

# Narrative and Narration in John Ford's *The Searchers*

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'First of all, the western is American History.'  
Jim Kitses<sup>1</sup>

On second glance, the first thing you notice about *The Searchers* is the framing. It takes a second glance, because the first time we see it we are simply not aware that the opening image of the opening door framing the figure of Martha looking out at Ethan Edwards is itself a framing device for the film as a whole.



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<sup>1</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: 1969), p. 8. I am very grateful to Simon Petch for first alerting me to Kitses' text, for sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm for the western over the years, and for reading and advising on this paper in draft form.

We become aware of the motif as the film proceeds, the interior-exterior shot the signature of this classic western, but it's not until the closing image of the closing door framing the figure of the departing Ethan Edwards that we realise quite how elaborate this framing device has been, nor how insistent it means to be as such a device.



John Ford was a director with an exquisite sense of the cinematic frame—his eye for composition was unmatched among Hollywood directors.<sup>2</sup> And as his style developed he became known for his capacity to impart symbolic depths to the image, to manipulate it in the service of the tone, mood, and thematic impulses of the narrative. It was a technique he first developed in silent films—framing the perfect symbolic geometry of the mise-en-scene—and this developed into a distinctive compositional style in which the characters became figures in expressionistic landscapes generated by the aesthetic conception of the whole, as here in the hulking figure of Victor McGlaglen's Gypo Nolan lurching drunkenly through the Dublin night in *The Informer*:

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<sup>2</sup> In an admired and incisive observation Andrew Sarris was to claim that Ford's visual style 'evolved almost miraculously into a double vision of an event in all its vital immediacy and yet also in its ultimate memory image on the horizon of history.' Quoted in Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* (London: 2003), p. 114.



Such potent expressionistic use of light, figuration and symbolic landscape is certainly at play in what, at first glance, is probably the scene from this film that most vividly stays with one afterwards, as it did with me for many years after I first saw *The Searchers* as a teenager long ago: the massacre at the Edwards homestead—‘the best suspense sequence ever filmed,’ according to Australian director Richard Franklin,<sup>3</sup> and a haunting image of the fragility of the innocent frontier family victim to the pitiless savagery of the wilderness, the sum of all pioneer fears gathered together and figured forth in the person of the marauding Comanche chief, Scar. No physical violence is depicted: Ford focuses rather on the terrified apprehension of the family, a terror that climaxes in the astonishing zoom-close-up on Lucy.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Franklin, ‘John Ford’,  
<http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/ford.html>  
accessed 1/9/2010.



I'll return to this chilling and deeply affecting scene later, but first I want to return to that first image of the opening door. This is a film that emphasises point of view from this very first shot, but it plays with that point of view significantly, asking the viewer to reassess and re-apprehend what is seen and the viewpoint from which it is comprehended. It is a narrative technique that is literalized in what has often been seen as a highly problematic incident late in the movie. After a series of trades with the local Native American population Marty, who was hoping to obtain a blanket, finds that he has inadvertently acquired a wife. Dutiful and obliging, she is nevertheless unprepossessing and indeed somewhat homely, and Ethan immediately takes the opportunity to needle Marty about his acquisition of 'Mrs Pauley', as he calls her. It is an unkind humour, but one in which the audience is invited to share a certain complicity. In her willingness to please Marty she comes to call herself 'Look,' mistaking his expression of attention for her marital name, but when she seeks to share the marital bed, Marty reacts by violently kicking her out. Again there is a comic accent to the scene, cued in particular by Ethan's laughter, which once more implicates the audience in the cruel humour.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards Look leaves to join Scar's band, leaving signs

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<sup>4</sup> The 'kicking out of bed' scene remains a problematic one for many commentators. Douglas Pye notes that 'it is difficult (now, at any rate) not to experience the treatment of Look as brutal and painful. If it is intended as comic (even grotesquely comic), the effect seems ill-calculated, the humour unpleasant and misogynistic.' ('Miscegenation and Point of View in *The Searchers*,' in Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman (eds.), *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western* (Wayne State University Press: 2004), p.227. Peter Lehman considers the scene at length in 'Looking at Look's Missing Reverse Shot: Psychoanalysis and Style in John Ford's *The Searchers*,' *Wide Angle* 4 (1981): 65-70), while Christopher Sharrett, in a scathing reassessment of the film, has taken this scene as evidence of Ford's 'insensitivity and ... generally coarse sensibility,' and concludes: 'His coarseness and tendency to go for the easy joke make one question the artistic complexity for which he is so often praised.' (Christopher Sharrett, 'Through a door darkly: a reappraisal of John Ford's *The Searchers*,' *Cineaste*, 31.4, Fall 2006).

Not all commentators have written on Ford and this scene in quite so sanctimonious a manner, however. Ed Buscombe takes up the issue in this way:

It's a good question whether we, the audience, are supposed to guffaw along with Ethan as Marty's foot propels his 'wife' down the side of the hill. Perhaps; no one has yet claimed Ford as prematurely politically correct. One has a sneaking suspicion that we're meant to find her physical attributes funny in themselves. And yet she is the one Indian character who is given any sort of individuality (Scar is barely more than a stereotype). She is good-natured to a fault, making coffee, willing to take on whatever

in her wake for Ethan and Marty to follow—a dutiful wife to the end. When they catch up to her, however, they find that she has been the victim of a cavalry raid.<sup>5</sup>

This sequence opens with an expression of moral puzzlement by Marty ('something happened that I ain't got straight in my own mind yet') which helps to cue our particular attention. He and Ethan have encountered a herd of Buffalo, which Ethan begins to shoot with maniacal zeal. 'That don't make no sense!' Marty complains, to which Ethan replies: 'Hunger! Empty bellies! That's the sense it makes ya blankethead! At least they won't feed any Comanches this winter!' They are then interrupted by the

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identity Marty requires, even to the extent of changing her name. Mistaking Marty's expostulatory 'Look' as a vocative, she replies in Comanche that if he wishes to call her that it's fine. (Ethan with a sneer translates, giving her Comanche name as 'Wild Goose, Flying in the Night Sky'; how could such a plain girl have such a fancy name, he implies.) So some groundwork is established for a more caring response, and if we do indeed succumb to Ethan's coarse laughter, we are soon sorry for it. So is Ethan himself.' (*The Searchers*, British Film Institute, London: 2000, p. 51.)

