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Uncovering an auteur: Fred Zinnemann

Alan Marcus

Film director Fred Zinnemann (1907–1997) was a consummate auteur. His twenty-two feature films span an impressive range of genres and include such classics as *High Noon* (1952), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *Oklahoma!* (1955), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), *The Day of the Jackal* (1973) and *Julia* (1977). His films present some of the finest performances delivered by actors Gary Cooper, Audrey Hepburn, Marlon Brando, Orson Welles, Grace Kelly, Jane Fonda, Burt Lancaster, Montgomery Clift and many others.

Raised in Vienna and educated in law, Zinnemann was an intellectual who managed to chart an independent course through the vagaries of Hollywood. His pictures were mostly made for the major studios, though in subject matter and technique they often ran contrary to prevailing norms. Whether it was shooting on-location in a neo-realist style with non-actors (*The Search*, 1948), selecting a non-commercial topic such as disability (*The Men*, 1950), or choosing to make an anti-heroic western (*High Noon*, 1952), Zinnemann quickly established a reputation for doing things differently. Yet, the studio bosses respected him and the finished films often reflect his 'director's cut'.

But Fred Zinnemann is also a filmmaker about whom curiously little has been written. At a time when the notion of the auteur is still very much alive, as evidenced by the exponential output in articles and books on Alfred Hitchcock, Fred Zinnemann remains a neglected figure. The first scholarly book on the director published in English, *The Films of Fred Zinnemann: critical perspectives*, appeared in 1999, and features an excellent collection of essays edited by Arthur Nolletti Jr.¹

The lack of literature on Zinnemann is not due to a Kubrickesque reluctance to give interviews. On the contrary, in a number of articles, and most vividly in his 1992 autobiography, he provides us with candid insights into his work². Nor did his talent go unrecognised by his peers. Zinnemann received four Academy Awards, two Directors Guild of America awards for Best Director, the first John Huston Award for Artists Rights, and numerous other accolades³.

Zinnemann's films do not bear the visual watermark of a John Ford or an Alfred Hitchcock picture. However, one can discern a clear and unifying narrative theme within the auteurist spine of Zinnemann's work. In his own words, his stories are 'about the human spirit refusing to be broken'⁴. When I first read that simple self-observation, I immediately thought of Gary Cooper's beleaguered and yet resilient sheriff in *High Noon*, Frank Sinatra's tragic figure in *From Here to Eternity*, and the moral integrity of Paul Scofield's Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*.

The cinematic coherence of this underlying theme is apparent, in spite of the fact that Zinnemann usually chose to work with different actors, writers, producers, cameramen, editors, composers and other collaborators on each of his projects. In several instances he made two or three films with the same colleague, but on only two projects did

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he work with the same director of photography⁵. This factor may be a chief contributing reason for the greater diversity of visual style in his pictures.

Another overlooked pattern is the lineage of powerful performances inherent in Zinnemann's films, whether by novices or experienced actors. His reputation as an 'actor's director' was linked to the importance he attached to the process of casting. 'The key to the success of a film, is the casting – the actors', he observed. 'By success I mean whether it comes off or doesn't come off, forgetting whether it makes money or not'⁶. His approach to directing actors, and in particular his interest in semi-documentary techniques, were among the subjects I wished to discuss with him. Early on in his career, Zinnemann was strongly influenced by Robert Flaherty, the legendary 'father of the documentary'. He spent a period of time working as an assistant to Flaherty in Berlin in 1931.

'Professionally, he was my godfather', Zinnemann explained when discussing Robert Flaherty with me. After studying Flaherty's films, I had travelled around the world visiting the communities where he made them, and had written about the legacy of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922)⁷. I was thus intrigued to learn about the impact Flaherty had on Zinnemann's approach to making movies.

I had the opportunity to do so when I was invited to talk with Fred Zinnemann in June 1996, in the year before his death. The interview was held in his comfortable office suite, located in the same Mayfair apartment building in London where he lived with his wife, Renée. He greeted me at the door to his office and, walking with a cane, offered me a chair in the living room. We then spent several hours talking about a range of subjects. The following is a portion of the interview. I began by asking him about Robert Flaherty:

FZ: Well, I met Flaherty in my formative years and I was lucky enough to have spent six months with him. I learned from him particularly that one should stick to one's guns, and try to follow one's instincts in making a film. Which at times, of course, is not easy.

AM: Many times, I would have thought.

