually enhance its expressive force."[66] While most of the film is bright,

Ford casts an emotional moment in chiaroscuro lighting and dark shadows.

This scene, however, is also noteworthy for Ford's attempt to render an altered state of

mind. As he does in *Bucking Broadway*, Ford is exploring how film can be used to express

mental subjectivity. However, I would argue that *Just Pals* reveals a more sophisticated attempt

than *Bucking Broadway* at presenting the inner-workings of the subconscious mind due to Ford's

employment of superimpositions and stark lighting. During Bill's dream, a number of

superimpositions of Bim in various uniforms appear, such as a baseball player and police officer

(fig. 11). Moreover, this shot uses an iris effect, creating dream-like imagery. These abstract

qualities illustrate Ford's attempt at externalizing the mental subjectivity of Bill's character as well as indicate Ford's technical prowess and evolution as an artist.

Straight Shooting, Bucking Broadway, and *Just Pals* feature stylized compositions and dramatic chiaroscuro contrasts of light and dark to produce expressionist images. Moreover, in each of these films, there is an attempt at cinematographically producing an altered state of mind through subjective shots and superimposition. These early attempts at expressionistic effects predate Murnau's arrival in Hollywood by nearly a decade. Ford arrived at Universal Studios during a period when the studio was in its organizational stages and, according to film historian William K. Everson, "freed its directors from assembly line requirements."[67] Perhaps it was Ford's relative freedom from the constraints of the studio system that allowed him to refine his product. With stylistic choices at his own discretion, Ford would be able to experiment with a wide range of lighting and cinematographic options that reveal his inclination for expressionism.

Ford's expressionism, while pronounced in these three films, would continue to be practiced throughout the rest of the decade, but is inchoate at best. Moments in *The Village Blacksmith* (1922), *Lightnin'* (1925), and *The Blue Eagle* (1926, featuring the three stars of *Sunrise,* George O'Brien, Janet Gaynor, and Margaret Livingston), continue to showcase Ford's expressionist lighting techniques and framing. However, the arrival of Murnau in Hollywood would activate a more heightened execution of style and technology that derive from Murnau's use of German expressionism and romanticism. Whereas Ford's pre-Murnau ventures into expressionism were more rudimentary and, in the case of *Bucking Broadway*, unbridled, post-1927 endeavors would be refined through the example of Murnau's unique style. Ford had crafted some strikingly expressionistic imagery in the 1917-1920 era, but those images would

become augmented between 1928-1933, resulting in frankly imitative films that extract and approximate the defining trademarks of Murnau's style.

Cultivating the Murnau Influence (1928-1933)

In the period of 1928-1933, Ford's films are at times so overtly imitative of Murnau's that they actually seem un-Fordian. Murnau's arrival in Hollywood, the production of *Sunrise*, and Ford's trip to Germany exposed Ford to Murnau's style and technical dexterity. They also activated a more emphatic use of expressionism in Ford while it also prompted the incorporation of elements of Murnau's romanticism. The stylistic markers of Murnau in films such as *Nosferatu*, *The Last Laugh*, *Faust*, *Sunrise*, and *City Girl* include compositions along a diagonal axis, deep-focus cinematography, chiaroscuro lighting, creation of characters' subjectivity, and the unchained camera. Five Ford films released between 1928 and 1933 display the distinctive elements from Murnau's work enumerated above: *Four Sons*, *Hangman's House*, *Born Reckless*, *Arrowsmith*, and *Pilgrimage*.

Murnau frequently composed his mise-en-scène in terms of diagonal lines, which Collier attributes to the Wagnerian influence in his films. She notes: "The Duke's [of Saxe-Meiningen] favorite piece of blocking, movement from downstage corner to the opposite upstage corner, is often echoed in Murnau's work."[68] Furthermore, "Diagonal lines give Murnau's images, as they give any pictorial design, a dynamic component."[69] For example, the trains at the opening of *City Girl* and *Sunrise* are framed diagonally in order to add dynamism to the shot **(fig. 12,13)**. Regarding *Sunrise*, Dudley Andrew attributes the tension, passion, and fervor of his shots to his

conscious use of diagonals throughout the film. He argues that the Woman from the City's

diagonal walk along the fence gives her a "driving and perverse energy."[70] I would add the

climactic altercation between the Man and Woman along the fence in *Sunrise*, which adds

dynamism to the overall composition **(fig. 14)**.

Diagonal compositions became standard practice for Ford starting with *Four Sons* in

1928. Moments in *Four Sons* bear a striking resemblance to the train shots in *City Girl* and

Sunrise. Ford frequently composes diagonally, giving the shots a sense of energy and vigor. This

is especially evident in the sequence of Mother Bernle (Margaret Mann) on the subway **(fig. 15)**.

Pilgrimage also displays trains framed along a diagonal axis, but here Ford incorporates other

means of diagonal composition that bear resemblance to Murnau. Shortly after Hannah

(Henrietta Crosman) enlists her son James (Norman Foster) into the army to keep him away from

his girlfriend Suzanne (Heather Angel), Ford frames shots along a fence that cuts through the

frame diagonally in front of Hannah's farmhouse – a direct homage to the fence shot in *Sunrise*

(fig. 16). Later, When Hannah visits James' grave, Ford once again composes diagonally, this

time along the graves of soldiers **(fig. 17)**.

Murnau was fond of employing depth of field in many of his shots. Gilberto Perez

suggests Murnau is the first filmmaker who consciously shot in deep focus: "Murnau looks past

the foreground and into the background."[71] Collier links Murnau's use of deep-focus

cinematography with elements of romanticism in the theater of Max Reinhardt. She notes,

"Composition in depth is a method of direction that Murnau inherited directly from his theatrical

predecessors. In this case, he has no need to perform an operation of abstraction, as from the

revolving stage to the moving camera."[72] The bleakness of the doorman's situation in *The Last*

Laugh is captured by the deep-focus shot revealing him at the far end of the bathroom he has

been assigned to clean **(fig. 18)**. Likewise, as the Man contemplates murdering his wife in *Sunrise*, he looks up from the bed and sees her feeding chickens outside. His disaffection from the love that once characterized their relationship is expressed in a deep-focus shot, stressing the distance between them **(fig. 19)**.