David Grimsted puts the case that, although disturbing 'to feelings of political correctness, the scene retains that humorous zest Ford usually brings to his low comedy sequences. Nor is there any sense of hostility and hurtfulness towards Look, who retains substantial dignity. She doesn't seem dumb like Ford's Anglo yokels like Charlie or irresponsible like the comic Irishmen Ford had Victor McLaglen often play.' And he concludes with the generous observation: 'There is no film precedent for Ford's use of a Native American woman for comic relief. It was a Fordian innovation toward integration, slightly increasing his huge repertory of folk who populate his humorous Americana.' (David Grimsted, 'Re-searching,' in Eckstein and Lehman, op.cit. pp. 308-9). Reflecting on negative responses to Ford's comic approach, Joseph McBride offered the view: 'Perhaps the deepest underlying cause of some people's distaste for Ford's comedy lies in its subversive nature. To Jean Mitry, who wrote a critical study of his work in 1954, Ford explained that he liked 'to discover humour in the midst of tragedy, for tragedy is never wholly tragic. Sometimes tragedy is ridiculous.' ' Joseph McBride, op.cit., p. 455. For my own part I would point to Look's name and the textual insistence that she be regarded as a figure of moral consequence as evidence of an artistic complexity that should deliver Ford from the comfortable self-righteousness of much contemporary criticism. In addition, there are significant aspects to the narration of the film at this point which need to be taken into account, and which I discuss more fully below.

<sup>5</sup> This raid appears to have been based on the 1868 Washita River massacre, conducted by General Custer, in which he claimed to have killed up to 140 warriors, but which all other parties number at approximately 14, along with upwards of 80 women and children.

sound of cavalry which draws them to the site of the massacre, where they encounter the dead body of Look. 'Why did them soldiers have to go and kill her for, Ethan?' Marty asks a clearly distressed John Wayne, 'She never did nobody any harm.' Framed in this way by Marty's moral confusion and his bewildered question, and underscored by the literalizing effect of the character's name, the film at this moment is pointedly asking us to look and look again—



to re-appraise previous people, events and attitudes in a new light, such as westward expansion and the role of the military in this, or such as our own

complicity in the callous humour of the earlier comic violence in the marriage bed, which shares in the callous treatment of the native population meted out by the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.

Look, and look again, as the frames of reference change and different aspects of human experience are brought into the light. As I suggested earlier, Ford learnt his art in the days of silent pictures and quickly developed a painterly style that remained his signature throughout his career. But in time he came to explore a different kind of framing technique to that of the aesthetics of the cinematic frame—a narrative and narratorial framing which invests the text with something more than symbolic composition and expressionistic effect, a point self-consciously elaborated in the reiterative insistence of the frame image of *The Searchers* (and particularly its pleonastic and, again, its literalizing feature of the frame within the frame, the doorframe within the cinematic frame). So I return again to that opening frame.

Apparently an establishing shot, we eventually come to understand this opening interior-exterior image as in part dramatizing the point of view of Martha, Ethan's sister-in-law, who, we discover, has feelings for Ethan. She opens the door as if sensing his arrival, and she, the shot, the film itself, welcome Ethan to the ranch. Metaphorically, this scene also functions as welcoming the generic figure of the frontiersman, the cowboy loner, the pathfinder, that ambiguous figure who stands at the edge of the wilderness and is the first to bring to it the light of 'civilization', just as he is the first to learn its ways—as Reverend Clayton says to Ethan, 'You fit a lot of descriptions'. And this frame opens, too, upon that kind of western in which this generic figure is celebrated. It helps set the tone and mood for what is to follow—a homecoming, but also a rather fraught family tableau, in which there are clearly things left unsaid.

Much that is left unsaid is managed instead by looks, or failures to look. Like the flustered, anxious look which Martha gives when Aaron, her husband, recognises the approaching horseman as his brother Ethan:





Or the look Martha gives when she holds Ethan's coat, or the look which the Reverend Clayton pointedly refuses to take when Ethan farewells Martha before leaving to pursue the raiders of Jorgenson's cattle:



What is seen and what is unseen becomes crucial in this first section of the film. At this point in the narrative things are not looked at and then looked at again—that comes later; here, some things apparently do not require looking in the first place, because they are already known. And in this circumstance one character in particular is seen to possess a commanding vision of things: Ethan Edwards. People see what Ethan

wants them to see—no more, and no less. When he returns to the massacre scene Ethan determines what can and can't be seen by Marty—a noble gesture, in one sense, but a problematic one, too, as he knocks Marty to the ground when he intends to enter the dugout to see the body of his dead aunt Martha:

**Marty:** Aunt Martha. Aunt Martha. Let me in.

**Ethan:** Don't go in there boy.

**Marty:** I want to see her.

*Ethan hits him.*

**Ethan:** Don't let him look in there Mose. It won't do him any good.

Later, in pursuit of the Comanche raiding party, Lucy's fiancé, young Brad Jorgensen, believes he sees her in the native camp, but Ethan insists that it is not what it seems:

**Brad:** I found them! I found Lucy! They're camped about half-mile over. I was just swinging back and I seen their smoke. Bellied up a ridge, and there they was, right below me.

**Martin:** Did you see Debbie?

**Brad:** No. No, but I saw Lucy alright. She was wearing that blue dress and...

**Ethan:** What you saw wasn't Lucy.

**Brad:** Oh, but it was...

**Ethan:** What you saw was a buck wearing Lucy's dress. I found Lucy in the canyon, wrapped her in my coat, buried her with my own hands. Thought it best to keep it from you.

