


A FILM BY **ALEXANDER HORWATH**



# **HENRY FONDA** **FOR** **PRESIDENT**

 Bundesministerium  
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A personal essay about the United States, viewed through the life and work of a movie actor. Henry Fonda and the roles he played merge into a dazzling and conflicted figure. A very private man who thought he had “no good answers to anything” becomes the unlikely motor of a parallel history.

His voice, recorded during his last interview in 1981, and his onscreen avatars guide us through America’s past and present – on a road trip from the village of Fonda, NY, across the Midwest to the Pacific; from 1651 to the 1980s and the presidency of another movie actor. It takes many places and times and characters to imagine an invisible republic – the United States of Fonda.



COCHISE<sup>OF</sup> TOMBSTONE

WORLD FAMOUS  
**VOGAN'S ALLEY**  
BAR & GRILL  
BEER, WINE, SODAS, & HAMBURGERS



# SYNOPSIS

The film begins with a personal memory: Paris, summer of 1980. The Moscow Olympics are underway. In Detroit, Ronald Reagan has just been nominated as the Republican presidential candidate. In New Hampshire, Henry Fonda is shooting his final film. Two actors sketch out two different ways of viewing the United States of America: as God's Own Country or as a stage for social struggle.

A sharp leap backwards: Holland, 1651. A dual history of migration takes its course: the story of a man and his family – and the history of a nation in motion. The film's journey continues to the shores of the Mohawk River and the years of the American Revolution, to the "Wild West" and the waves of racist violence in the early 20th century, to New York during the Great Depression, to Hiroshima and the Pacific Front in World War II. The postwar era and its new forms of depression, the Cold War and its apocalyptic scenarios – this is also the time when the society of the spectacle finally asserts itself.

Our protagonist is now closer than ever to the role of a politician. The story comes to a close around 1976: after Watergate and the Vietnam War, during a time of confusion and hope in which the U.S. is trying to find itself again.

Each station on this journey through the country and its times is connected to Henry Fonda – to his life and that of his forebears, to his work as an actor and his public persona, and to the movie characters he portrayed. He becomes concentrated in them – along with the country from which all of these faces arise. Considered from the vantage point of today: another time, another country. But its phantoms, no matter if famous or nameless, are more potent than ever before.





# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Alexander Horwath

The search for “origins” should be avoided at all cost, but it’s not a big stretch to say that my lifelong preoccupation with the history and present of the United States, with the American cinema and its practitioners, and specifically with the actor Henry Fonda, were essential reasons for me to try out a new profession.

Still, this leap into filmmaking is certainly a stretch for me. I decided to go for it because in order to come to terms with the material that had accumulated in front of me the cinematic approach seemed to be the only logical one. A lesson from my previous activities: Every topic that one “adopts” pushes towards a certain form of realization. To some degree, any constellation of questions already contains the form of the possible answer. That’s why, in close collaboration with Michael Palm and Regina Schlagnitweit, I chose to answer in the shape of a film. It may resemble a double helix: Two main strands constantly intertwine in a mutually ascending, spiraling movement – the biography of a composite called “Henry Fonda” and the “biography” of the United States of America.

The film superimposes multiple thematic spheres and presentation formats: fictional narratives and historical facts; individual life paths and socio-political reflections; moments from American history and its pop cultural detritus – as well as acute questions about democracy. Henry Fonda is the pilot of this endeavor. His life and the life of his ancestors, the

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Alexander Horwath, 2024



actual person and the *persona* that crystallizes from his works, the places and times where and when the person and the *persona* were active – these threads condensed into a view of America. And they directed us to the locations where we filmed in 2019 and 2021. Their concrete shape and their own momentum led to further investigations: new side roads, new



satellite characters, new connections and speculations. Thanks to his family history, his personal conflicts, weaknesses and beliefs, his films and his special talent as an actor, Fonda also acts a bit like a zoom lens, capturing the most varied dimensions of history and life in America via different focal lengths. It can give you just the outlines – or very precise details. And thanks to Fonda's voice, which reaches us through Lawrence Grobel's long interview with him in the summer of 1981, he is also the second "narrator" of the film.

In reality, he was a taciturn person. He didn't see himself as an artist and didn't like to talk about himself. But he managed to bear witness – even if he himself didn't perceive it that way. Hannah Arendt talks about this at the beginning of my film, and I took the liberty of reading it as a statement about Henry Fonda: "The subject discloses an objective work to the public. What is subjective about this, the working process for instance, is of no concern to the public. However, if this work is not merely academic, but rather the result of a life lived and suffered, then it will also reveal a living action and speech, the bearer of which is the person himself. What appears here is unknown to the one who presents it. He has no command over it."



**"In reality, he was a taciturn person. He didn't see himself as an artist and didn't like to talk about himself.**

**But he managed to bear witness – even if he himself didn't perceive it that way."**

Alexander Horwath, 2024





# DREAMS AND FACTS, FONDA AND AMERICA

**“Imagination always plays a big role  
in times of political unrest.”**

Emilio Lussu, 1932

**“Actors are our emotional government –  
they aren’t elected, but they wind up  
representing us whether we like it or not.”**

Luc Sante & Melissa Holbrook Pierson, 1999



The forces that affect the two subjects of *Henry Fonda for President* have some similarity with the description at the outset of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ...” Here too, these things come together, often in one and the same flash – and with all the shades of gray in between. Just as Fonda oscillates between the films he shaped, so too does the historical and political structure to which they

belong. A deep state, “America”, and a republican state ruled by law, the “United States”. According to the images most frequently ascribed to it: a perpetrator nation and a savior of democracy; a backwards, violent country and a nation of indigenous people, migrants, and forced residents, which, in many respects, could be understood as a global avant-garde. John Steinbeck’s words about his friend “Hank” Fonda give a sense of the contradictions that pertain to both “protagonists” of the film: “My impressions of Hank are of a man reaching but unreachable, gentle but capable of sudden wild and dangerous violence, sharply critical of others but equally self-critical, caged and fighting the bars but timid of the light, viciously opposed to external restraint, imposing an iron slavery on himself. His face is a picture of opposites in conflict.”

In Fonda’s most significant films, American experiences – historical as well as personal – are inscribed in diverse ways. Sometimes the traces are openly visible in the stories told and the positions that Fonda’s character takes in them. In other cases, they emerge indirectly, subtly, through his style of acting which lends presence to the unspoken and the invisible. The most compelling biography of the actor, Devin McKinney’s *The Man Who Saw a Ghost*, dedicates its title to Fonda’s talent for summoning the spirits. Thanks to this ability, he is able, more than other film stars of his generation, to vividly and painfully reveal to us the hidden textures and fault lines of his time and his country.

