
Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Hollywood's Legendary Director

By Marilyn Ann Moss, University of Kentucky Press, 2011

Reviewed by Fredrik Gustafsson

Too many books written about Hollywood filmmakers make the claim that their particular director had an unusual amount of freedom when making his films. This is based on the assumption that in Hollywood directors were uniquely constrained and controlled, by the studios and the producers. This is a rather general statement. In Hollywood there were many different agreements and arrangements, depending on the individual director and on the studio, and the status of filmmakers changed all the time. The argument also makes Hollywood out to be more unique in its system than it actually was. It is a credit to Marilyn Ann Moss that she never makes this argument in her new book *Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Hollywood's Legendary Director*. Walsh is a good example of the complexities of the Hollywood system, which Moss's book reflects.

Walsh was born in 1887 and lived to be almost 100 years old. He began directing around 1914, under the auspices of D.W. Griffith and his first important film is *Regeneration* (1915). That film already has the characteristic drive and verve of Walsh's direction, while also having some connections with Walsh own life. He was quickly established as a first-rank director but it was when he joined Warner Bros. in 1939 that he entered his artistically most interesting phase. The first great film of this phase was *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and for little over 10 years Walsh was at the peak of his career. He continued to direct until 1964 but the later output is much more varied in quality and interest.

Although Walsh was never given an Academy Award for direction he was held in high esteem by established critics (such as James Agee, Andrew Sarris and Manny Farber) and fellow filmmakers (Ingmar Bergman was a fan). But there have not been much coverage or analysis of his life and work in full, so for that reason alone, Moss's book is a welcome contribution to the field of cinema studies. Since it is extensively researched, it will also be an invaluable reference point for future studies

of Walsh work. Such studies are still needed, because Moss's book is somewhat dissatisfying. Three primary problems with the book are its tendency towards repetition, some factual errors, and a lack of ambition when it comes to analysing the films.

Moss does write about Walsh's characters, how these characters share similar traits and how many of them are close to Walsh himself (she mentions how Errol Flynn would often play his parts as if he was playing Walsh), but with such a visually gifted, and visually-centred filmmaker, it is a shame that she pays so little interest to his work with the camera. Moss does quote second unit director Ridgeway Callow as saying "he [Walsh] had a way, an absolute knack of placing the camera in the right position" and this is true, but little is said on how he worked with the camera, and where he placed it. Walsh's use of deep focus is one of the most advanced in film history, and he developed his particular way of shooting in the silent era. With his use of depth and his dislike of studio settings, he was one of the most Bazinian of filmmakers, and this long before William Wyler or the neorealists were making films. I would have liked to have read more about these aspects of his work.

Despite these problems the book is still a worthwhile addition to the (all too small) body of work on Walsh. Moss went through archives, talked to survivors, and read memos, letters, reviews, interviews and autobiographies. The scope of this research is the book's lasting achievement. Walsh was a boisterous and engaging character, and the book does make him come alive. After finishing this book, it is hard not to miss him.