**Brad:** Did they...was she...

**Ethan:** (*Yelling*) What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture? Spell it out? Don't ever ask me! Long as you live, don't ever ask me more!

'What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture?' asks Ethan, and that is enough to send Brad into a frenzy in apprehension of the lurid and grisly picture that Ethan conjures with these words. Yet it might be that Ethan has been drawing pictures all along, but they look so much like cinema, we can't tell the difference.

There were two earlier Ford films which notably used equally self-conscious framing devices as *The Searchers*, but neither of them are westerns. The first of these was *How Green Was My Valley*, a loving evocation of childhood in a Welsh mining town which uses voiceover framing of the adult Huw Morgan reflecting on his boyhood—we don't see him as an adult, only as a child played by the young Roddy MacDowell. It was in this film in particular, I think, that Ford began to become interested in the ways in which the framing of a story from a particular point of view could shape the reality of events, and it is this foregrounding of the first-person narrator that renders this film ambiguously situated between chronicle and reverie. 'How *green* was my valley,' reflects the unseen adult narrator, or rather does he ask 'how green *was* my valley?' Simultaneously affirming and questioning the veracity of memory, both the title and Ford's filmic style put in play the subtle tensions that arise between personal and historical truth.

Later, in the second of the films to use this kind of device, *The Quiet Man*, Ford appeared to see the necessity of including a framing voiceover to account for the film's evocation of a clearly idealized western Ireland. This narratorial role—only used in the opening and closing scenes—is given to the secondary character of Father Peter Lonergan, played by Ward Bond, the Reverend Clayton of *The Searchers*. He tells the story of Sean Thornton, a retired boxer whose family had emigrated to America, and who has now come home to the land of his birth. As many commentators have noted, as a member of the Irish diaspora himself, raised on a diet of Irish-American yearning and anti-British bitterness, Ford knew at first hand the ways in which immigrant populations shaped nurturing myths out of the nostalgic elements of a lost cultural past. Here he both celebrates and qualifies this complex of feelings in shaping the impossibly quaint, genial and luminous Irishness that forms itself around the central character, played by John Wayne, and he dramatizes the immigrant consciousness of this fantastic world in tableaux that play at the precipitous edge of the iconic and the clichéd, as when Sean Thornton first sets eyes upon Mary Kate Danaher, the flame-haired, barefooted pastoral maiden who will enrapture him:



Ford is careful to qualify these ideal images: here the town drunk and matchmaker, Michaelen Oge Flynn, ironically offers Sean sobering advice, putting things in another perspective:

**Sean:** Hey, is that real? She couldn't be.

**Michaelen:** Ah nonsense man! It's only a mirage brought on by your terrible thirst.

The effect of this is to cast what is seen into a light both imaginative and imagined, removing it from the real on the one hand but insisting on the other that this imagined reality has a greater or at least a more compelling force than the merely actual.

Both *The Quiet Man* and *How Green Was My Valley* are self-conscious explorations of almost mythically imagined and subjectively apprehended countries of the mind—the idealized homelands of Wales and Ireland. In a similar way, the framing devices of *The Searchers* announce Ford's intention in this film to inquire into the mythic character and idealizations of the West, here not in a spirit of nostalgic celebration but rather one of literally searching examination. It is an inquiry that begins with Ethan Edwards and our acceptance of the image as it appears on the screen; we don't begin to look again, to search that image, until Marty lets us know that that is precisely what he has begun to do at the beginning of the second act, which opens once again with the classic interior-exterior shot.



At first glance it seems we are back with the opening frame, but this can't be the same door because the Edwards ranch was burned down in the massacre. So this is not the Edwards doorway opening onto a world of dark familial turmoil; rather it is the Jorgenson doorway; and it is not Ethan, the lone rider, who is welcomed, but Ethan and Marty, the companions of the trail; nor is it the Edwards ranch—scene of deep familial tension—but the Jorgenson ranch, scene of sociability and social ritual (dances and weddings are held here, and letters criss-crossing the state arrive here for delivery, connecting people who are far apart). So this second act begins not with a reiteration but a transformation, a new frame opening onto another world in another narrative register. At this point, I would argue, the film detaches itself from the figure of the tragic and solitary outsider, riding the frontier margin of nationhood and wilderness and comprehending all with his determined gaze—the film detaches itself from this figure and the narrative paradigm it motivates, and attaches itself to other values: companionship and marriage, comedy and regeneration. So broad is much of this comedy—reflecting Ford's own great fondness for a Shakespearean or, indeed, Melvillean mix of tragic depths, epic scale, and buffoonish humour—that some have complained of a failure of tone in the film<sup>6</sup>, but this very apparent tonal shift is, I take it, meant to underscore the shift in narrative paradigm that the film undertakes here, which has the effect of unhinging both the character and the imposing vision of Ethan Edwards. This allows us to review events in another light, such as the massacre at the Edwards ranch, which I would now like to consider in the context of its framing images.

The first of these is a medium close-up on Ethan—one of a mere handful of close-ups in the film, and one that might recall the medium close-up of John Wayne from *The Quiet Man* as the screen filled with seemingly idealized visions of home and romance:

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<sup>6</sup> See note 5 above. 'The first half hour of the film reveals Ford as gifted director,' Christopher Sharrett notes, apparently begrudgingly, but then goes on to claim that the film as a whole is 'complex and intriguing at many moments, but it is also an inconsistent and sometimes silly film, and an often morally outrageous one.' (Sharrett, op.cit.) In view of my own argument here this seems ill-considered.



The second is a brief shot of the riders racing to the Jorgensen ranch:



The shot of the riders, in clear daylight, lasts a couple of seconds only—it could so easily have been left out or put earlier—but its inclusion at this point is enough to establish a time disjunction, for the massacre scene depends for much of its effect on the fact that it takes place in darkening



twilight.<sup>7</sup> The drama of Lucy's lighting of the lamp and the zoom close-up on her awakened horror-struck face rely precisely on this fact.