As attested once again by the current situation in the U.S., a country's options are negotiated not only in Congress and not only on the basis of hard facts, but also (for better or worse) in the sphere of public imagination, in the "dream life". For much of the 20th century – precisely during the period in which Henry Fonda was active – Hollywood cinema served as the most efficient medium in this sphere. Some of its powers back then can perhaps be compared to the current energies of social media. The "Henry Fonda for President" campaign, launched in the 1976 sitcom episode *Maude's Mood*, is an echo of that long-lost power. The film of the same name takes such conceits at their word and examines the extent to which a Hollywood star may serve as the unlikely instrument of a parallel history.





# INTERVIEW

with Alexander Horwath

**Your “acquaintance” with Henry Fonda began in Paris on a trip with your parents. Is he, in particular, a personality who laid the foundation of your socialization in film history, your love of cinema?**

That was more my mother’s role. Fonda – like his daughter Jane, who I was deeply infatuated with at the age of 14 – was one of the actors who touched me at a very early age. But the more fundamental influence was my mother’s penchant for theatre, cinema and literature – and for actors, especially from German, French and English-speaking countries. My first love for the cinema was, as with many people, focused on certain actors. For my mother that meant Gregory Peck, for example, Oskar Werner or Yves Montand, while for me it was the Fondas, Barbara Stanwyck, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin ... I’ve always tried to preserve this approach to cinema. Later, I didn’t just want to exchange it for the more “adult” and classic cinephile perspective – the idea that it’s the directors who embody true authorship in film. To this day, I am of the opinion that when it comes to the complicated interplay of forces in filmmaking and cinema culture, some “acteurs” can also have the function of “auteurs”. This is one of the central speculations in my film.

**You headed the Vienna International Film Festival for five years and the Film Museum for sixteen years, which involves a very specific appreciation of filmmaking around the world and its outstanding creations. Considering the wealth of your knowledge, how is it possible to choose a single personality?**

All that other work – the writing, curating and organizing – necessarily means keeping “the whole field” in mind, at least as an illusion. But every individual act, whether it’s deciding on a film series, writing a certain essay, or joining and running an institution, is still based on personal motivation. The question is how much one can become *aware* of one’s own motives, in view of the prevailing formats and expectations that are constantly imposed on these activities from outside. I think I’ve avoided alienated or standardized work relatively well, because I’ve always kept that tension in mind. Now, with this film, it was rather easy. There were no expectations from outside anyway. And the form of the essay film was an obvious choice, because it is one of my preferences in film history – and because I myself come from “writing and speaking”. I like the unpredictability that essay films often possessed before it became a fashionable genre at art universities ... And the double subject of America and Fonda was the only material that I thought was somehow waiting for me. A subject nobody else would approach in the same way. In a culture of dogmatism, Fonda’s penchant for doubt has always been appealing to me.

**Were you pre-occupied by particular thoughts, desires and considerations before you arrived at the decision to create a work for the big screen yourself?**

I knew this leap would only be meaningful for me if it took place in an intimate and independent setting – and it would be fine if that meant taking a little longer about it. I dared to make the film because it was possible to do so together with Michael Palm and Regina Schlagnitweit. Michael is not only the experienced professional in the team, as editor, cameraman and sound expert, but has also been a good friend for decades. And Regina has been my partner *in love and crime* for just as long, which means she is also the most important corrective factor in terms of aesthetic choices and how to communicate ideas. The fact that the producers, Irene Höfer and Ralph Wieser, allowed us this freedom and intimacy was very crucial too, of course.

**The complex, fascinating and often surprising interlinking of Henry Fonda's biography and the Fondas' family history must have been backed up by profound and wide-ranging research. What were the starting points in this actor's career that provided the impetus for this multifaceted analysis?**

The key point is that, more than perhaps any other film star, he makes his country legible in such a rich way – also due to biographical coincidence. This was confirmed more and more during the research and filming. I wanted to make a film about America, from a perspective that wasn't too hackneyed, and at the same time a film about Fonda – but not a linear biopic about a celebrated “genius”. This was only possible because of the way Fonda's traces and connections develop: he gives us a view of the American condition that is broad and at the same time precise at particular moments. He does this firstly through the major films that he

put his stamp on, historical ones like *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *Fort Apache* as well as topical ones like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Fail Safe*. Then by virtue of his particular family history: the early migration of the Fondas from Holland to America, later from the East to the Midwest, and from there to New York City and California. Even in his own life, his worldview, and in his style of acting, there are powerful echoes of issues that have defined America's political history, including the contrast with his own “children of '68”. You could certainly unpick the USA along the lines of a different star persona, but I feel that the sheer density and variety of sources, places and coincidences in his case make him special.

**Which films made you aware of the extent to which Henry Fonda's artistic work is also a political act, and even the films created by the dream factory can't be apolitical?**

Fonda himself would be very skeptical about this thesis. Outwardly, he always emphasized the distance between the roles he played and his own life. But of course, everything is political, and that applies even more to the structures, products and effects of the entertainment industry. The political forces that shape a society can be seen not only in the official locations but also – or especially – in that society's “dream life”, as Norman Mailer called it, “a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires”. In the 20th century, we learned a lot about these imaginations from the cinema. My game of contrasts with Ronald Reagan and Fonda refers back to that.



**You work in interdependencies but even more so in layers. One of these, which runs through the entire film, is the interview over several hours that Henry Fonda gave to journalist Lawrence Grobel a year before his death. Detailed conversations at the end of a life have something of a legacy and can also be an opportunity to frame the image of oneself. What effect did this interview, perceived as a whole, have on you? How is it available to posterity? How did it become the basic motif of this multi-layered composition?**

I got in touch with Mr. Grobel and was extremely happy to hear that the twelve-hour tape of the interview he conducted with Fonda over several days in the summer of 1981 still existed. We acquired it and digitized it – and I sat over the transcription for a couple of months... Fonda was rather taciturn; he never wanted to be the center of attention in private and was highly critical of himself. During that period, he submitted to his family's wish that he should leave something autobiographical. In the year of the interview, a book was also published, *FONDA: MY LIFE As told to Howard Teichmann*. In this sense, the legacy and framing aspect probably plays a role. But he doesn't sound like it in the interview – Fonda is often very direct and wittily grumpy when it comes to people he loves or hates. He refuses to answer a lot of the analytical questions, and he prefers to talk about things outside his films and the roles he played. These tapes were very productive because Fonda implicitly answered almost all of my questions – and also because of the texture of this recording. The old, brittle voice, the birds in the garden, his sneezing ...