Deep-focus shots pervade the mise-en-scène of *Hangman's House* and *Arrowsmith*. Depth of field is pronounced throughout *Hangman's House*, such as when three bystanders observe Hogan (Victor McLaglen) and Dermot (Larry Kent) safely escaping the burning mansion **(fig. 20)**. Shortly after, before D'Arcy (Earle Fox) falls to his death, he is seen escaping the growing fire. Ford frames him within many archways in the mansion, echoing Harker's entrance to Count Orlok's castle in *Nosferatu* **(fig. 21, 22)**. In both of these shots, Ford makes use of multiple planes of focus, adding dynamism to them. Similarly, while deep-focus shots are scattered throughout *Arrowsmith*, they become particularly apparent after the bubonic plague erupts. Ford frequently shoots Arrowsmith (Ronald Colman) and Leona's (Helen Hayes) residence in the West Indies in deep-focus as a means of stressing their anguish and distance between their remote location and their home in the US, as well as their growing alienation from each other **(fig. 23-25)**. Moreover, Ford manages to incorporate a favored visual motif of his – framing through doorways –to capitalize on contrasting light tonalities within multiple planes.

Another formal aspect for which Murnau is known is his trademark lighting schemes. As his frequent collaborator Carl Hoffman remarks: "For Murnau lighting became part of the actual directing of the film. He would never have shot a scene without first 'seeing' the lighting and adapting it to his intentions."[73] Murnau's combined expressionist and romantic influences are evident in his lighting. On the one hand, Murnau's use of lighting exemplifies the stark chiaroscuro contrasts of light and dark seen in many expressionist films. The opening of *Faust*,

which Lotte Eisner describes as "the most remarkable and poignant images of the German chiaroscuro ever created,"[74] features a meticulously designed lighting scheme to characterize the wager between Mephisto and the archangel **(fig. 26)**. Matt Erlin notes, "The stark contrast in this initial confrontation between the blinding radiance of the backlit angel and the dark, shadowy figure of the devil introduces the moral semantics of light and darkness that carries throughout the entire film."[75] The intensity of light during the sequence creates additional distortion, adding to the film's adherence to expressionism.

However, Eisner argues that Murnau's use of lighting distinguishes itself from other expressionists, noting, "There are none of the arbitrary contrasts, over-accentuated contours, or artificially serrated shadows found in so many German films. The forms come through the misty light gently, opalescent."[76] By privileging light over dark, Murnau demonstrates his adherence to romantic techniques and to Reinhardt, who "created his magical world with light, darkness serving only as a foil."[77] Both the Wife and Woman from the City are inundated in light throughout *Sunrise*; however, while the Wife's light is a saintly halo, the vamp's is what Molly Haskell calls a "miasmal mist."[78] Lighting in *Sunrise* extends to salvific, dust-laden beams of light. When the Man and Wife witness the marriage ceremony in the church, a divine light cast down from above, enhancing the shot's painterly composition **(fig. 27)**. A similar effect is used in *Faust*, when a cherubic light streams from the cathedral and prevents Faust from trailing Gretchen **(fig. 28)**.

Much of Ford's lighting techniques in his post-1927 films find their correlate in Murnau's oeuvre. Many scenes simulate the chiaroscuro lighting arrangements apparent in Murnau's more expressionist moments. In *Arrowsmith*, chiaroscuro lighting becomes increasingly embedded into the mise-en-scène during the final moments of Leona's life; her

anguish is externalized by means of contrasting black and white tonalities produced by hard

lighting **(fig. 29-31)**. When Arrowsmith returns to find Leona dead, he is shot in silhouette

looking over her body **(fig. 32)**. Keating argues that in this particular shot, "the light background

serves to make the shadows seem even darker, maximizing their expressive impact."[79]

    Other instances of chiaroscuro lighting occur in *Born Reckless*. The opening of the film

replicates the stark lighting of *Faust*'s opening. Shortly before the police discover Louis Beretti

(Edmund Lowe) during a jewelry heist, many of the shots feature distinct tonal differences

between light and dark, adding to the expressionist mise-en-scène. Here, Ford emphasizes

Beretti's dire situation by using extreme contrast and a low-placed key light, resembling

Murnau's lighting choices **(fig. 33, 34)**.

    In addition, Ford often shares Murnau's romantic lighting strategies. For example, in

Four Sons, after Mother Bernle has learned that her two sons Johann (Charles Morton) and Franz

(Ralph Bushman) have been killed in battle, she retreats to her bedside to lament. In a long shot,

a beam of light (also from a window) is cast onto her, highlighting her blonde hair, echoing the

church scene in *Sunrise* **(fig. 35)**. In *Pilgrimage*, dust-laden lights resemble Murnau's romantic

techniques. In the barn scene, a strain of light casts down onto Jim and Mary as they dream of a

life together **(fig. 36)**. As in *Sunrise*, a radiant beam of light shines on the couple, resulting in a

painterly composition reminiscent of German romanticism.

    Mental subjectivity is in evidence throughout much of Murnau's films, and is

undoubtedly a principle goal of externalizing psychological states. In her analysis of mental

subjective camera shots in *The Last Laugh*, Fabe asserts, "Murnau often presents his [the

doorman's] world not as it is but as he sees it, distorted by his anxious mental state."[80] When the

doorman reads his letter of demotion, Murnau superimposes the previous lavatory assistant being

dismissed from the doorman's point of view. As his eyes read the words "due to infirmity," the camera goes out of focus, illustrating the doorman's angst **(fig. 37)**. The subjective camera also exhibits dream states throughout the film that reinforce the humiliation of the doorman. One such instance occurs when the doorman is drunk. Once again, Murnau superimposes images and shoots out of focus to suggest the interior state of the doorman **(fig. 38)**. These visual effects create a fitting atmosphere for the dream. When he wakes up, a double exposed subjective shot reveals a woman standing in front of him.