Twilight at the Edwards ranch

Similarly, we are told that the search party is 40 miles from the ranch when they come to the realisation that a murder raid is to take place: Ethan then decides he must water and rest his horse before trying to return. Marty fails to heed his advice, rushes off, and rides his horse to death before arriving at the ranch—Ethan eventually catches up with him carrying his saddle in early twilight. In other words, either the film has jumped forward and backward in time, or the close-up on Ethan is actually a cue for what Bruce Kawin has called a 'mindscreen', or what we literary types might prefer to call free indirect imagery<sup>8</sup>—precisely the kind of screen imagery inflected

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<sup>7</sup> Even allowing for day-for-night shooting, this shot contrasts vividly with the twilight episodes of the massacre that precede it and Marty and Ethan's return to the homestead that follow. By clearly contrasting the lighting in this way these surrounding shots effectively frame the shot of the riders in such a way as to give rise to the sorts of interpretative possibilities I am pursuing here.

<sup>8</sup> Kawin writes:

My point is not simply that film can 'speak' in the first person as well as the third, and that its narrative structures can achieve reflexivity, but that the presence of these modes and voices indicates that the audio-visual field is at least as flexible and articulate as that of the novelist or poet, and that the interplay of mind (of the artist, of the audience, and of the film) is a decisive element of the visual structure, equivalent in authority—but not in method—to the pronoun system (pronominal code). The 'I' signifier



by a narratorial consciousness that Ford had explored in *How Green Was My Valley* and *The Quiet Man*, but here used to much more pointed rhetorical effect. This scene 'draws a picture' not from the fact but from the 'known', because it is wrought from the paranoid forebodings of Ethan who at this moment is wretchedly imagining what might be taking place. What the screen presents is what Ethan 'knows' is happening: a murderous Indian raid at twilight. It is all managed through the vividness of apprehension: we do not see the massacre itself because we come to apprehend the event through Ethan, who cannot bring himself to picture the physical horror of it because the psychological terror is sufficiently overwhelming.

What I want to suggest, then, is that by using a form of free indirect cinematic discourse, the events that appear onscreen can be understood as coinciding with, but not reproducing, historical actuality. What appears real is so potentially inflected by the consciousness of a particular character that it may not be the case. In other words what the film offers as represented in this most chilling image of frontier terror is in fact the worst imagining of what might take place. No wonder this scene stayed so long with so many of us, since it was an image of unspeakable fear and anguish. And Ethan's refusal to allow others like Marty to see condemns them too to their worst imaginings, or, perhaps, to his—as happens with Brad when Ethan 'draws a picture', by refusing to 'draw a picture,' of what happened to Lucy. It is not that the massacre does not happen; it is that we don't know *how* it happens, nor do we know the motivations behind it, and what is figured in this is a shift in the character of the screen image—and equally a shift in the character of the generic narrative in which this image is fashioned—a shift from the realm of the certain to the realm of the compelling. The story that it tells might now be understood not as a representation of historical

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and the 'mind's eye' signifier differ in that the former is included in its sentence, while the latter is contextual.

Bruce F. Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard and First-Person Film* (Princeton University Press: 1978; Dalkey Archive Edition: 2006), p. 92. John Stowell first drew attention to the subjective narratorial style of the film at this point, locating it in Ethan's consciousness, and also discussed the narratorial shifts associated with Laurie's reading of Marty's letter which I discuss below, in his *John Ford* (Boston: 1986), pp. 138-140. He highlights the crucial grammatical point that 'As Ethan begins to wipe the lather off his horse, the camera holds—not in a close-up—on his deeply introverted eyes and his powerfully tragic expression. Then it cuts—it does not dissolve as it has in every other scene change in the film—to Aaron's family discovering and preparing for the raid.' (p. 139)

actuality but rather as the effect of a determined, determining, and potentially psychotic understanding: the delirium of a profoundly racist sensibility, Ethan's sensibility, which—and this is Ford's most profound point—coincides with and indeed may have supervised the dominant paradigm of the western narrative. The opening act of *The Searchers* is for many the most acceptable and dramatically engaging narrative sequence in the film, I suspect largely because it is the most generically familiar, which in this instance also means the most ideologically determined. A paranoid imagining, the homestead massacre nevertheless looks real because it looks like a western. But as in the literary text, the effect of free indirect screen discourse is to put in play an ironic distance between the narrative content and the narratorial character of the text, allowing Ford to simultaneously evoke and interrogate values and ideas represented by the character whose perspective is understood to be put in play in the narration—a point which I will take up more fully later.

What dominates the first section of the film, then—and we are cued to this not only by the close-up that precedes the massacre but, from the first, by the opening frame welcoming Ethan to the film itself—is the commanding vision of Ethan Edwards. And the degree to which the massacre scene is chilling can now be read as a reflection of the near-psychotic intensity of Ethan's feeling about Native Americans. An unreconstructed Civil War rebel who fought for slavery in the United States and for imperialism in Mexico, who has still not renounced his oath to the Confederacy and who looks with suspicion at Marty, the eighth part Comanche foundling whom Martha and Aaron took into their family, Ethan, the pathfinder and man of the west, is also a dark portrait of a complex and deeply questionable figure. He has returned to the family ranch which is the scene not only of past romantic frustration but also of past familial tragedy. It is never mentioned in the film, and it is only momentarily visible, but the mound to which Debbie runs contains the graves of past Edwards family members, including Ethan's mother, who, the headstone records, was 'killed by Comanche'. It is a detail that would be lodged in Ethan's tortured imagination as he pictures the scene:<sup>9</sup> 'Here lies Mary Jane Edwards,' it reads, 'killed by Comanches / May 12 1852 / a good wife and mother / in her 41<sup>st</sup> year.' But this family tragedy is only offered as one factor in the pathological racism that informs Ethan's character. It is fashioned equally by his implicit belief in white supremacy

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<sup>9</sup> Where it remained for decades, incidentally, only to be unearthed with the advent of DVD technology, which allows the inquisitive viewer the opportunity of pausing on that fraction of a second in which the tombstone is legible.

and by the national claim to its manifest destiny, which inspired the western pioneers both to their heroic endeavours and to their shameful acts of Native American dispossession and near genocide.<sup>10</sup> Ethan's own racial mania erupts on occasion during the film, transgressing sacred laws of human compassion and deeply puzzling the racially hybrid character of Marty. When Marty tells us that he witnesses an event over which he is still puzzling in the cavalry massacre sequence I referred to earlier, the film is sufficiently ambiguous for us to take this as a reference to the Washita massacre and the death of Look, or as a reference to Ethan's crazed killing of the buffalo. Earlier, when Scar's band pursues the rangers across the river where they are able to take a defensive stand, Ethan's manic desire to kill and keep killing causes him to transgress an ancient rite of battle and a religious commandment from Reverend Clayton:

**Clayton:** Leave them to carry off their hurt and dead.  
(Knocks Ethan's arm, disturbing his aim at retreating Indian.)