**Historical sources and facts, film excerpts, audio recordings, archive material from TV ... the research work for HENRY FONDA FOR PRESIDENT seems to have been more than complex. Where did this work begin to take shape?**

During the many U.S. trips that Regina and I have been taking since the late 1980s – that would be one answer. Because that's where you learn to redefine the relationship between cinema and on-site experience. But everything became really dense during the project development phase, in 2018/19 – the very deep research, the immersion in potential Fonda material and in certain moments and figures of U.S. history. We often spent very enjoyable weeks roaming through „ephemeral“ film history, including advertising and propaganda films, talk shows and amateur films. And then there were months when I was completely absorbed by Margaret Fuller's or Hannah Arendt's writings, Lincoln's speeches, recent essays on political theory and the storming of the Capitol in 2021.

**HENRY FONDA FOR PRESIDENT takes us on a journey from the 17th century to the USA of the Reagan years. Where did your historical research take you? What prompted you to counterpoise these historical sites with images from the present? Was it also your aim there to bridge the gap between Henry Fonda's death in 1982 and the present day?**

Historical films and TV shows often put on such an “immersive” act. The audience is led to identify with a first person singular view of the era, “as it felt back then”. But of course these are all re-enactments, it's a *mise-en-scène*. I wanted to include the locations in the present-day U.S. that are relevant to Fonda because it's a film and a perspective from today. The temporal distance to the historical complexes that the film deals with is abundantly clear. On the other hand, I specifically looked for sites where, like in the movies, actual stagings of historical reality takes place – pageants,

History parks and fairs, museums and plain roadside memorials ... And then there are graves and crime scenes, an abandoned sanatorium, a former U.S. Air Force base – places that only “re-enact” something in the context of Fonda’s biography and filmography. That way, today’s USA is present in this way, as a layer on top of other layers and traces, but I have omitted the current headlines about the U.S. – hopefully they will resonate by themselves. Many of the “historical scenes” as well as Fonda’s life and work now appear almost haunted by these current questions.

**You say at the beginning that on your trip to Paris you saw *The Wrong Man*, *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. So does that mean you saw three emblematic films which delineate very important stages of his career? What considerations go into the definitive selection of your film excerpts? To what extent were you attempting to do justice to Henry Fonda as an actor, in terms of his presence on screen and his choice of roles?**

The three films are definitely part of his core oeuvre, but since then I’ve seen about 70 of his roughly 100 films, and one way or another I’ve taken about 40 of them into consideration during this work. The excerpts were then selected exclusively on the basis of the arguments I pursue in the film. This applies to Fonda’s style of acting, but even more so to the persona known as “Henry Fonda”, whose crypto authorship of a certain narrative – or counter-narrative – of America I’m trying to suggest. A potential president who would have preferred to remain anonymous, a “nobody” who represents a multitude of other nameless or forgotten people and not a “well-rounded”, stable identity. Someone who wants his ashes to be scattered in the sea.

**In your voice-over, you define the technique of chiaroscuro as the method of grasping the space between light and dark. The selected film excerpts from Henry Fonda’s black & white film era are a captivating exploration of this game of contrasts. Was this formal aspect a criterion in the selection of some excerpts? What does this interplay of light and dark reflect, with reference to your view of Henry Fonda, and also to developments in American society?**

The visual aesthetics weren’t decisive in the choice of excerpts, though it’s a nice side effect. I was mainly interested in the ideological black-and-white discourse about America. The contradictory, malleable zones between “very light” and “very dark” are far more realistic and interesting – at least, that’s how my own interest in America came about. And as far as the Fonda persona is concerned, there is his gaze which is simultaneously present and absent – and there are his actions which are guided just as much by the sense of possibility as by a sense of reality. They often refer to utopian concepts or “lost causes” in history. “What do we say to the dead?” he says at one point, in *Fail Safe*. That, too, is part of the chiaroscuro.

**One of the major themes that concerns you during this obstacle course is the history and interpretations of the American concept of democracy. Could this be seen as a central issue?**

It’s certainly one of the main lines in the film. “Democracy is not a fair-weather event,” wrote the philosopher Rainer Forst. It is not a question of *avoiding* disputes but of enduring and negotiating fundamentally contentious issues. In contrast, playing games like “Make America Great Again” – or “The People’s Chancellor”, as the current populist slogan goes in Austria – points towards authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism. However, they are not an invention of our time, which is why the film

also looks back at the 1830s, for example. Fonda's young Mr. Lincoln is surrounded by figures like Andrew Jackson, a super-racist president, and Margaret Fuller, a writer who dealt thoroughly with women's political participation, with slavery and with the indigenous peoples whose existence was endangered by Jackson's policies as never before. It's about demagoguery versus deliberation, concepts of "strength" and "weakness", mob justice versus the rule of law. In Fonda's cinema, two rough ideas of the United States of America compete with each other. An *America* that historically predates the actual state, the *United States*, and continues to make waves as an ideological "primordial soup". A mythical „deep state“, founded on blood and exclusion. The *United States*, the republic, the rule of law, must constantly and untiringly assert itself against that.

**What strikes me as a second crucial theme is a reflection on images of masculinity, and Henry Fonda was always the incarnation of that as an actor; interestingly, references to periods of history with matriarchal structures appear several times in your historical analysis. Does this also resonate with the extent to which today's America is a result of the exercise of power by white men, and to which the history of this country could have taken a different course?**

Fonda was certainly not a feminist. But he invites a critique of the authoritarian character and male triumphalism – especially where he himself embodies such "armoured" types – for example, as Colonel Thursday in *Fort Apache*. By means of the numerous satellite characters that appear in the film I also wanted to pick up on Fonda's critical potential, his ability – or his urge – to doubt, even regarding the option of taking on the role of a politician himself. Fonda splits a bit into these other characters, into (hi)stories of the USA that have long been covered up by the narrative of the "great white male democracy of Mount Rushmore". This includes

people like the black Air Force pilot and exile Virgil Richardson or the Mohawk woman Tekakwitha, who perished as a Jesuit, but also a terrible reactionary like General Curtis LeMay. Such evocations of counter-histories and previously neglected protagonists are not new anymore, of course, but I hope that some of them remain unpredictable for the viewer...