Hangman's House, with its emphasis on the external manifestation of psychological states, shares many similarities with *The Last Laugh*. Justice James O'Brien (Hobart Bosworth), guilt-ridden because of his ruthlessness in sentencing men to the gallows, is told by his doctors that he will son die. Humiliated and remorseful, he gapes into the fireplace in front of him and begins to recollect. Within the perimeters of the fireplace, a mental subjective shot shows us a blindfolded man (an uncredited John Wayne) being sentenced to death. Immediately before hanging, a woman appears, looking directly at the camera while screaming (echoing a shot from *The Last Laugh*) **(fig. 39-41)**. Later, a similar subjective shot reveals multiple men wrongly accused by Judge O'Brien being sentenced to death. Ford utilizes superimposition and a slightly out-of-focus lens in these shots to emphasize their subjective nature **(fig. 42, 43)**. Similar to *The Last Laugh*, these moments indicate an externalization of mental states, which is why visual effects are applied to the shots.

Much of Murnau's legacy can be attributed to the moving camera. When asked once in an interview what he would like most for Christmas, he replied "a camera that can move freely in space . . . one that any moment can go anywhere, at any speed."[81] Collier argues, "Murnau . . . often used the moving camera to establish a film's characteristic rhythm."[82] Murnau's use of the

unchained camera takes on different forms. It is often linked to transportation, as in the ride down the elevator in *The Last Laugh* and the trolley ride into the city in *Sunrise* **(fig. 44, 45)**. In other instances, it takes on a dream-like quality, as in the psychic trip through space in *Faust* or the couple's escapade through the wheat field in *City Girl* **(fig. 46, 47)**. Collier situates these examples as being emblematic of romanticism, particularly in Reinhart's theatrical use of the "crowd-chorus," because "the spectator by means of Murnau's camera is able to be both participant and observer."[83]

Perhaps no other example of the unchained camera in Murnau's body of work is as refined and intricate as the long track through the marsh in *Sunrise*. Much has been written about the camera's trajectory, as well as the interplay of objectivity and subjectivity.[84] For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to emphasize the narrative and stylistic function of the shot. Dudley Andrew considers the function of the camera to "animate and prolong" the moment as well as secure Murnau's reputation as an "aesthetic, high-art director."[85] In comparison to others who argue the camera serves a variety of narrative functions, Andrew argues the camera has no narrative function whatsoever. Moreover, Murnau's labyrinthine shot can be viewed as a synthesis of expressionist, romantic, and naturalistic techniques. As Collier notes, "Murnau's moving camera can be thought of as the cinematic equivalent (and elaboration) of Reinhart's revolving stage . . ."[86] While this is indicative of romanticism, Collier points out, "the function of movement [however] has been reversed. Wagner had conceived scenic dramaturgy as a means to maintain spatio-temporal continuity; Murnau moves the camera to violate it."[87] Murnau's explicit attempt to disorientate the spectator, in addition to the subjective quality of the shot, has its roots in expressionism. Lastly, Murnau's outdoor realism, stressed by the marshland setting and inclusion of the moon illustrates his predilection for natural landscapes.

The influence of Murnau's unchained camera is evident throughout *Four Sons*, *Hangman's House*, and *Born Reckless*. In his brief mention of the film, Gallagher recognizes Ford's excessive camera movements as "aped from *Sunrise* and other German movies and which tracks ceaselessly with characters, in front or behind."[88] One such example occurs at the beginning of *Four Sons*, when the camera follows the Postman (Albert Gran, who uncannily resembles Emil Jannings in *The Last Laugh*) down the main road of the Bavarian village **(fig. 48-50)**. It is easy to distill the degree to which Ford is imitating Murnau in this shot with its lack of narrative agency. Aside from showing the Postman greet townspeople and arrive at Mother Bernle's house, there is no reason to move the camera so continually. In a shot even more indebted to *Sunrise*, Joseph (James Hall) prowls through a foggy battlefield to comfort a dying soldier, which turns out to be his brother Franz. The mobile camera, which follows a silhouetted Joseph through the murky field, recalls the marsh that the Man trudges through in *Sunrise* **(fig. 51-53)**.

In *Hangman's House*, camera movements continue to display the influence of *Sunrise*. When Hogan receives a telegram at the film's beginning, he bids goodbye to his comrades, saying he must leave Algeria and return to Ireland to kill a man. Upon his arrival in Glenmalure, Hogan, a condemned man, assumes various disguises. Ford captures his first entrance in Glenmalure with a flowing tracking shot along a road. The shot echoes the tracking shot in *Sunrise* with its foggy landscape, low-key lighting, and lateral tracking movement. Moreover, the shot features multiple planes that are all filmed in deep focus **(fig. 54)**. Another shot recreates the trolley shot from *Sunrise*. Hogan, having been previously caught by the police, is broken out of jail by his compatriots and goes into hiding. When he leaves his prison cell, he jumps into a truck

awaiting him. For the escape, Ford mounts the camera inside the moving truck with the driver in silhouette, recalling the trolley driver in *Sunrise* **(fig. 55)**.