**Ethan:** Well, Reverend, that does it! From now on, you stay out of this, all of you! I don't want you with me.  
(Shoots Indian in back.)

We know that Ethan is a driven character—possibly due to the emotional frustrations to which we are aware he is victim, almost from the beginning of the film. But we are alerted to the manic side of Ethan's personality by Marty, who begins to fear that Ethan is searching for Debbie not in order to rescue her, but rather to kill her. He first voices his suspicions at the Jorgensen ranch:

**Laurie:** Ethan rode on an hour ago. I don't know what you can do about findin' Debbie that he can't. He'll find her now, Martin. Honest he will!

**Marty:** That's what I'm afraid of, Laurie, him finding her! I've seen his eyes at the very word 'Comanche.' I've seen him take his knife and... Never mind. He's a man

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<sup>10</sup> Ford's decision to make Marty's character one eighth Cherokee (he was fully white in the novel) is relevant here, as it points to a history of brutal and heartless relations between white governments and Native American tribes of a kind that might motivate the otherwise incomprehensible 'savagery' of the 'Indian.' The Cherokee 'Trail of Tears' was perhaps the most dramatic and shameful act of Native American dispossession in U.S. history.

that can go crazy wild! And I intend to be there to stop him in case he does.

How far are we to go with Marty's suspicion of Ethan? What lies behind the unseen and unspoken elements of his character? How much are we to make of the hints given by the film's fascinating narrational style which, at this stage, now begins to call into question the heroic narrative paradigm with which it began, encouraging us to look again at the behaviour and attitudes of the central heroic figure of Ethan?

Take the matter of Ethan's past with Martha. How far did it go? Both Ethan and Martha's actions throughout suggest a profound affection which they guiltily continue to hide from the unknowing Aaron, but their liaison must have been sufficiently evident for the Reverend Clayton to detect it, and to both discreetly ignore and simultaneously police their relationship as he stares unblinkingly away from them, drinking his coffee while they take their tender farewell. There is enough in this scene to suggest that their previous liaison transgressed the laws of family and society, a suspicion which highlights what we come to recognise as the psychosexual complex of Ethan's blood racism.<sup>11</sup> Could such psychotic fear of the blood-other have moved him to desire union only with the blood-same, moved him, that is, to quasi-incest with his sister-in-law, perhaps fathering the daughter he must now destroy because of her exposure to Indian blood through sex? The urgency of the search, as far as Ethan is concerned, is to find Debbie before she comes of age and is taken sexually by Scar or one of his Comanche braves, suffering a 'fate worse than death' in the 19th century phrase, as Ed Buscombe notes.<sup>12</sup> But this was true only to the religiously-minded, for that fate threatened the salvation of the victim's eternal soul, and once that fate has been enacted nothing is to be gained by killing the victim other than confirmation of her forsakenness. And, in any case, Ethan is not religiously-minded—he has no respect for the Reverend Clayton's orders, and he interrupts the funeral with a snarling 'Put an amen to it! There's no more time for praying—amen!' Rather, he is racially-minded, and so Debbie's threatened fate here is understood as a mortal affront not

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<sup>11</sup> Much has been written on this aspect of the text; cf. in particular Brian Henderson, 'The Searchers: An American Dilemma,' in Eckstein and Lehman, op.cit., pp. 47-74, and Arthur M. Eckstein, 'Incest and Miscegenation in *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Unforgiven* (1959),' *ibid.*, 197-222. See also McBride for a related angle on John Wayne's understanding of Ethan's character, op.cit. pp. 557-8.

<sup>12</sup> Buscombe, op.cit., p. 20.

to the victim of sexual assault but to the race from which she comes—the fate worse than the death of that race involves the racially paranoid fear of miscegenation, leading to the degradation and disappearance of that race through the elimination of the purity of its bloodline, and so Debbie must be eliminated as the source of that affront. It is only later, when Ethan desecrates the dead body of Scar by scalping him (a symbolic castration, undoing the threat of miscegenation) that he finds another way of resolving his paranoid sexual/racial fixation.<sup>13</sup>

It is one of the ironies of the film that the figure who most resembles Ethan is not his brother, Aaron, nor the person to whom he wishes to leave his legacy, Marty, but rather, as has often been noted, the murderous Indian chief Scar.<sup>14</sup> The murder of Ethan's mother by Comanche raiders is matched by Scar's loss of two sons to white gunmen which, we discover, motivates his own racist fury against the whites—one of many ways in which we see Ethan's character reflected and refracted in that of the renegade Comanche chief. This feature is underscored comically by their matched dialogue when they meet, as they sarcastically reflect on the ability of each to learn the ways of the other:

**Ethan:** You speak pretty good American for a Comanche.

Someone teach ya? ...