**HENRY FONDA FOR PRESIDENT is the result of an enormous amount of montage work. Can you tell us about the main stages and decisions? Working with different levels, which you have already mentioned, is interesting. Your own eloquent personal analysis adds another layer to the film. How and when did this text come about, so it would be in harmony with the montage? Why was it important for you to give this film your personal voice?**

An initial text, which already connected to various film quotations that I had in mind, turned into a dialogue with the Fonda tapes from 1981. His voice, his statements transformed the text, sometimes overturned it. The two shoots brought completely new options and many satellite figures into play. What we experienced on site determined again and again where the journey of text and image would continue... Regina's archival discoveries would also lead to such detours. In any case, what had begun as a "soliloquy" and a dialogue, quickly turned into a network of voices, which we were somehow able to keep under control thanks to Michael's experience and his editorial skills. At least I hope so! A lot of sidetracks have been eliminated, actually – the film was originally five hours long. Some of the things that were left out, such as the "Henry F./Jean-Luc Godard/Jane F." complex, or the three days of shooting at the Fonda Fair with roaring engines and roaring cattle, donkeys, and sheep, would even be suitable for separate satellite films ... In any case, the text, as interwoven with images and other sounds, changed constantly and meticulously – sometimes

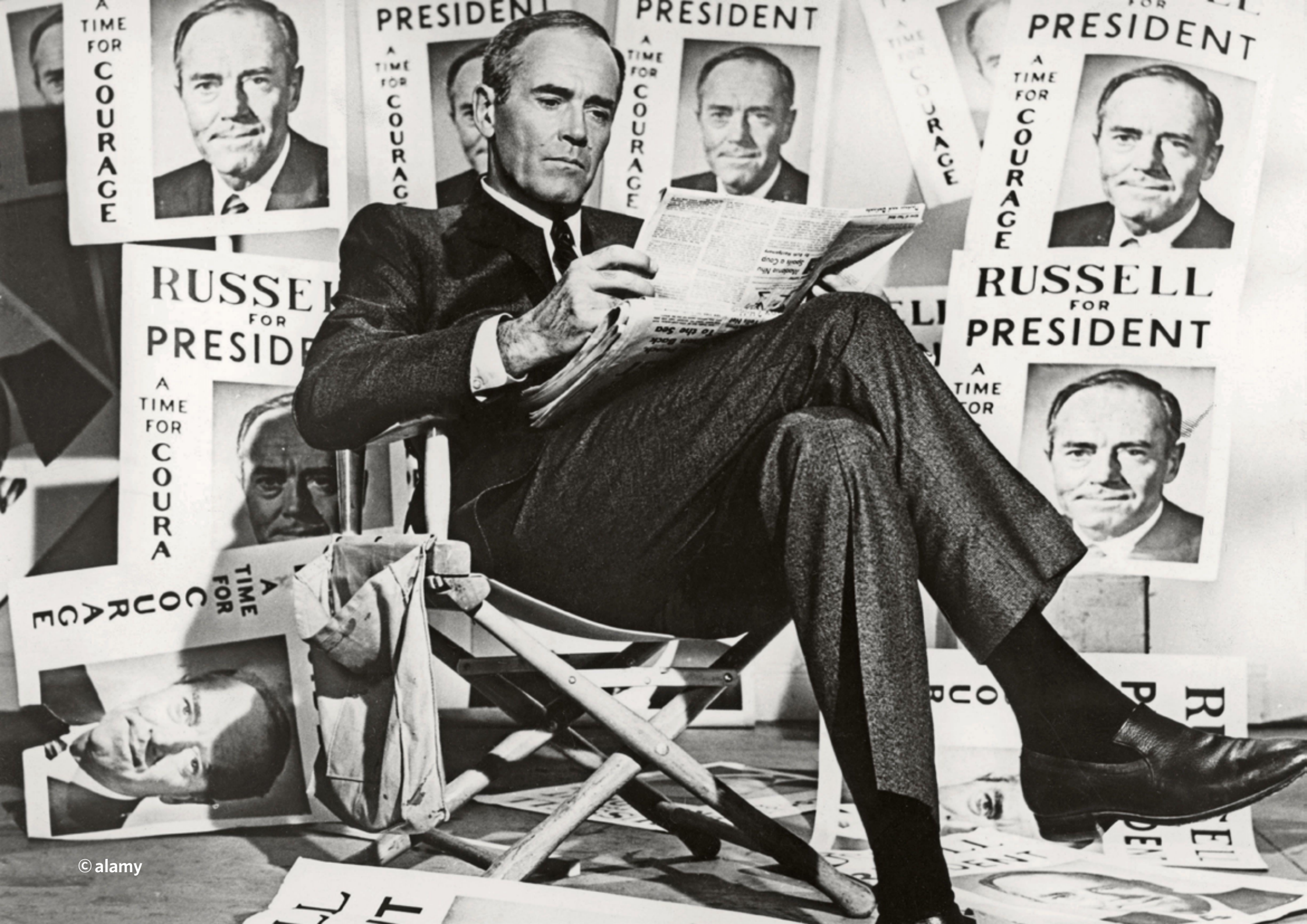


even in dialogue with Peter Waugh, who translated everything into English for the subtitles. As far as the voice-over is concerned, we didn't like the idea of having a slick "professional speaker" running through my text. At the same time, I was unsure whether my own voice was any good for this purpose. Ruth Beckermann helped me over the threshold with her insistence: "You HAVE to say it yourself!!"

**Do you intend to create a multifaceted portrait of an outstanding artistic personality in this work, or more to offer a form of historiography, on the basis of an important filmography, and thus to show how much MORE cinema is than telling stories and destinies that allow people to immerse themselves briefly in another world?**

Hopefully the latter. But it would be nice if, along the way, the former could also become tangible. Basically, I aimed at *three* things: America is the subject or force field of the film; questioning the forms of historical perception is my central impulse; and Henry Fonda – as a person and persona – was and is the endlessly fascinating tool that helped and still helps me in trying to address these two aspects. "I don't feel I have good answers to anything," he says in the film – but he's wrong.