Significantly, *Hangman's House* demonstrates the beginning of Ford fusing Murnau's influence with elements of his own style. McBride writes that Ford "adapted the brooding Murnau manner to an Irish setting, although in a more restrained fashion . . . the fog-and-doom shrouded atmosphere . . . allows Ford to discover greater depth in his mythopoetic view of Ireland."[89] Meanwhile, Gallagher, who describes the film as "no longer imitative" of Murnau, claims "Expressionism blends with Ford's nineteenth-century romanticism."[90] While I don't disagree with McBride and Gallagher's statements, I would argue the integration of Ford's style in *Hangman's House* can be seen in his camera movements. Dermot, who soon discovers the inn where Hogan is hiding, takes Connaught with him across the river to see Hogan. In figure 56, the couple boards the canoe and begins to sail towards the hideout. Unlike the tracking shots in *Four Sons* that lack narrative utility, this shot is narratively justified even while retaining the Murnau atmosphere. Throughout the duration of the shot, Dermot and Connaught discuss their marriage plans and what they will ask Hogan **(fig. 57)**. In contrast with the slavish tracking shots of *Four Sons*, Ford is now finding ways to combine Murnau's style with his own narrative concerns.

I would like to end this section with an analysis of a scene in *Born Reckless* that represents the apex of Murnau's influence. What makes *Born Reckless* so ripe for analysis is not only its explicit homage to Murnau, but also its lack of critical attention by Ford scholars and biographers. According to McBride, "*Born Reckless* is perhaps the least competently directed film to bear Ford's name; it's hard to spot much in it that looks like his style."[91] Eyman also provides scant attention, calling the film "a minor gem. . ." well shot on smaller-than-life studio sets . . . the material is closer to Raoul Walsh – but it isn't bad."[92] Gallagher reduces the film to a

brief statement, arguing the "building up of tangential incidents in *Born Reckless* nearly diverts us from its pointless story."[93]

What is most surprising about the above comments is their dismissal of the film's unabashed replication of the long tracking shot through the swamp in *Sunrise*. More so than earlier, subtler references to Murnau's work, this shot instead so overtly restages Murnau's influential shot that one gets the feeling Murnau could have shot it himself. This remarkable restaging appears after Jean's (Catherine Dale Owen) baby has been kidnapped by Big Shot (Warren Hymer). Rosa (Marguerite Churchill) and a distraught Jean go to Louis for help. Louis immediately agrees. Meanwhile, Louis' partner Bill has discovered Big Shot's hideout in the wilderness, and the two go to rescue the baby. In figure 58, Ford shows Louis and Bill park on a wooden bridge in a marshy terrain. Louis exits the vehicle, telling Bill to remain in the car while he looks for Big Shot's hideout. In a long shot, Louis is surrounded by a misty landscape suffused in chiaroscuro lighting **(fig. 59)**. From here, Ford commences a lengthy tracking shot akin to *Sunrise*, that both laterally tracks with Louis' trajectory as well as tracking directly behind him. When he begins walking through reeds, the camera tracks parallel to him, keeping its distance, peeking though the branches **(fig. 60)**. Midway through his trek, Louis comes across a wooden fence that he crosses over, once again replicating the Man's movement in *Sunrise* **(fig. 61, 62)**. As Louis arrives at the hideout, the camera begins to dolly in behind him, but all that can be seen is heavy mist **(fig. 63)**. Ford's tracking shot can be seen as an equivalent of Murnau's shot in *Sunrise* for its unchained movement, rich chiaroscuro lighting, and similar mise-en-scène.

The period of 1928-1933 saw the proliferation of Ford's frankly imitative Murnau aesthetic. In the years following Murnau's arrival in Hollywood, Ford adopted many of

Murnau's stylistic and technological components. In films like *Nosferatu*, *The Last Laugh*, *Faust*, *Sunrise*, and *City Girl*, Murnau demonstrates an interest in diagonal compositions, depth of field, intricate lighting schemes, character subjectivity, and unchained camera movements. Ford displayed these techniques in such a way that the Fordian touch is nearly absent.

Throughout the rest of the 1930s, Ford would continue to practice Murnau's aesthetic, reaching a zenith in *The Informer* and *The Long Voyage Home*. However, Murnau's influence began to dissipate in other films, as Ford's own style began to take center stage. One impetus for change was Murnau's sudden death in 1931. Additionally, the consolidation of sound was largely complete by 1933, allowing Ford to explore newer stylistic and technological possibilities. As we will see, Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) are indicative of these changes. While Murnau's influence is still present, both films illustrate Ford's own auteurism beginning to shine through.

Ford's Artistic Apex (1935-1940)

Murnau's influence on Ford's visual style culminated in *The Informer* (1935) and *The Long Voyage Home* (1940). In these two films, the five stylistic elements Ford cultivated in the 1928-1933 period indicate not only a continuation of Murnau's influence, but an intensification of it. However, almost simultaneous with the release of *The Long Voyage Home* was Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). In these two films, Murnau's influence is no longer sustained virtually throughout but instead has become a more nuanced facet of their overall visual design. I will first argue that *The Informer* and *The Long Voyage Home* represent

Ford's final attempt at overtly imitating Murnau. Then I will turn to *Stagecoach* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, arguing that while they are more decidedly Fordian, both films subtlety illustrate Murnau's lasting influence.

The Informer*, adapted from Liam O'Flaherty's 1925 novel, represents Ford's *ne plus ultra* of the visual style he adopted from Murnau's films. Nevertheless, while multiple critics have acknowledged the expressionist influence in the film, they have neglected to illustrate how its style derives from Murnau. McBride writes: "Following the same expressionistic path Ford took in the late silent period with *Four Sons* and *Hangman's House*, *The Informer* is a tour de force of visual storytelling. "[94] Furthermore, he argues Ford "was excited by the artistic challenge of creating a state of mind by orchestrating the interplay of light and shadow; inadvertently, RKO had allowed him to make an art movie."[95] Similarly, Gallagher's only mention of *The Informer*'s connection to Murnau is in terms of cinematographer Joseph August's "radiant *Sunrise*-like tonalities."[96] Sheeran comes closest to recognizing *The Informer*'s artistic debt to Murnau, noting the novel Ford "chose to film certainly beckoned in a German expressionist direction and made very good use of what he had learned from Murnau."[97] Yet, Sheeran fails to identify the actual instances of Murnau in the film. Scholarship has treated Ford's film as a bravura example of cinematic art and even expressionist art, but has overlooked Ford's debt to Murnau.