FZ: In his whole life he only made six pictures, because of that. I tried to live up to that with a certain amount of success. He certainly influenced

my style of making film in the sense that I liked using the documentary approach to making a film when it's appropriate. It must always be an appropriate thing for the subject, but when there is a chance as in *The Men*, or *The Day of the Jackal*, or *High Noon*, I was always glad to use that. I wanted to organise *High Noon* in the way a documentary would have been made at that time when the action happened. Except that in the 1880s there was no such thing as motion pictures. So that in using the style, the cameraman Floyd Crosby and I studied very carefully contemporary still photography, particularly the photographs of Mr Lincoln's cameraman (Matthew Brady) who photographed parts of the Civil War in America. That meant that we used a grainy kind of print, deliberately grainy and flat, with a very white sky, instead of a dark sky with pretty clouds on it. So, it reasonably looks a bit like photography of that period and gives it a feeling of being authentic, which was not the usual method at all at the time when this film was made.

AM: What strikes me about both *High Noon* and *The Day of the Jackal* in the way that they effectively achieve a sense of suspense, is in the construction, the editing. Of course, the editor on *High Noon*, Elmo Williams, received an Oscar for the work. I just wonder if you could give me a sense of your approach to the editing of both films, the tight construction, and how closely you worked with the editors.

FZ: There was a difference in the two films in that the final cut on *The Day of the Jackal* I had the right to do, and the final cut on *High Noon* was to a certain extent the producer Stanley Kramer's work. Except that I had pre-cut the film in the camera, pre-edited it in such a way that it could be put together only one way. There were clocks in all the important sequences indicating the time, so you could not change the structure very well. Kramer did a very fine job of fine-cutting, but the editing, the basic editing, was done in the camera.

AM: I think part of the great success of both *High Noon* and *The Day of the Jackal* is in the pace, the rhythm. From the very first shot it carries all the way through the film.

FZ: Well, that mechanical way in *High Noon* was an element that I emphasised which was my contribution to the script itself, that I treated the element of time as an enemy. In other words, the



Fig. 1. *High Noon* production shot with Floyd Crosby (left), Fred Zinnemann (centre) and Gary Cooper, 1952. [Photo: Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.]

fact that the time was running out became a threat in itself. The whole thing became in a sense a race between time and the happening itself. In the case of *The Jackal*, the reason why I wanted to make it was to see if you could maintain tension in a film where the audience knew the ending. I think everybody at that time knew that de Gaulle had not died in that manner. That in itself was a challenge that I found very interesting. But, in fact, that had also been true with the book.

AM: How did you work with the editor on both films? Did you work very closely with the editor, or did you wait until they put something together, a rough cut, and then talked with them about it?

FZ: Normally the way I like to work is to let the editor make his own rough cut without my ever looking at it. So, he does that as I shoot the film. When a production is finished, I always used to go away for two weeks and let the man finish the work, then I looked at it. That way I came to it fresh, with a sense of whether it was long, or too short, whether it came off or didn't come off. And from

then on I stayed with the editor throughout the editing period.

AM: What is fascinating about the two films is the way they achieve and maintain a very high level of suspense. In *High Noon* it is very tightly compacted into that ninety minutes of classic construction that you achieve. Whereas, in *The Day of the Jackal*, you are having to sustain that high level of suspense over a longer period of time.

FZ: Yes, in the case of *Day of the Jackal* the interest is partly on its change of scenery and background and the various elements that go into the whole enterprise. It also has to do with the way the main character is treated, in that he's totally unemotional and gives nothing away. So that the audience is puzzled and does not know how it is going to come out – I don't give them any hints.

AM: That is what is so striking. Up until the last moment you just don't know. As the viewer, you also find yourself in the peculiar situation of wanting him to be successful. And you are disappointed that he doesn't kill de Gaulle.

FZ: Yes, yes. In fact, there were many tries to kill de Gaulle and nobody succeeded. It was a marvellous security service. Although, I must say that the double that we had was the absolute image of de Gaulle, and nobody could tell the difference. When we shot the exteriors in Paris, de Gaulle had been dead for two years and when civilians went walking by and saw de Gaulle they couldn't understand it. They were absolutely confused, and the French don't like to be confused.

Laughter

AM: Both films deal with political themes. *The Day of the Jackal* is more overt – the opposition of the generals against de Gaulle. But in *High Noon*, much of course has been written about the way Carl Foreman was commenting on the McCarthy era. In your autobiography, however, you mention that at the time you were perhaps less aware, or less interested in whatever political metaphors there might be in *High Noon*.