Interview: Karin Schiefer | AUSTRIAN FILMS  
January 2024



# HENRY FONDA'S LAST INTERVIEW

Henry Fonda's rough, fragile voice permeates the film. It derives from the long interview that journalist Lawrence Grobel conducted with Fonda in July 1981 at his home in Bel Air. At that time – a year before his death – Fonda was still weak after an operation, but he dedicated six days to answering Grobel's extensive list of questions.

The tapes, 12 hours in total, were acquired and digitized for use in *Henry Fonda for President*. Below are some excerpts that can also be heard in the film.

[Download Audiodata](#) by clicking on the title

## 1919, A LYNCHING

*On September 28, 1919, a lynching occurs outside the Omaha courthouse. The victim is William Brown, one of the many African-American migrant workers from the South who have moved to the industrial cities of the North and the Midwest after World War I.*

**Fonda:** My dad's office looked down on the courthouse square. And he took me with him, we went up into his office and watched from

the window. And there was this young black that they had arrested on suspicion of rape. And this mob started to collect. I know the mayor, he was on horseback. He rode with two assistants on horseback, rode into the middle of this mob, trying to quell them and calm them. They damn near lynched the mayor. That's how out-of-control they were. You couldn't believe that they would overpower the law, force their way in, get this guy out of a cell, drag him through the streets, hang him from a lamppost, riddle him with bullets, and then drag him in the back of an automobile. It was an experience I will never forget. It was so horrifying. I know that my dad never lectured. We watched. And when it was all over and we went home, he didn't talk about it. Well, it was a great shock to me.

## ACTING AS THERAPY AND ART

**Fonda:** Part of the whole attraction of acting, and what I learned very gradually, was that it was therapy for a very shy, self-conscious young man. I was wearing a mask. It was like hiding behind a character. This was a game, it was make-believe. "Let's pretend". Like a young kid playing Cops & Robbers or Cowboys & Indians. I'm gonna get out there and I'm not gonna be myself and people aren't going to be looking at me.



*How to disappear – and become famous at the same time. It is a long-term therapy, and Fonda spends his lean years trying to find the required balance*

**Fonda:** We were in a depression as actors all the time. And Charlie [Weatherbee] and Josh [Logan], when they graduated, they went to Russia to study with Stanislavsky. And they let me stay in the apartment, rent-free. We had no sugar, no salt. Nothing. You just boiled rice. And it got so that all the casting gals and the secretaries got to know me so well, they'd just look up and smile and say, 'Nothing, Hank'. And it was during that time that Josh said I was the best-known unknown actor in New York. [...]

**Grobel:** Do you feel that there is an art to the movies?

**Fonda:** Yeah. I think De Niro is an artist.

**Grobel:** How about yourself, in that regard?

**Fonda:** I don't think about it. I don't think about myself like that. [...]

**Grobel:** Would you attend the Oscar ceremonies this coming time if your picture's nominated?

**Fonda:** I will not be there and put up with that shit. I'll watch it on TV. No way.

## JOHN FORD

**Fonda:** I think his first words [to me] were something like, "What's all this shit about you not wanting to play Lincoln? You think he's the fuckin' President? He's a young jackleg lawyer from Springfield, for Christ's sake." And that's how he intimidated me or persuaded me. [...]

Ford, you were never real sure about. He kept things secret from his own script supervisor. He'd dream up little pieces of business in the car

driving to location. Never said a word until you got to the scene. And then he'd say, "Why don't you do this and do that? Put your feet up on the post. Change position." And they would always turn out to be the things that people remembered.

## "THE GRAPES OF WRATH", JOHN STEINBECK AND THE ROLE OF TOM JOAD

**Fonda:** I'd worked for [20th Century Fox and Darryl F.] Zanuck several times. I had done a lot of films there and he was always after a contract – and I wasn't interested. Until *Grapes of Wrath*. And that was bait. He said, "I'm not gonna let you play Tom Joad if I can't control you." I did *Grapes of Wrath* and I followed it with some of the worst shit I've had to do in films. [...]

**Grobel:** Do you feel there's a part of Tom Joad in you?

**Fonda:** No.

**Grobel:** When did you get to know [John] Steinbeck?

**Fonda:** Well, it was after I'd done the film. We just went on a tour of bars and got drunk. We were never intimate, close-close. I think we had admiration for each other.

**Grobel:** I wrote down something he said of you. He said: "My impressions of Hank are of a man reaching but unreachable, gentle but capable of a sudden wild and dangerous violence, sharply critical of others but equally self-critical, caged and fighting the bars but timid of the light, viciously opposed to external restraint, imposing an iron slavery on himself. His face is a picture of opposites in conflict." Is he accurate?

**Fonda:** I don't know, that's... Those are Steinbeck's words. I would never think of me when I read those words.

## HIROSHIMA

*Fonda's home town produces B-29 bombers. The flying Superfortress ensures U.S. superiority in the war against Japan. The deadliest one is the 'Enola Gay'.*

**Grobel:** You knew about the dropping of the atomic bomb, didn't you, before it was dropped. Did you realize what that was going to be?

**Fonda:** Not totally, because I had no idea what kind of devastation it would create. It was just something new, bigger bomb. And I went up to Tinian with my boss, commander Koepke. We briefed the pilot about where he was going and what marks to look for. And the next thing I knew we hear about Hiroshima, which sort of took me aback, I must say. I can only wish that they had never thought of making it in the first place and never made an atomic bomb. I'm against all of it. I wish they'd just said, "Well, that's dangerous, let's not touch it."

**Grobel:** That's not the nature of man, though, is it?

**Fonda:** No.

**Grobel:** Do you think it will eventually destroy us?

**Fonda:** I wouldn't be surprised.

## THE McCARTHY YEARS

*It is 1948 and "Mister Roberts", a play about the war, is a hit. It keeps Fonda away from Senator McCarthy's Hollywood witch hunt. Seven years later, Fonda glides back into films.*

**Fonda:** I mean, the McCarthy era was just unbelievable to me. That's when I started to become less friendly with Duke Wayne and Ward Bond. They'd

never indicated any political leanings, and suddenly these two characters are naming names of Communists in the business, putting them on blacklists.

**Grobel:** Did you ever get friendly with them again after that?

**Fonda:** With Duke a little bit warmer. He was a very nice guy, and he had a sense of humor, too. But I never did forgive Ward Bond and never spoke to him again.

## THE DEATH OF FRANCES SEYMOUR FONDA

**Fonda:** Well she was a very fun person to be with. She enjoyed life. She enjoyed the things we did. It was a very successful marriage.