Before Ford's version, German director Arthur Robison had filmed an adaptation of the novel at Britain's Elstree Studios in 1929. Robison had remained relatively unknown in Germany until the release of *Schatten* (1922), one of the defining films of German expressionism. *Schatten*, typified by its manipulation of light and shadow, produces what Lotte Eisner argues are "evocative ornamental shadows"[98] that have the power to mobilize the repressed unconscious

desires of many characters.[99] Interestingly, Robinson's version of *The Informer* is stylistically far

more subdued than his German films made earlier in the decade and instead employs a look

contiguous with classical realism found in Hollywood. Despite the fact that Ford's style matured

within the confines of the studio system, Ford's version of *The Informer* is much more

expressionistic in technique than Robison's.

In a 1953 interview, screenwriter Dudley Nichols suggests *The Informer* owes much of

its artistic pedigree to Murnau. He "never heard Ford mention *The Last Laugh* or *Dr. Caligari's*

Cabinet [*sic*], but it is very likely he had absorbed what they had to give in the way of new film

ideas."[100] He goes on to note, "As for the lighting, it was Ford and [cinematographer] Joe August

– perhaps influenced by Murnau in one respect, where flashlights point directly at the camera

and produce eerie halations."[101] The moment Nichols describes appears early in the film, when

Franke McPhillip (Wallace Ford) is hiding from Black and Tan officers searching for him. Ford

places the camera so that the flashlights aim directly at the lens, creating a quasi-chiaroscuro

lighting arrangement **(fig. 64)**. This expressionist lighting scheme is reminiscent of a scene in

The Last Laugh, when the doorman sneaks through the hotel looking for his old uniform. When

he notices a night watchman, he leans up against a wall to avoid confrontation **(fig. 65)**. Just as in

The Informer, the night watchmen's flashlight is aimed directly at the camera. It is vital to note

that Nichols gives credit to Ford for this effect, not Joe August, an accomplished

cinematographer at the time of the film's production: "Yet observe that *all* cameramen are good

with Ford; he may not be able to operate a camera but generally he knows more what can be

done with it than they do."[102]

The Informer demonstrates the height of Ford's aesthetic dexterity due to its subjective

camerawork, what Nichols described as "the stylized symbolism [that] was the key to the whole

thing."[103] Indeed, the expressionist styling of the film harkens back to the effects Murnau used to externalize the mental state of the Man in *Sunrise*, particularly the use of superimpositions. In fact, a 1927 review of *Sunrise* could as easily be applied to *The Informer*: "What Murnau has tried to do is to crystallize in dramatic symbolism those conflicts, adjustments, compromises and complexities of man . . . Murnau reveals a remarkable resourcefulness of effects . . . He can convey subtle meanings by trick photography of by treatment of backgrounds."[104] In *The Informer*, Ford uses superimpositions to reveal Gypo Nolan's (Victor McLaglen) thoughts. At the beginning, Gypo comes across a wanted poster for Frankie, an IRA activist and compatriot. Ford superimposes a shot of Gypo drinking with Frankie, in order to indicate their friendship **(fig. 66)**. Later, when Gypo and Frankie meet at pub, Ford superimposes the reward poster over Frankie's face; Gypo is contemplating informing the police of Frankie **(fig. 67)**. Character subjectivity was one aspect of the film that garnered critical attention, such as this contemporaneous review: "the greatest importance of the film consists in its experimentation with the means of rendering subjective moods and states of mind on the screen."[105]

     The Informer also illustrates its debt to Murnau via the moving camera. Even more so than Ford's earlier films, *The Informer* does not legitimate camera movements in the narrative. Instead, Ford moves the camera in order to boost the film's artistic stature. The first shot of the film, with Gypo walking along a Dublin street, is captured by a tracking shot **(fig. 68)**. In contrast to classical Hollywood conventions, Ford sacrifices an establishing shot, instead opting to begin with a flashy camera movement that follows Gypo down the street with no apparent destination. Later in the film, the camera rapidly dollies through a crowd in the fish & chips tavern **(fig. 69)**. It is perhaps the shot in the film most imitative of Murnau; not only does it call

attention to itself, but mirrors a similar shot in *The Last Laugh*, when the camera moves through a crowd in the hotel lobby as an independent participant in the action.

Ford's debt to Murnau in *The Informer* extends to his expressionist lighting methods. This is nicely illustrated by the film's use of silhouette – a technique Murnau was fond of using. Collier argues that Murnau's frequent use of silhouetting his figures against light "emphatically isolates" them from society by reducing them to a shadow. In *Nosferatu*, Count Orlok is framed in silhouette against the sky, creating a stark contrast between light and dark **(fig. 70)**. Ford uses the same technique in *The Informer*, shortly after Gypo collects the money for informing. As the police approach him, he raises his hands in the air and is shot in silhouette **(fig. 71)**. The use of silhouette, combined with the foggy atmosphere and dim lighting evokes a sense of isolation and guilt. Expressionist lighting, in addition to the subjective camerawork and moving camera, indicate Ford's debt to Murnau.

After *The Informer*, Ford would direct a number of standard studio films before his daring return to expressionist filmmaking: *The Long Voyage Home* (1940). Trade journals at the time were hasty to pick up on Ford's "art" film. A reviewer for *Hollywood Reporter* stated, "There seems no way to describe the Wanger-Argosy production of *The Long Voyage Home* other than 'arty.' It is that in every sense of the word and about as high an art of motion picture as one would find in many days of looking at pictures." Similarly, *Time* hailed *The Long Voyage Home* as "the best picture since *The Informer*."