**Scar:** You speak good Comanche. Someone teach you?

If this resemblance is ironic, it becomes deeply problematic when we consider that the massacre scene is fashioned out of Ethan's darkest imaginings: it may be read, then, not only as a reflection of his racial psychosis, but equally as a reflection of the intensity of his feelings about his brother's marriage. That is, the massacre perversely fulfils Ethan's own suppressed desire to destroy Martha's relationship with his brother and to possess her.<sup>15</sup> In this sense Scar, a symbolic counter-double, enacts Ethan's

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<sup>13</sup> We already know that desecration gives Ethan some satisfaction when we see him shoot the eyes out of a dead Comanche—his vengeance goes beyond death and has other purposes for his racially paranoid personality.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., for example, McBride's view that 'Scar is not so much a character as a crazy mirror of Ethan's desires' (op.cit. p. 561)—a statement that effectively sums up most commentators' opinions on the relation between Ethan and Scar.

<sup>15</sup> James J. Clauss, among others, has discussed this idea in 'Descent into Hell: Mythic Paradigms in *The Searchers*,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Volume 27, Issue 3 1999, 2-17. Perhaps the possibility of metaphorically exploring forbidden desire was appealing to filmmakers at this time, as it is interesting to note

own unacknowledged or repressed desires, and Ethan's quest to retrieve the children might mask his desire to finish the job, which is possibly what he does when he catches up to the party that includes Lucy. For if the narrative allows us to entertain the notion that Debbie is his illicit daughter, it also allows us to suspect that he has saved the elder sister—or spared the race—from 'a fate worse than death' through blood sacrifice of her. It is all a question of how far we are willing to let Marty's suspicions take us, and how darkly we wish to interpret the narrative elements of the text. Consider again the scene in which Marty first voices his suspicions to Laurie: Marty's voice trails off as he makes a motion with his knife—



**Marty:** I've seen him take his knife and...

—disturbingly recalling the motions of Ethan with his knife after catching

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that the elaborate science fiction adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Forbidden Planet*, came out in the same year as *The Searchers*. This was certainly a film that explored forbidden areas in a metaphorically heightened manner—most notably in Morbius's (Walter Pidgeon, the film's Prospero) protective but dangerously incestuous desire to protect and possess his daughter through monstrous, invisible projections from his own unconscious, 'creatures from the id' that emerged at night to wreak destruction on male rivals for his daughter's affection.

up again with Brad and Marty after discovering Lucy in the canyon.



Perhaps there is a suggestion here that Marty's awakening suspicions<sup>16</sup> reflect an unconscious fear that Ethan has already killed in this way, a fear he rehearses in the motion of the knife. In an ambiguous film that bristles with dangerous implications, particularly through its textual technique of doubling, what are we to make of a particularly distinctive shot of Ethan late in the movie: a zoom close-up as he reacts with horror at the madness of the liberated captives,<sup>17</sup> which replicates the shot of Lucy in the massacre scene as she realises with horror what is about to befall her:

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<sup>16</sup> Which, of course, are correct, for Ethan does intend to kill Debbie.

<sup>17</sup> Robert B. Pippin, in a thoughtful essay on *The Searchers* and the meaning of the western as a genre, finds much to ponder in this image: 'The question of understanding Ethan is deeply interwoven with the question of how to interpret this singular, eerie look. It is not so much anger or hatred, even though there are profound flashes of both. Is there sadness at what he thinks he has to do? Self-hatred at not being able to feel the pity he knows he should? Wayne is the master of cold reptilian looks in this film, but this is the extreme, and it is almost completely ambiguous.' 'What is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*, *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter, 2009), 236.





In response to the captain's observation, 'It's hard to believe they're white,' Ethan claims: 'They ain't white—any more. They're Comanche.' Inevitably he sees them as infected by miscegenation. He knows that sex can drive a person mad—the thought of it drives Brad suicidally insane at the Comanche camp, and who knows what his yearning for Martha has done to him—and perhaps he reads in the derangement of the rescued captive the fate of Debbie, and through her the threatened fate of the race. But perhaps it is not Debbie that is on his mind. The zoom close-up is used only twice in the film;<sup>18</sup> given that the massacre scene may be read as a visualization of his own fears, the matched shot here suggests a self-conscious connection in his own mind not with Debbie but with Lucy, since it was Ethan's tortured imagination that rendered her horror in this way. In that case it could be that, looking at the deranged captives, Ethan is remembering the state in which he found Lucy—'not white—any more'—and what he might have done about it, after which he plays distractedly with his knife in a motion that suggests burial, but also suggests the action of cleaning it. These are the kinds of ambiguities that play so disturbingly about this film, and we can entertain them at this point in the narrative precisely because the narrational mode has shifted from one in which Ethan's view is unquestioned to one in which it is darkly interrogated by competing perspectives, and against which it struggles to manifest itself, so to speak. Here, if Ethan's subjectivity has momentarily inflected the narratorial surface of the film<sup>19</sup> in such a way as to register his traumatic response to the captives, and if this response apparently replicates his own earlier apprehension of Lucy's terror of the Comanche, the effect of this is not to confirm his suspicions of the behaviour of primitive savagery but rather to arouse *our* suspicions of *his* behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf McBride: '[Ford's] sparing use of the close-up, for example, gives that highly emphatic tool far greater impact than if it were diluted by over-use. By withholding close-ups, Ford places greater emphasis on people's social roles than on their isolated, subjective viewpoints.' (McBride, op. cit., p.255) Just so, and, by the same token, Ford's use of the close-up here places greater emphasis on the subjective mode it evokes, especially when—in these two instances—it is combined with a moving camera, which was another stylistic feature he used only sparingly.

<sup>19</sup> That is, the film has momentarily adopted a perspective reflecting Ethan's subjective consciousness. My point is that, at this point in the movie, the narrative is focalized through various points of view, various subjectivities—a fact reflected in the tonal breadth and variety of the film from the second act onwards, and also in its no longer being determined by Ethan's vision of what can and can't be seen and the ways in which it is seen.