*Frances Seymour's youth and her first marriage were marked by violence and alcoholism. Her second marriage points in the opposite direction: exemplary Hollywood bliss with Henry Fonda. The model lasts for a few years. Then the husband goes to war. The wife is diagnosed as manic-depressive. On April 14, 1950, Frances Seymour Fonda ends her life with a razor blade at Craig House.*

**Fonda:** My personal life was disintegrating, but very slowly. I wasn't even aware of it for a long time.

**Grobel:** At what point did you become aware of it?

**Fonda:** Well, I guess, after we moved East, and I was doing *Mister Roberts*. And that's when Frances had to first go to a home for disturbed people.

**Grobel:** Did you ever know what caused her disturbance?

**Fonda:** No. A lot of that I've put out of my mind, so there's almost a blank. I never dreamed that it would be anything permanent. It was just a bore to have a wife who wasn't always well.

**Grobel:** Is it difficult to talk about that time, for you?

**Fonda:** Well, it ain't easy. I don't like to talk about it or be reminded of what happened.

**Grobel:** And how did the children find out?

**Fonda:** They were too young to be told the truth, so we just simply said that mother had died in the hospital. But I've been criticized for not telling them the truth. I still think I was right. [...]

## SERGIO LEONE AND "ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST"

**Fonda:** I enjoyed Sergio, he's a real character. So, I committed, still not sure why he cast me. I had thought in the meantime: What could I do to make myself look more like a villain? And I grew a mustache and a little dibbet to look something like the guy that killed Lincoln. And I got brown contact lenses to cover my baby blues, and I arrived at the set with the contacts and beard, and Sergio took one look and he said: "*Off!*" – That was not what he wanted at all. He wanted the baby blues and the Fonda face.

## ORGANIC FARMER FONDA

**Grobel:** What's your favorite fruit?

**Fonda:** Apples.

**Grobel:** What kind?

**Fonda:** Well, *my* apples. I just had one for lunch. It is a Beverly Hills. It's not grown except in backyards. It's not a commercial fruit that you can buy from an orchard.

## BIG BUSINESS – AND RONALD REAGAN

**Fonda:** I think water is becoming a major problem, all over the country. There are still companies that are illegally dumping poisonous waste in yards someplace and don't say anything about it. I think that's where our danger is. Too many people think it's progress and the right direction.

**Grobel:** Do you think Big Business is out of control in this country?

**Fonda:** No, I don't think they're out of control; I think they are getting more and more in control. I think Reagan is for big business, he's doing everything he can to help big business. [...]

**Fonda:** Reagan upsets me so that it's hard to talk about. I think we're headed for disaster. I'm surprised there isn't more opposition. I think he's got us on a path now that we're gonna be on for a long time.

**Grobel:** Do you know Reagan?

**Fonda:** Yeah.

**Grobel:** Friends or just acquaintances?

**Fonda:** Acquaintance.

**Grobel:** Was he ever a good actor?

**Fonda:** No.

**Grobel:** Is he now?

**Fonda:** No.

**Grobel:** So how did he get elected?

**Fonda:** He's a hell of a speechmaker. He says the things that people want to hear. He says them very convincingly and with what sounds like sincerity. He's talking a language that people haven't heard for a long time, and it impresses them. /listen to a Reagan speech and want to throw up!