Scholarship has hinted at the influence of Murnau in the film without making direct reference. For instance, Robert L. Carringer argues:

Traditional film history has it that UFA-style expressionisms survived underground as it were in the Hollywood horror film until Welles revitalized it in *Citizen Kane*. As *The*

Long Voyage Home demonstrates, that version of the story is seriously incomplete. A

number of expressionistic compositions in the Ford film are even more precise

forerunners of what will appear in *Citizen Kane*.

Furthermore, Brian Spittles asserts the film is "marked by a mastery of deep focus, allowing the

depiction of two planes of action simultaneously, and a chiaroscuro expressionism that brings out

strong contrast between characters, and characters and their situations."[106] Meanwhile, McBride

describes the film as "an almost abstract exercise in the creation of a doom-laden mood with

deep pools of light and shadow, filmed largely on cramped studios sets, this adaptation of sea

plays by Eugene O'Neill one of the most avant-garde films ever made in Hollywood."[107]

Many scholars attribute the look of the film not just to Ford, but to cinematographer

Gregg Toland, who would collaborate with Welles the following year on *Citizen Kane*. McBride

remarks, "Ford and Toland broke all the rules of conventional Hollywood cinematography by

shooting directly into floodlights, showing water cascading into the lens during a storm-

sequence, and setting up shots with the extreme foreground-background tension made possible

by Toland's deep-focus technique."[108] Moreover, as Mark Harris reports, "Ford considered

Toland's expressionist compositions so important that director and cinematographer shared their

credits on a single title card."[109]

Matthew Bernstein has spent the most time unpacking the visual style of the film. He

argues that due to *The Long Voyage Home*'s prestige status at the time of its release in 1940, it

"attests to the possibility of an American 'arty' cinema."[110] Moreover, Bernstein maintains the

film "features a self-conscious approach to style and narration that favors atmosphere over

narration momentum, and thereby distinguishes itself from standard Hollywood product in

striving for formal features we commonly associate with foreign films of later decades."[111]

Bernstein focuses on the film's formal elements, arguing Ford's methodical treatment of light

and deep-focus cinematography help render the film artful.

I will argue that *The Long Voyage Home* is a deliberate artistic statement that not only

intensifies Murnau's influence, but also distinguishes the film from Classical Hollywood

conventions. In comparison to his studio work at Fox, Ford had a high degree of artistic freedom

on *The Long Voyage Home*, a joint production of Argosy Pictures, Ford's newly formed

production company, and Walter Wanger Productions. In a 1940 article, Harry L. Salpeter writes

that Wanger, the film's executive-producer, appointed several prominent American painters –

including Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Luis Quintanilla, Georges Schreiber, and Ernest

Fiene – to observe filming and paint scenes and characters from the film.[112] The completed

canvasses were exhibited in galleries across the US during the film's distribution.[113] There seems

to be no doubt that Wanger's publicity strategy indicates Ford's filmmaking was being compared

to the work of the country's finest artists.

The Long Voyage Home, in fact, heightens the influence of Murnau's style in its "silent"

sequences. Murnau once wrote, "Screen art ought, through its unique properties, to tell a

complete story by means of images alone; the ideal film does not need titles."[114] Collier notes

that Murnau tended to devalue language, instead working "toward their elimination."[115] *The Last*

Laugh illustrates Murnau's attempt; it contains a single intertitle, opting to tell the story

completely by images. In *The Long Voyage Home*, Ford privileged the use of silent sequences,

particularly in the film's portentous opening. The sequence contains 27 shots, which introduce us

to the sailors of the S.S. Glencairn. Nearly four minutes pass with no dialogue, until a First Mate

signals to someone ashore by a flashlight (a direct reference to Murnau's' technique in *The Last*

Laugh) **(fig. 72).** Bernstein argues that the film, by virtue of this sequence, introduced a principle

known as "uncommunicative narration,"[116] which negates the rationale of classical narration, further attesting to the film's artiness. It appears that in this sequence Ford is attempting to achieve exactly what Murnau accomplished in *The Last Laugh*'s use of no intertitles. In a 1940 article entitled "How We Made *The Long Voyage Home*," Ford writes: "movies are primarily pictures, so I play them that way. Let the pictures do the talking for you."[117]

Throughout the entire film, low-key lighting becomes a major component of *The Long Voyage Home*'s mise-en-scène. Toland's lighting techniques advance the film's expressionist design and visual virtuosity. In addition to the flashlight effect in a scene noted above, expressionistic side-lighting makes many of the film's visuals dynamic. Smitty's (Ian Hunter) attempted escape from the Glencairn illustrates in full the film's artistic aspirations. While the Glencairn is docked, Smitty discreetly jumps overboard and runs along the pier. In a long shot, Smitty runs into the distance with strong backlighting, resulting in a chiaroscuro effect **(fig. 73)**. A high-angle shot then shows him trapped between a fence and piles of cargo that create a diagonal effect similar to many of Murnau's shots **(fig. 74)**. Police chase after him and soon catch him. The shot's chiaroscuro lighting scheme adds to the film's visual virtuosity. In addition to using dramatic lighting, Ford shoots the scene without dialogue, with only the whistles from the ship and Richard Hageman's score accompanying the dramatic action.