FZ: I was totally disinterested, never thought of it. It never occurred to me. This for me was not a political film. This was read into it because a lot of people shared Carl Foreman's concept without really thinking beyond it. I don't think that the film survived because of its political value. It survived simply because I tried to deal with basic questions of human conduct. Curiously enough, originally I felt that the best description when I was asked 'what is the film about?', was to quote Stevenson's remark: 'a man's character is his destiny'. As you probably know, the picture was treated as just another 'B' Western, and gradually grew beyond that because these questions are much larger than politics. I then came to think of it as a question of conscience.

AM: Yes.

FZ: And now I realise that it really has to do quite simply with self-respect. If you ask me today what do I think, I would say it is about self-respect. Three years ago I would have said it's about conscience. Ten years ago I would have said the characters' destiny. Partly, one gets that from the audience. Either directly or indirectly, they tell you what they see in it without knowing that they are telling you. Which is very good because the entire art of film used to be, and this was very, very important, it used to be subliminal. It used to be subconscious, just like music. In making a movie you did

not think primarily about how to approach it with a rational point of view. You approached it because of the emotional weight and importance that it had.

AM: Your words on self-respect are germane to that whole period in the 1950s when people had their reputations, their moral values, under threat by the communist witch hunts. For example, in your own involvement with the DGA (Directors Guild of America) when that vote was taken, which you stood up against. I am also a member of the DGA, so I am delighted to meet one of the founding members of the guild.

FZ: I am pleased to know that you are a colleague. Well, the DGA was one of the solitary good things that came out of the whole period because it showed that there was a percentage of people who had the guts to stand up for what they believed in, even though there was a very direct economic threat, which was not formalised. It was the blacklist. It meant that if you exposed yourself in your political thinking you wouldn't get a job again. Very simply. And you probably know that when the general meeting assembly happened that fourteen people voted NO, while over five-hundred voted YES, and there were about fifty people who didn't vote, which was also taken as being in opposition. I was one among the fifty. It was one thing to be a director with a track record of excellence and box office success who was needed by the industry. Directors of the calibre of say John Houston or John Ford and so on, had less of a problem along that line than directors who were unknown. I was one of those lesser known ones at that time. One didn't know what was going to happen, other than to declare yourself. That was very good that people were able to declare themselves. But in the end, I think it contributed in a very minor way to the general rejection of Mr. McCarthy.

AM: Gary Cooper was known to have rather conservative political views. Did the writer, Carl Foreman, or others perceive his character in this film as standing up for essentially the liberals – standing up for their sense of self-respect, or as you say their conscience? Isn't there a somewhat odd dichotomy between the actor and his views, and those of the writer?

FZ: I don't know how much Foreman told Coop about the political part of it, but Coop was

an innocent person in that respect. He was a traditional American boy and I am sure he must have been amazed when he was suddenly charged with being disloyal. Of course, the whole thing was a joke as far as he was concerned. Even with the piece of film on him at the hearing in Washington, when he was formally asked, 'what is your occupation', and he said 'I am an actor'. The whole place started to laugh. So that was a bit of insanity, but again I have respect for what Foreman thought and if he thought that it was an allegory, so be it. I did not think it was in my wildest dreams. First of all, I never heard about that from Foreman or anybody else.

AM: So, it wasn't as if he was plotting this theme?

FZ: Not at all. They sent me a script which was ninety per cent marvellous. I added ten per cent. It was a very good western, and what I thought was fabulous was that there were all these people finding very good reasons why they wouldn't stand up, or why they couldn't or wouldn't protest. This is why I thought there was something unusual about this western formula. The politics, I say again, for me were non-existent, and I would believe that they were non-existent for Coop. I think there have been too many interpreters of this whole thing, and too many cooks. Too many people who repeat theories by hearsay. And the basic thing is quite simple. The basic thing is the kind of hysteria that existed because of McCarthy, and the kind of hysteria based on the idea that the communists were going to take over. So that when John Wayne said that the picture was subversive, it was considered subversive because the tin star is a symbol of federal authority. To kick the star on the ground, to throw it down, was an act of subversion. So, therefore the picture was subversive. This is possibly the reason why we didn't do better at the Academy Awards.

AM: But you got four Oscars?

FZ: Well the Oscars were for Cooper, which was right. They were for Tiomkin, which was right. There were two for Tiomkin, for the song and for the music. And there was one more for the editor, who had very little to do with it.

AM: Really?

FZ: These claims that the picture was saved in the cutting room border on insanity.

Laughter

AM: I was curious about the way you approach your work across a wide range of genres. Was it an accident, or were you methodical about it?