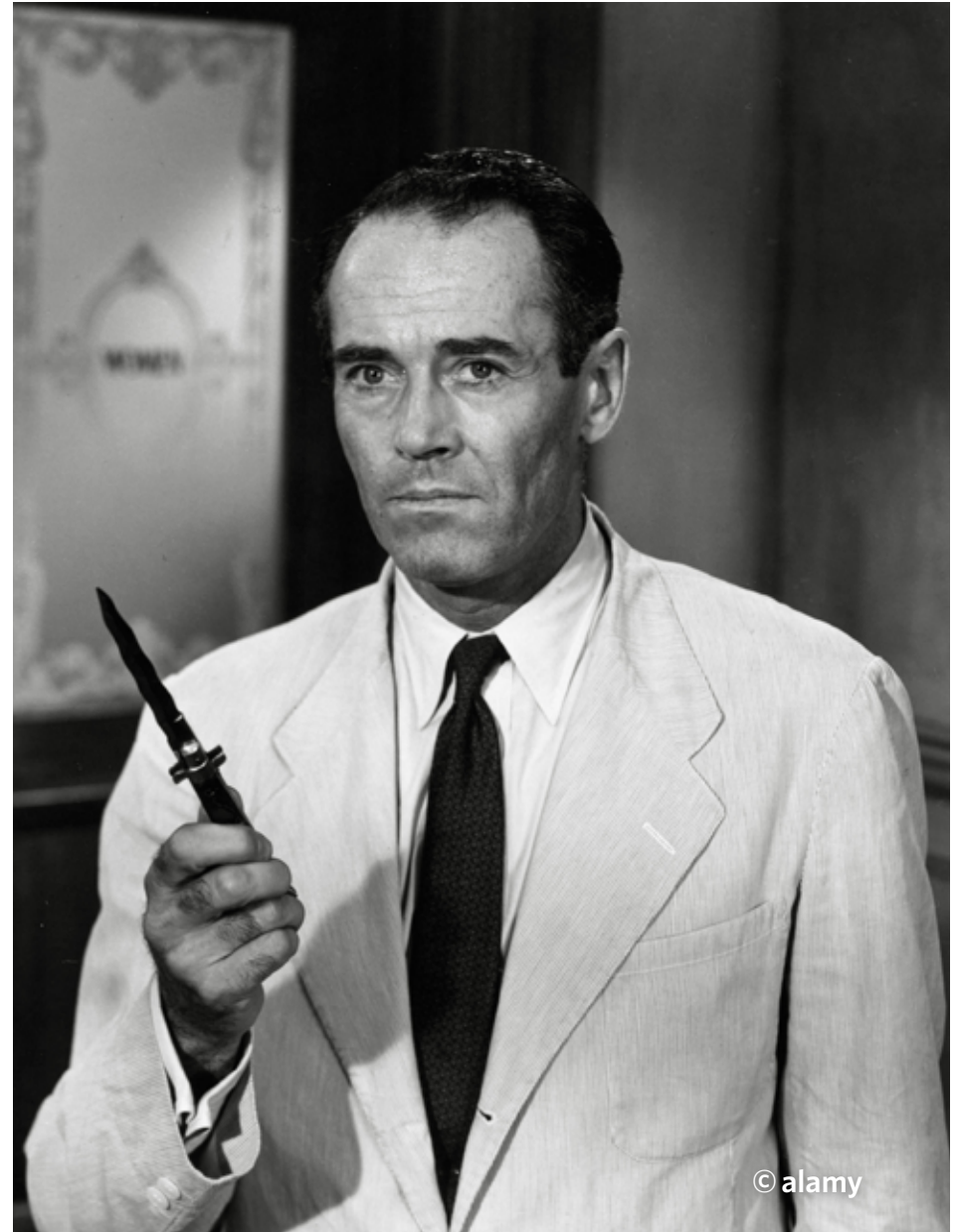


# BIOGRAPHY

Henry Jaynes Fonda was born on May 26, 1905 in Grand Island, Nebraska. His father, a liberal-minded Midwesterner, was in the printing business, his mother was a follower of Christian Science. The family soon moved to nearby Omaha where, at age 14, Fonda witnessed the storming of the courthouse by a racist mob and the lynching of William Brown, a black migrant worker.

In the mid-1920s he joined an amateur theater group in Omaha. Leaving to study journalism at the University of Minnesota, he dropped out after two years and moved to New York to become a professional stage actor. He and his friend James Stewart joined the University Players, a summer theater group on Cape Cod. His first marriage to Margaret Sullavan (another member of the University Players) ended after a few months. In 1934, his participation in the revue *New Faces*, followed by the lead role in the play *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, marked his breakthrough on Broadway. He was soon hired for the film adaptation (1935) of the hit play.

Fonda didn't have to work his way up in the Hollywood industry. He was put under contract to the esteemed producer Walter Wanger and given leading roles from the start, often on loan to 20th Century Fox. His performances for Fritz Lang (*You Only Live Once*, 1937) and Henry King (*Jesse James*, 1939) and an intense collaboration with director John Ford (from 1938/39, starting with *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Drums Along the*



*Mohawk*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*) shaped his screen profile as a social rebel during the era of the Popular Front. Off-screen, Fonda was also active in liberal causes and a supporter of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies. He met and married the New York socialite Frances Seymour Brokaw in 1936; their daughter Jane was born in 1937, their son Peter in 1940.

In order to secure the role of Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Fonda signed a 7-year contract with 20th Century Fox, which quickly became a burden to him as studio chief Zanuck placed him in one mediocre project after the other. In the fall of 1942, he volunteered for the Navy, serving for three years on the Pacific front. His post-war films added new twists to his persona: self-doubt, trauma, war, and violence were all central to the roles he played between 1946 and 1948 (in *Daisy Kenyon* and *Fort Apache*, among others). These aspects also marked his hugely successful Broadway comeback *Mister Roberts*, which ran for almost five years. Starting in 1948, Fonda's wife Frances spent long periods of time in a sanitarium. In April 1950, she committed suicide. A year earlier, Tom Heggen, the author of *Mister Roberts* and Fonda's close friend, had also taken his own life.

In 1956/57, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* and Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (produced by Fonda himself) sounded the bell for his "third act" in the movies. He was a key figure in the brief wave of political dramas that gripped Hollywood between 1962 and 1964, negotiating the state of the republic and its political caste during the Cold War (*Advise & Consent*, *The Best Man*, and *Fail Safe*, where for the first time he was cast as the acting president, in a pre-apocalyptic moment). During the second half of the Sixties, Fonda focused on his Broadway roles and continued his film career with little enthusiasm.

The years around 1968 brought him into conflict with his children Jane and Peter who became icons of the counter-culture and practiced new forms of cultural-political radicalism. During the same period, he also took over an unusual – and globally celebrated – film role: as a killer for hire in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The last decade of his life was marked by increasingly smaller film parts and increasingly bigger successes on the stage (e.g. as Clarence Darrow in the eponymous play, 1974–76). Fonda received numerous high honors for his life's work – from the American Film Institute (1978), the Kennedy Center (1979), and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1981).

His very last film returned him to the center of attention in Hollywood: For his leading role in *On Golden Pond* (1981), initiated and produced by his daughter, he won another Oscar, now as Best Actor. Five months later, on August 12, 1982, Henry Fonda died from heart disease in Los Angeles.





**VICTORY STARTS IN OMAHA!**



# THE FILMMAKERS AND PRODUCERS

## Alexander Horwath

b. 1964 in Vienna, is a writer, curator and film historian. He was the director of the Viennale-Vienna International Film Festival (1992-97) and the Austrian Film Museum (2002-17). He curated the documenta 12 film program (2007) and many other projects in the film and art world. His essays and books have, among other topics, addressed subjects such as Josef von Sternberg, Ruth Beckermann, Guy Debord, Austrian avant-garde cinema, Film Curatorship, and the American cinema of the 1960s and 70s. He is a member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and teaches Film History at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna. *Henry Fonda for President* (2024) is his first film.



## Michael Palm

b. 1965 in Linz, Austria, is a film editor and sound designer of more than 25 highly acclaimed feature films and numerous short films; since 2001 he is writing and directing, mainly in the field of documentary and experimental film. His recent feature documentary *Cinema Futures* celebrated its world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival 2016. He is the author of numerous lectures and publications on the history and aesthetics of film and cinema. Since 1998 he is a lecturer at the Viennese University for Music and Arts and the University of Arts in Linz, Upper Austria. Since October 2019 he is a professor for "Montage" at the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film in Munich.

## Regina Schlagnitweit

b. 1964 in Linz, Austria, is a freelance curator, writer and editor of books and catalogues. MA in Musicology, with a thesis on Max Steiner and Hollywood film music of the 1930s and 40s. She has worked on the casting and as an assistant director for Richard Linklater, Egon Humer, Karin Berger and Peter Ily Huemer. From 2002 to 2018 she was Head of the Program Department at the Austrian Film Museum.





# PRODUCTION COMPANIES

## MISCHIEF FILMS

Mischief Films is a Vienna-based independent production company, founded by producer Ralph Wieser and award-winning director Georg Misch in 2002. It is our mission to tackle socially significant stories and carefully turn them into memorable documentaries.

Focusing on collaborations with innovative auteurs, we also encourage directors to develop their own distinctive style and support their creative approaches from unique angles. Ambitious to reach a wide and heterogeneous audience, our films are screened around the world – whether on TV, in cinemas or on renowned festivals.