It is not just the film's expressionist lighting that suggests Murnau, but also the film's deep focus cinematography and diagonal compositions. After the police capture Smitty, he is returned to the ship. The shot of his return is in deep-focus, emphasizing the lengths of the ship and dock, which extend far into the background **(fig. 75)**. Here, Ford composes the shot along a diagonal axis, once again reminiscent of Murnau's framing techniques. In another deep focus, diagonally-composed shot, Smitty is seen walking along the Glencairn's main deck. Ford once

again makes use of the entire space, shooting the hull, foremast ropes, and Smitty's silhouette in deep-focus (fig. 76). Lastly, after the Glencairn has docked in London, the surviving crewmembers observe Smitty's family walk along the side of the ship, grieving his death (fig. 77). Once again, the shot is diagonally composed along the Glencairn and presents multiple planes of action in deep-focus: the ropes, crewmembers, and the building in the background. What these shots indicate is that despite being more than a decade removed from his encounter with Murnau, Ford relies on Murnau's stylistic techniques, which subsequently elevates the film's artistic pedigree.

The Informer and The Long Voyage Home mark the end of the direct influence of Murnau and Ford's overt homages to his work. Ford's classical style would emerge in the 1930s, a style that defined much of the remainder of his work, especially in the post-World War II era. This style is marked by specific visual motifs, such as framing through doorways, long takes, and a reluctance to move the camera, as well as thematic motifs, including the privileging of community and family, musical performance and dancing, and a sensibility for Irish stories and settings.

More crucial for this study, however, are Ford's changing views on the stylistic practices he championed in earlier films. In a 1974 interview, Joseph McBride asked if Ford is he liked moving the camera, prompting this response: "No, because it throws the audience off. It says, 'This is a motion picture. This isn't real.' I like to have the audience feel that this is the real thing. I don't like to have the audience interested in the camera. The camera movement disturbs them."[118] Nevertheless, two of Ford's films that ushered in his mature period are stylistically diffused with Murnau-like camera movements. I will now turn to these films – Stagecoach and The Grapes of Wrath – and argue that while they exemplify Ford's mature style, they evidence,

if only momentarily, the influence of Murnau. Whereas previously discussed films are defined

by their adherence to Murnau's style, these two films present Murnau's influence as a nuanced

element integrated into the films' visual design.

   Stagecoach, Andre Bazin writes, is "the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought

to classical perfection."[119] Indeed, the film achieves a fine balance of what has come to be

expected from studio-era filmmaking. However, I would argue a reexamination of the Apache

Wells sequence illustrates Ford's ability to incorporate artful shots and setups that recall Murnau.

Soon after Lucy Mallory's (Louise Platt) baby is born, Ringo (John Wayne) watches Dallas

(Claire Trevor) exit the stagecoach stop at Apache Wells, in a long, deep-focus shot down a

hallway **(fig. 78)**. Moments later, Ringo follows her, planning to propose. Once outside, the

scene is shot with rich chiaroscuro lighting and the stark shadows of Ringo and Dallas **(fig. 79)**.

Ford frames much of the scene along a diagonal axis, in this case a fence, evoking the man's

walk towards his assignation with the vamp in in *Sunrise* **(fig. 80)**. Moreover, the expressionistic

mood in *Stagecoach* is enhanced by the cloud cover that is suffused in a low-key, low contrast

lighting pattern. The following morning, Ringo and Dallas plot his escape in the kitchen. Ford

frames Ringo against a wall of windows, adding contrast to the shot's lighting. Here, Ford's shot

echoes a similar composition from *Sunrise*, when the vamp is framed against a window. Eisner,

in describing this shot from *Sunrise*, remarks that the lighting "cast[s] a sudden vivid shadow of

the window-frame," which is replicated by Ford in this shot from *Stagecoach*. Shortly before the

Apache Wells sequence ends, Ringo attempts his escape. He and his horse leap over a low fence;

soon Dallas and Curly (George Bancroft) walk over it. Ford tracks the camera with them,

recalling the track (and movement of the Man) in *Sunrise* **(fig. 81)**. In his exhaustive analysis of

the film, Edward Buscombe writes many shots are "more than just functional to the narrative:

there is always some added value. It may be a particular felicity or framing, or the subtlety with

which the actors are clocked, or an elegant camera movement . . . " I would argue this "subtlety"

that Buscombe recognizes is at least partially due to the lingering impact of Murnau's style on

Ford.

Similarly, *The Grapes of Wrath* clearly embodies Ford's mature classical style, yet still

has moments that bear resemblance to Murnau. Chiaroscuro lighting is used in certain scenes,

giving the film expressionist weight: the dramatic reunion between Tom and Muley in the

deserted Joad cabin **(fig. 82)**; Ma Joad's surveying of various keepsakes in front of a small fire

(fig. 83); and the moment under the bridge where Tom, Casey, and the agitators fight the Keene

guards **(fig. 84)**. In these scenes, lighting is punctuated by the most basic means – in some cases,

only candlelight. Ford also alludes to Murnau in a pronounced tracking shot that occurs when the

Joad's enter the Hooverville. Vivian Sobchack claims the shot is "the one literally jarring

exception to the general pattern of composition and camera and subject movement"[120] in the

film. Here, Ford sacrifices narrative justification, instead freely moving the camera as a member

of the Joad family at a slightly askew angle **(fig. 85)**. Ford breaks Hollywood convention here by

calling attention to the camera itself, making it into a character. Further, while Tom is with the

other men at the Wheat Patch Camp, a fence is framed along a diagonal axis, an ephemerally arty

composition reminiscent of *Sunrise* in an otherwise realistically shot film **(fig. 86)** Finally, in the

aforementioned scene of Ma Joad, Ford replicates a moment in *Sunrise* where the vamp holds a

pair of earrings while she looks in a mirror **(fig. 87)**.

Conclusion: Ford's Artistic Identity

I began this study with two quotes showing the diametrically opposed views held by Murnau and Ford regarding cinematic art. As we have seen, the period between 1928-1941 was a time in which Ford was not only striving to consolidate his position within the studio system, but also simultaneously seeking an artistic identity. In 1937, Ford wrote: "Today, I fear the art of telling stories by motion pictures is becoming lost . . . I'll venture the prophecy that if somebody today made a picture completely without dialogue, told the story only with the camera, and then 'dubbed' in sound effects and music after the filming was completed, the production would be a smash hit."[121] This quote was penned one decade after the arrival of Murnau, the production of *Sunrise*, and Ford's trip to Germany. Ford's quote seems to indicate that he had found the artistic identity he was searching for. Moreover, I would argue that it perfectly encapsulates the purpose of this study: Ford's visual and technological style during this period is singularly indebted to Murnau because it was Murnau who activated Ford's conscious attempt at cinematic stylization.