FZ: I have to tell you that first of all in my work I am not an intellectual, because I simply react to something, some event or something I've read. It makes me want to make a comment, but it is a comment that comes from emotion and not from reason. In other words, if I hear a child, a displaced war orphan, a ten-year-old kid, saying, 'I'm nobody's nothing', that makes me want to make a picture about it – which had to do with *The Search*. The stimulus to me is never intellectual.

AM: Really?

FZ: Never, never. I don't want to send out messages, because I am not smart enough. Whatever I may think, I don't think it is of any interest. What I feel, I seem to be able to communicate. I never go into it saying 'I want to make this picture because Joe Blow is going to play the lead, and Joe Blow is a big star'. I want to make a picture because I'm moved by what it is about. That's a big difference. That's probably why I have made very few pictures. Because it is increasingly difficult to find something you want to make pictures about. In the era of my youth and early middle age we were full of optimism, very idealistic, still carrying the heritage of Roosevelt, Mrs. Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson.

AM: But again, did you think 'I haven't done a musical, why don't I try a musical?'

FZ: No. I thought this was a marvelous new system (the Todd-AO widescreen format used for *Oklahoma!*) and it has not been tried and has great possibilities. And, it would be great fun to do a film trying to see what this new medium is capable of, or what I am capable of doing with the medium, rather. And this is lovely music, it's a sort of pastiche of a western, but it's charming. I remember the effect the stage production of *Oklahoma!* had on the people in the Second World War when things were not going very well for us, and everything was gloomy. Then suddenly this musical came out, and it had a tremendous electrifying upbeat lift to it. So, for that reason I had respect for it. I thought it was a good piece of work. And at that time, as I said, we were very idealistic and full of what Roosevelt had said, 'Americans have nothing



Fig. 2. Fred Zinnemann, n.d. [Photo: Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.]

to fear, but fear itself'. All that kind of thing. 'Who was afraid of the big bad wolf?' And that's now under great, great pressure. How it will come back I don't know. Because the new generation doesn't know much about it. How could they, poor things? And I mean poor things. They come into a world where there are hardly any more birds left. Anyway that's a whole different story, we'll not talk about that.

AM: You said that you had made relatively few films, but you have made a number of what people call classics, like *High Noon* and *Oklahoma!*, *From Here to Eternity*. When people talk about your work, about your films as being classics, what does that mean to you?

Author: FZ: Well it has to do with survival. If a picture, Sense? not just a picture. Let's be pretentious and say it's an art.

AM: You mean realistic, not pretentious.

FZ: If a piece of art is a great big hit and it's forgotten in six months, then there's something

wrong with it. If it lasts ten years then there is something about it that presents a lasting value for a certain length of time. If it lasts a hundred years then it is certainly valuable. If it survives six thousand years then it's really a great thing. To me 'a classic' is something that is determined by the length of time it has had some meaning for people.

AM: Do you think of yourself foremost as a craftsman or an artist?

FZ: I have the psychology of an artist, and the talent of a craftsman. Instead of psychology there I would say sensitivity.

AM: When you look back across the range of your work, do you see your ideas as a kind of composite? Something worked extremely well here, something worked very well there. Or are there one or two films that you feel most embody your approach to art?

FZ: To tell you the truth I can't stand looking at most of my pictures any more, except for occasional glimpses of one or two sequences that are

very good. By and large I find it boring. I have seen them too often. I don't think of myself in those terms at all.

AM: In your autobiography you mention that 'High Noon is the one picture I directed more than any other which was a team effort'.

FZ: Yes, that's what I meant about Kramer and Foreman – that this script was ninety per cent okay when I first read it. I can't say that the editor made a contribution, but a great contribution was made by the cameraman, Floyd Crosby. At one point he was being accused of doing a lousy job. But, he had the courage to go ahead, even though there was a threat that he might be fired.

AM: What strikes me about *High Noon* is that it is a film with strong women and weak men. With the exception, of course, of Will Kane, it is the opposite to many westerns.

FZ: Well, let me see. I never thought about that before. I was trying to think of Grace Kelly as a strong woman, which she wasn't. She was a bewildered Quaker girl who found herself in a milieu that she didn't know anything about. She was in the wild west. You know, she came from a different world altogether and didn't know anything. She was quite blank as a human being. Like a piece of paper that had not been written on as yet. The one who was strong was this marvellous Mexican girl, Katy Jurado. She was strong alright.

AM: For example when she said to Harvey, the deputy sheriff, 'I don't like anybody to put their hands on me unless I want them to ... and I don't want you to'. A very strong figure.