Many of our films are international co-productions with Arte, ORF, WDR, SWR, BBC and Channel 4 as well as the US-American film fund ITVS. Our films have won prestigious awards such as the Vienna Film Award, Hot Docs Toronto, Visions du Réel Nyon, Cinéma du Réel Paris.

Mischief Films is member of the Austrian Documentary Association dok.at, Documentary Association of Europe DAE and the Austrian Producers Alliance *Die Produzent\*innen*. Ralph Wieser is member of the European Film Academy and the Austrian Film Academy.

**[mischief-films.com](http://mischief-films.com)**

## MEDEA FILM FACTORY

Medea Film Factory develops and produces compelling narrative structures for documentaries, arthouse and feature films as well as series and innovative cross-media formats (VR), often as part of funded international co-productions.

Irene Höfer is a producer, author and director of many cinematic portraits and documentaries on culture and pop culture as well as CEO of Medea Film Factory. She produces German and international TV and cinema films together with co-partner and producer Andreas Schroth. Many productions have found national and international distribution.

Medea Film Factory has participated in international festivals and has received numerous awards: BERLINALE SPECIAL 2018, Hamburg Film Festival 2018, Geisendörfer Prize 2017, 22nd Festival Mix Brasil – Best Foreign Documentary, Zurich Film Festival – Special Mention, Art Basel Miami, Festival of German Films New York, CPH:DOX, DOK Leipzig. Irene Höfer is a member of the German Film Academy and AG DOK.

**[medeafilm.com](http://medeafilm.com)**



# PRODUCER'S STATEMENTS

## 6 January 2021

I am following the coverage of the storming of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., and am stunned. An attack on democracy. Trump's message to his supporters to "go home" sounds half-hearted and so different from his call shortly before: „We are now going to walk down to the Capitol.“ At this moment, I am convinced that this will have consequences for the president who was recently voted out ...

## 28 September 2022

Alex shows us a first (five-hour) version. An excerpt from *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) – The unleashed mob storms the prison. Windows shatter, a battering ram blows up the gate, the men are in a frenzy. Off-screen – Fonda recalls a lynching that he witnessed as a youth in his home town and the images that have stayed with him. It feels like a dark premonition.

Another president – Ronald Reagan – speaks to his Republican followers: "Can we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer?"

I remember the peace demonstrations in the 1980s, when hundreds of thousands marched through the streets of Europe. And how urgently Heinrich Böll and his Russian writer friend Lev Kopelev spoke in the Wiener Stadthalle, warning against the stationing of cruise missiles in Germany.

All of a sudden, a Trump impersonator appears on Times Square and skillfully plays out the familiar Trump demeanour. Or maybe – in another world – it's not an actor at all! Because the voted-out president was actually convicted of incitement to storm the Capitol. And disappears here into the darkness of Broadway.

## Ralph Wieser

ALEXANDER HORWATH is one of the most captivating people in the film world for me – as an scholar, cineaste, visionary and now also as a filmmaker. I got to know him as a young, passionate director of the Viennale. Thanks to him, as young producers we were able to conduct interviews with icons of cinema for film portraits. Years later, I sought out his expertise as director of the Film Museum in Vienna and asked him if he would like to make a film about one of his heroes.

HENRY FONDA seemed to us to be the right character for a cinematic examination of a biography, a myth and at the same time the history of America – right up to the question of the state of democracy today. With HENRY FONDA FOR PRESIDENT, Alexander Horwath and his team have succeeded in creating a cinematic portrait of great political relevance that is also very personal, witty, emotional and surprising

We look forward to working on more films with Alexander Horwath, Michael Palm and Regina Schlagnitweit.

## Irene Höfer



# HENRY FONDA FOR PRESIDENT

Austria/Germany 2024, 184 minutes

Writer, Director  
Cinematographer, Editor,  
Sound Designer  
Artistic Collaborator, Researcher,  
Location Coordinator  
Color Grading  
Sound Mix  
Postproduction DCP  
Rights Clearance and Licensing  
English Translations  
Subtitling  
Graphic Design  
Production Management  
Legal Advice  
Commissioning Editor ZDF/Arte  
Producers

**Alexander Horwath**  
  
**Michael Palm**  
  
**Regina Schlagnitweit**  
**Klaus Pamminger**  
**Rudolf Pototschnig**  
**Philipp Mayer**  
**Katharina Nesterowa, Bertram Zacharias**  
**Peter Waugh**  
**finali film & wortschatz produktion**  
**Christian Thomas**  
**Mirjam Saleh, Nalan Kahriman**  
**Dora Stöber Rechtsanwältin**  
**Kathrin Brinkmann**  
**Ralph Wieser, Irene Höfer, Andreas Schroth**



# CONTACT

## Production Austria

Mischief Films  
Goethegasse 1  
1010 Vienna, Austria  
+ 43 1 585 23 24 25  
office@mischief-films.com

## Production Germany

Medea Film Factory  
Bödekerstr. 88  
30161 Hannover, Germany  
+ 49 511 848 676 96  
factory@medeafilm.de

## World Sales

sixpackfilm  
Neubaugasse 45/13  
1070 Vienna, Austria  
+ 43 1 526 09 90 11  
office@sixpackfilm.com  
sixpackfilm.com

## Berlin Coordinator

Nalan Kahriman  
Haus am Lützowplatz  
Lützowplatz 9  
10785 Berlin, Germany  
+ 49 174 2169223  
nalan.kahriman@medeafilm.de

## Picture captions

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p. 4 My Darling Clementine (1946, John Ford)  
p. 5 Sunday Parade: Tombstone, Arizona  
p. 7 Times Square, Manhattan  
p. 10 Amboy, California  
p. 13 Grape Harvest: Arvin, California  
p. 20 The Best Man (1964, Franklin Schaffner)

p. 25 Railroad Town, Grand Island, Nebraska  
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p. 28 Museum vitrine: Strategic Air Command  
& Aerospace Museum, Omaha, Nebraska  
p. 29 Alexander Horwath, Strategic Air  
Command & Aerospace Museum,  
Omaha (© Regina Schlagnitweit)

p. 29 Michael Palm, Amboy  
(© Alexander Horwath)  
Regina Schlagnitweit, Fonda  
(© Alexander Horwath)  
p. 32 Titan Missile Museum, Tucson, Arizona  
p. 35 It's Everybody's War (1942, Will Price)

TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX  
*presents*

**IT'S  
EVERYBODY'S  
WAR**

*Narration by*  
**HENRY FONDA**