<sup>20</sup> Cf Peter Lehman's 'The Limits of Knowledge in and of *The Searchers*,' in Eckstein and Lehman, op. cit., pp. 239-263. Lehman takes up the issue of what can

Ethan has another explanation for what happened in the canyon, of course, but it is sufficiently elliptical for the suspicion to remain. He says he found Lucy there, wrapped her in his coat and buried her. Perhaps that is what happened, or perhaps he left something out, but in any case his view of the event is sufficient to send Brad on his crazed attack of the Comanche camp in a state of suicidal distress, as I mentioned. Ethan's view of things can have this effect, but not on everybody. Later, when the rangers and some cavalry members discover Scar's camp, Ethan wants to charge in with all guns blazing. Marty protests, pointing out that this would cause the Indians to kill their captives—which, at this point, is still the goal Ethan has in mind ('Just a minute reverend,' Marty complains, 'we go charging in they'll kill her and you know it.' To which Ethan replies, 'That's what I'm countin' on.') Against this Marty proposes to steal into the camp first to try to liberate Debbie, and the following exchange takes place:

**Marty:** Well, it ain't gonna be that way! She's alive and she's gonna stay alive!

**Ethan:** Living with Comanches ain't bein' alive.

**Marty:** It's better she's alive and livin' with Comanches than her brains bashed out!

**Clayton:** Now, son, I know this is a bitter thing to say, but there's more at stake here than your sister.

**Ethan:** There sure is. I'm gonna tell you somethin'. I didn't mean to speak of it, but I'm gonna tell you now. You remember that scalp strung on Scar's lance? Long and wavy?

**Marty:** Yeah, I saw it. And don't try to tell me it was Aunt Martha's or Lucy's!

**Ethan:** It was your mother's.

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and cannot be known and explores possibilities of behaviour for Ethan that might be suggested but not depicted onscreen, arguing that the film 'denies the audience the knowledge of precisely what has happened and why' (p. 239). Regarding Ethan's behaviour he notes: 'The fact that such extreme formulations about Ethan's behaviour occur to so many spectators of the film only makes sense within the epistemological framework I have described. The film pulls the rug out from so many epistemological certainties of both the characters within it and the spectators of it that it almost encourages this kind of speculation.' (p. 249) As to what precisely is signified by Ethan's close-up at this point, that is another matter entirely. Robert B. Pippin discusses this moment at length but does not draw a connection between it and the earlier scene of Lucy's terror (Pippin, op.cit.).

**Marty:** But that don't change it. That don't change nothing!

It is at this point that Ethan's commanding vision fails in two ways, throwing into doubt all of his other pronouncements, along with the generic narrative and the film form they motivate. First, I think it fails to convince us—for how could he possibly tell? If he found Martin as a baby after a raid, how could he possibly know what an unknown woman's missing scalp would look like some twenty years later? And second, we now know that for Ethan the world takes shape as he chooses (or is compelled) to see it, and we have seen him impose that view on others, but this time it fails to persuade Marty —'That don't change nothing,' he tells him. So for Marty, by this point in the film, Ethan's view of things no longer signifies.

One of the reasons the film acquires an epic scale, like *Moby Dick*, is because of the elusiveness of the object of the quest. Scar and his band are difficult to track because they are what is known as 'Nawyecka Comanche': Alan LeMay in the novel translates this as 'Them As Never Gets Where They're Going', but in the film Ethan translates 'Nawyecka' as 'Sorta like round about; man says he's going one place, means to go t'other'. With its implication of an intention to deceive, and equally an intention to get somewhere—'means to go'—Ethan's translation is much more pertinent to the cinematic style of this film, which artfully metaphorises or literalises so many of its own textual processes. What I would suggest is that *The Searchers* could well be regarded as a kind of 'Nawyecka cinema'—because it too indicates it is going one way, but means to go another. That is, it sets up one generic mode and implicates the viewer in it, sharing in its compelling vision and even empathising with its dark racial imaginings, before disconnecting itself from that mode, arriving somewhere else entirely.<sup>21</sup> It begins with Ethan's view, which is determined and imposing—he knows what he is looking for, he sees what he wants to see, and he supervises the view of others including, effectively, our own: initially we see the narrative unfold according to the heroic paradigm of American westward expansion and the frontier confrontation with an unfathomable savagery. Marty's view, on the other hand, is diffident and sceptical. There are initial indications of this when Ethan fails to read the signs of the cattle raiders' trail correctly, whereas Marty becomes suspicious; we see it too at the buffalo shoot and Indian massacre, where

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<sup>21</sup> In this regard it is interesting to note that Ford told Jean Mitry before making *The Searchers*: 'I should like to do a tragedy, the most serious in the world, that turned into the ridiculous.' (McBride, op.cit. p.561)

Marty admits to being morally puzzled by one or other, or both of these events—he reflects on what he sees and he questions it. But most importantly it is there in the feature that confirms that by the second act we are in a new narratorial consciousness—the use of Marty's letter to convey the narrative. Marty's account does not 'draw a picture', it reports, it gives witness to events, and his diffident voice allows for other interpretations, other views, other narrative perspectives. This is elegantly implied by Ford's splicing of Marty's and Laurie's voices across the narratorial line as he tells of Look's assistance in helping them follow the trail of Scar:



**Marty:** Maybe she left other signs for us to follow but ...

**Laurie:** ...we'll never know 'cause it snowed that day and all the next week.

This occurs immediately after the scene in which Look is pitched out of the marital bed, and it is difficult to say whether that scene represents Marty's account, the film's account of Marty's account, or, possibly, Laurie's imagining of Marty's account, inflected by the resentment and jealousy she must feel at hearing of this 'marriage'. The latter interpretation, however, is given some weight by Ford's choice of actress, Beulah Archuletta, as Look. Marty insists that she is 'much younger' than Laurie, yet Archuletta was a full 17 years older than Vera Miles, who was 26 at the time of filming. In addition, it is often remarked that Laurie is given one of the most sinister pieces of dialogue in the film, revealing her own bigotry, when she tries to persuade Marty to give up the quest for Debbie and stay with her:

**Laurie:** Fetch what home? The leavings of Comanche bucks, sold time and again to the highest bidder, with savage brats of her own? Do you know what Ethan will do if he has a chance? He'll put a bullet in her brain! I tell you Martha would want it that way.