FZ: Tremendous vitality, great dignity above everything else.

AM: Whereas the men tend to be weak and to hide. Like when Morgan hides behind the skirts of his wife when Kane comes calling.

FZ: He was the alderman. Total loss of dignity. The only ones who were on Cooper's side had no sense of reality. One was a drunk and the other was a kid.

AM: And in the church it is the women who stand up and say, we must do this, we must do that, but then they are shouted down. Suppressed by men. But as it turns out, weak men, not willing to make a stand.

FZ: Men are speculating too much and the women follow their emotions.

AM: That's right. So there are a number of strong women characters. Even in the end, Grace Kelly does come to her husband's aid.

FZ: She can't help herself, poor thing. She was a lucky piece of casting.

AM: Extraordinary wasn't it?

FZ: Yes, because she gave the illusion of this totally pure image of the virginal feminine ideal of those days. A woman was either a saint or a whore, there was nothing in-between.

AM: Was it Louis Mayer who said that?

FZ: Yes, that was very true, and not just because of Mayer. That was a tradition for a long time. One of the great lines in all of film history is in a picture by Buñuel where there is a dwarf and a prostitute, and at one point he says to her, 'You're a whore but I respect you', which I thought was very, very touching in the context.

AM: And also the way that you contrasted the costuming of these two women – the virginal woman all in white, but closeted. Her chest is bound, her sexuality suppressed, contained. As opposed to Ramirez, who was voluptuous, sexy and dressed half the time in a negligee.

FZ: Mother Earth, she was Mother Earth. She was very much like Ethel Waters in that sense. Did you ever see that picture, because that is my favourite one of all – *A Member of the Wedding*? That died a death at the box office, but it's the best picture that I have ever made.

AM: Why do you say that it was the best picture?

FZ: Well, because I like it best.

His response surprised me. When I got home I watched *A Member of the Wedding* (1952) again, searching it for clues. Why should he single out this particular film? What was it in this drama that encapsulated Zinnemann's approach to filmmaking? Its production, sandwiched between two of his most famous films, *High Noon* and *From Here to Eternity*, suggests little of their brave spirit⁸.

It even seems to be an anomaly in Zinnemann's oeuvre. Adapted from the Broadway stage play by Carson McCullers, the film remains rooted in a static one set environment.

Zinnemann reaffirms that it is his favourite picture 'perhaps because it is not entirely my own – or perhaps because of the quality of pure love that seems to radiate from it so strongly'⁹. His statement

underscores the collaborative nature of filmmaking, which bedevils attempts to consistently stamp a director's work with an original signature. It could be for this reason then that Zinnemann has eluded the film critic's auteurist spotlight, and the greater recognition and investigation that his work as a whole merits. ¶

Notes

1. See Arthur Nolletti Jr. (ed.) *The Films of Fred Zinnemann: critical perspectives* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999). This study is an expansion of the Fred Zinnemann special double issue of *Film Criticism*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Spring-Fall, 1994), edited by Arthur Nolletti Jr., in which a number of the essays originally appeared.
2. Fred Zinnemann, *Fred Zinnemann: an autobiography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992).
3. Zinnemann's awards included: Oscars for Best Short Subject for *That Mothers Might Live* (1938) and *Benjy* (1951); Best Direction, New York Film Critics for *High Noon* (1952); Oscar for Best Director and Director Award, Directors Guild of America for *From Here to Eternity* (1953); Best Direction, New York Film Critics for *The Nun's Story* (1959); Oscar for Best Director, Best Direction, New York Film Critics and Director Award, Directors Guild of America for *A Man for All Seasons* (1966); D.W. Griffith Award (1971); Order of Arts and Letters, France (1982); U.S. Congressional Lifetime Achievement Award (1987); John Huston Award, Artists Rights Foundation (1994).
4. Fred Zinnemann. 'From Here to Eternity', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (1988): 21.
5. Robert Surtees was director of photography on *Act of Violence* (1949) and *Oklahoma!* (1955).
6. 'Fred Zinnemann Remembered', Arena BBC-TV broadcast, director: Alan Lewens, 30 min (1997). This is an edited version of a 50 min. programme on Zinnemann broadcast in 1990.
7. See Alan Marcus, *Relocating Eden* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995).
8. Louis Giannetti, however, finds much to commend in this film. See Louis Giannetti 'Repeat Business: Members of the Wedding', in: Arthur Nolletti Jr. (ed) *The Films of Fred Zinnemann: critical perspectives* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 103-118.
9. Fred Zinnemann, *Fred Zinnemann: an autobiography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 115.