I use 1941 as a logical end date for my historical account because of Ford's deployment as head of the photographic unit for the Office of Strategic Services in the U.S Navy. McBride argues that his transition into wartime filming "marked a momentous turning point in his life and works . . . transforming some of his values and deepening others, World War II gave a greater sense of authority to his artistic vision."[122] Upon his return from serving in 1944, Ford would not follow the same Murnau-inspired path that he took in the early sound period and the subsequent decade. Some would argue – including myself – that the post-war changes in Ford's style were for the better. Certainly the John Ford of *They Were Expendable* (1945), the Calvary trilogy (1948-1950), and *The Quiet Man* (1952) show a more unadorned and mature style that is, quite

simply, more Fordian. Needless to say, the influence of F.W. Murnau on Ford was richer than it may first appear.

Ford's style underwent a radical transformation as a direct result of his encounter with Murnau in the late 1920s, which yielded an almost fastidious imitation of Murnau's style. A brief anecdote may summarize my claims. The longtime screenwriter for many of Ford's films, Dudley Nichols, once told a story of being on a streetcar with Ford late at night. At one point Nichols noticed Ford staring at the glass of a compartment window with deep concentration: "He was seeing a double reflection – the passing lighted street outside and the people in seats behind us – and at the same time looking through at people in the front section of the car."[123] Nichols goes on to mention that Ford discussed his desire to render what we saw with the camera. Nichols concludes his story by poignantly stating: "There are some film-makers who only use their eyes on the set. Ford used his observation all the time, as a good artist should. He was always on the watch for new things to catch with the camera."[124] With regard to this study, we can conclude that Ford's eyes caught onto something remarkable in 1927, and used it as an opportunity to cultivate a style that not only emulated Murnau, but also established Ford's artistic identity.

Illustrations

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Figure 15

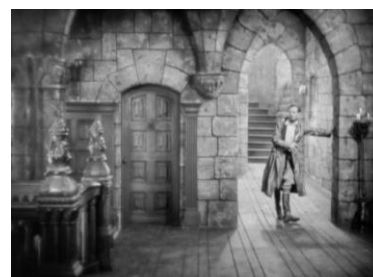Figure 16

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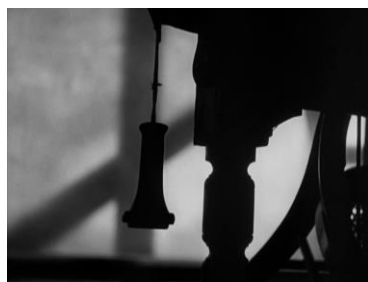

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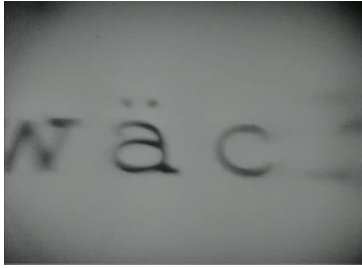

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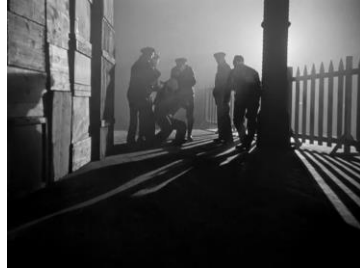

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End Notes

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[10] Ford, 42. It must be noted that Ford eventually scrapped the footage he took in Germany for *Four Sons*, instead relying on studio sets (many of which were constructed for *Sunrise*) to represent both the film's Bavarian village and its city scenes.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

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[30] Ibid.

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[32] Patrick Sheeran, *The Informer* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 44.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 42.

[35] Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 50.

[36] Ibid., 54.

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[40] Eisner, *Murnau*, 221.

[41] Sabine Hake, *German National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 29.

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[48] Hake, 38.

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[52] Prager, 290.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Robin Wood, "Murnau II: *Sunrise*" *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (1976): 11.

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[56] Gallagher, 54.

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[63] McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, 49.

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[67] William K. Everson, *American Silent Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 13.

[68] Collier, *From Wagner to Murnau*, 148.

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[74] Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 285.

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[76] Eisner, *Haunted Screen*, 286.

[77] Ibid., 56.

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[79] Keating, 145.

[80] Fabe, 41-42.

[81] Eisner, *Murnau*, 84.

[82] Collier, 150.

[83] Ibid., 152.

[84] See, for instance, Robin Wood, "Murnau II: *Sunrise*," *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (1976): 10; Jean-André Fieschi, "F.W. Murnau," in *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Richard Rond (New York: Viking, 1980), 717; Melinda Szaloky, "Sounding Images in Silent Film: Visual Acoustics in Murnau's *Sunrise*," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (2002): 109-131.

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Gallagher, 54.

[89] McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, 162-163.

[90] Gallagher, 57.

[91] McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, 170.

[92] Eyman, *The Searcher*, 123.

[93] Gallagher, 69.

[94] McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, 219.

[95] Ibid., 220.

[96] Gallagher, 121.

[97] Sheeran, 63.

[98] Ibid., 31.

[99] Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 133.

[100] Dudley Nichols quoted in Anderson, 239.

[101] Ibid.

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[107] McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, 317.

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[109] Mark Harris, *Five Came Back* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 63.

[110] Bernstein, 33.

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[113] Ibid.

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[116] Bernstein, 33.

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[123] Anderson, 241.

[124] Ibid.

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