Laurie is no doubt motivated here by a desire to keep Marty at home, so she is putting the case in the worst light, but the outburst is extraordinary nevertheless. Yet this only adds to the likelihood that Laurie's prejudiced imagining of Look may be determining the film image in those scenes in which she appears, unflatteringly depicted and comically demeaned, which gives us another reason to look again and reassess that problematic scene of the 'marriage bed' in terms of Ford's use of free indirect cinematic discourse at this point.

That the generic form of the narrative shifts as Marty's narratorial consciousness takes up the story is also indicated by such things as the reframing of the narrative in the Jorgensen doorway, Marty's declaration of his suspicions about Ethan, and the comic sexual byplay of the bathtub scene, in which Laurie has the upper hand, and which sets the tone for much of the rest of the film, which now broadens to include comic romance, the clownish humour and musical diversions of Charlie MacCory, as well as the celebratory dancing of the wedding party. Ethan figures in every scene but the massacre in the first act, and I have argued that he effectively figures in that, too, as it is his tortured imagining that we watch at this point; so from the second act onwards it is significant that he is absent from some scenes. It is not that Marty's point of view dominates but rather that it has the effect of opening the film to alternative perspectives.<sup>22</sup> It is this shift in narrative mode that most strongly indicates the ideological leanings of the film itself, moving from the heroic paradigm and the tonal austerity of the frontier tragedy presided over by Ethan's commanding vision to a more hybrid form that includes a comic celebration of civility, sociability, and anti-authoritarianism, expressed most forcefully in the sword which is unceremoniously shoved up the backside of the figure of political, judicial and ecclesiastical authority, the Reverend Clayton, in an utterly superfluous but gloriously comic coda.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Like Laurie's, and even Ethan's in the scene of the rescued captives, as mentioned above, but again the effect of Ethan's narratorial command at this late stage of the film is ironically to interrogate his earlier view of the events surrounding Lucy's death.

<sup>23</sup> Ford had already experimented with hybrid forms in relation to the western in his great cavalry trilogy, which included the anti-heroic *Fort Apache* (deconstructing

Ford's greatest early cinematic achievement was the epic of national history, *The Iron Horse*. This silent film relied on a sense of cinema as objective witness to the epic of history. By the end of his career, however, and in his final masterpiece in particular, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ford was to interrogate the issue of narrated history more fully and more darkly. For him the telling of history was no longer understood as an objective affair, a disinterested statement of fact; rather, it was seen as inevitably told in the interests of one over another. In *The Searchers* he employed a mode of narration that allowed him to explore the character of cinematic storytelling with a critical understanding that reflected on the genre of the western itself, showing at once the poetic capacities of the medium and equally its proclivity to be co-opted to one view of history or another. The story of the American West has always had two contradictory aspects: pathfinding and settlement, and the virtues of westward expansion (which include rebellion, outlawry, non-conformity, self-reliance and rugged individualism) are not necessarily the virtues of settlement, union and nationhood (which require the values of tolerance, community, the rule of law, the acceptance of human equality and, by extension, the acceptance of racial hybridity).<sup>24</sup> At a discursive level, Ethan and Marty separately put in play these two generic understandings of the national story. Against the austerity of Ethan's epic vision of heroic white individualism, manifest destiny, and the singular bloodline the film juxtaposes Marty's sceptical chronicle of democratic civility, with its rituals of social cohesion and familial growth, its comic breadth and suspicion of the heroic, and its celebration of inter-racial relations. One is a story of taming the savagery without, the other of taming the savagery within,<sup>25</sup> but one cannot cherry-pick the past, and the film recognises that the latter cannot come to pass without the former. Moreover, no telling of the national story can ignore the fundamental relation between virtues that adorn it from one perspective, and attitudes that darken it from another. In recognising conflicting visions of that story and the values these embody, through a subtle technique of free indirect cinematic discourse Ford was able to simultaneously dramatise these values without endorsing them, and interrogate them without discarding them, arriving instead at an ironic

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the legends of the West), the autumnal *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (perhaps the first 'end of the West' film), and another captive adventure, *Rio Grande*, which comes as close to a musical as anything else in the Ford canon.

<sup>24</sup> See Jim Kitses' *Horizons West* for a structural elaboration of these dichotomies within the evolving western narrative.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Pippin, 227-9.

counterpoise of competing views. Ethan Edwards fits a lot of descriptions—at one moment he looks to have the frontier skills of Natty Bumpo, at another the monomania of Ahab; at times he even seems to have the restlessness of Huck Finn, lighting out for the territory. Importantly, each of these figures is unimaginable without his companion: the noble Chingachgook, the chronicler Ishmael, the pure of heart Jim, in each of whom we might see aspects of Marty. It was Ethan who found Marty abandoned as a baby after an Indian raid on a wagon train, but at the beginning of the film he does not want to acknowledge his role in bringing him into the family; later, when Ethan comes to recognise a kinship with him and aims to make him his sole inheritor, Marty refuses his legacy; yet, the film insists, despite these separate repudiations, each is somehow connected to, somehow implicated with, the other, and it is the task of its complex and shifting narrational mode to reflect this in its management of the western narrative.



The portals of the homesteads that figure so prominently in this film are the frontier limits of American civility: they enclose the warm values of advancing democratic nationhood, but they open onto the terrain of the other that must be dispossessed for this advance to continue, as it inevitably will. At the end of the film the door closes on Ethan as he goes out to continue his roaming, the music building to ask once more ‘what makes a man to wander?’ It is not the door that opened on him at the beginning, so the frame has altered, and as the film makes clear, a different frame means a different picture. We might wonder whether Ethan has chosen to wander still, restlessly seeking out new territory, unable to find a place for himself

in the settled lives of the growing Texican community; or whether he has been ejected from the interior world of the homestead, advancing civility here closing the door on its wandering, violent, individualistic past. My own reading of the film suggests that it is both, because these are parallel stories, and their common elements signify in fundamentally different ways depending upon how one tells the story of the West.

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