

DOUBLE VISION

Miscegenation and Point of View in The Searchers

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The history of the Western is littered with movies that attempt to develop liberal perspectives on the historical treatment of Native Americans. However, the racism that is inherent in the traditions of the genre makes almost any attempt to produce an anti-racist Western a paradoxical, even contradictory, enterprise. It is, in effect, impossible to escape the genre's informing White supremacist terms.

The Searchers (John Ford, 1956) is no exception. But it is different in a number of ways from most other Westerns which attempt to look critically at racism. Although it offers critical perspectives, it is not a liberal movie in any significant sense: its representation of a deeply racist and obsessive Western hero and of the vicious attitudes to miscegenation located at the heart of White civilisation is disturbing in ways that go far beyond the liberalism of, say, *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950) or even the much later *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970). *The Searchers* allows no comfortable identification with or disengagement from its hero (who is both monstrous and John Wayne) or easy detachment from other expressions by White characters of racial fear and hatred. The film probably goes further than any other Western in dramatising and implicating us in the neurosis of racism. But in wrestling as a Western with the ideological and psycho-sexual complex that underlies attitudes to race, it is working *within* almost intractable traditions of representation. Much of what is fascinating about *The Searchers* lies in the resulting struggle to control point of view – in fact, in its multiple forms of incoherence.

This is not intended as a revisionist account of *The Searchers*, an attempt to challenge its critical standing. I share the widely held view that the film is one of the great Westerns. Rather, I want to look at aspects of the film which have been noted by some writers as troubling or in some way problematical but which have tended (with one or two exceptions) to be marginalised within wider analyses. In particular, I want to consider them not as failures of realisation or artistic control but as problems rooted in the film's engagement with generic tradition.

As many critics have noted, there are several important ways in which the film develops clear and critical perspectives on racism in White society. Almost from the outset, when Ethan (John Wayne) greets Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter) – 'Fella could mistake you for a half breed' – Ethan's obsessive hatred of Indians and of the idea of mixed blood are presented in ways designed to distance us from him.

The film develops this aspect of Ethan while simultaneously implying the ways in which at times Ethan demonstrates a kinship with the objects of his hatred. Increasingly, and in ways that seem entirely controlled, the film detaches us from Ethan so that we are required to perceive the neurotic and irrational nature of his attitudes and actions. Martin's letter to Laurie (Vera Miles), which functions as a kind of embedded narrative in the middle of the film, acts partly in this way by framing in voice-over Ethan's shooting of the buffalo to deny winter food to the Comanches. (In other ways, the containing framework of the letter is less clear in its implications for point of view, as I will argue later.)

The interruption of Ethan's slaughter of the buffalo by the cavalry bugle and the cavalry's entrance – straight, as it turns out from the massacre of a Comanche village – also marks eloquently the way in which Ethan's racial hatred is repeated at the institutional level in the genocidal actions of the US Cavalry. Later, as it becomes clear that Ethan intends to kill, not rescue, Debby once she has been taken as a squaw, the film's distance from Ethan is again unambiguous. The final and in some ways most extraordinary moment of this strand of the film's treatment of racial hatred comes in Laurie's appalling outburst to Martin, just before the last movement of the film, in which she describes Debby as 'the leavings a Comanche buck has sold time and time again to the highest bidder' and declares that Martha, Debby's dead mother, would want Ethan to put a bullet in her brain. The speech is particularly shocking coming from Laurie, apparently one of the film's sanest and most sympathetic characters. But that is clearly the film's point:

Frame: The Searchers – the arrival of the US Cavalry.





Laurie's hideous outburst locates the disgust and loathing of miscegenation not simply in Ethan but at the heart of the White community. Ethan is, in this respect at least, not an aberrant but a representative figure.

These perspectives are in themselves coherent and remarkable. The film traces a network of racist loathing from Ethan, into White society and out to the implementation of government policy by the cavalry. Particularly extraordinary in the film's context are the creation of a hero obsessed by racial hatred and the perception that such attitudes, rooted deep in society and in the psyche, are found not only in the villainous, ignorant or aberrant but in people like Laurie who are in other respects sympathetic and caring.

Other aspects of the film are consistent with its critical distance from Ethan's attitudes. In part, both Martin and Debby seem to offer much more positive and rational perspectives on relationships between the races. In the early parts of the film, Martin's identity is created very strikingly in relation to his Cherokee ancestry ('an eighth Cherokee, the rest's Welsh and English') – bare-back riding, moccasins, skin and hair colour, the ability to read a trail. He embodies the possibility of integration, of harmonious mixing of the races. In Natalie Wood's early appearances as the grown-up Debby, too, cross-cultural assimilation, living contentedly with another race, is raised as a real possibility. The Comanches are not monstrous but a people with whom Debby identifies: 'These are my people – go, Martin, go.'

But in many other ways, as I have suggested, the film's point of view on this material is far less clear.

Still: The Searchers. Above – the first appearance of the grown-up Debby (Natalie Wood) as Ethan (John Wayne) and Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) meet Scar (Henry Brandon). Opposite – after Martin has kicked her down the hill, Ethan tries to get information from Look (Beulah Archuleta).

Take two pivotal episodes, both contained within the narrative of Martin's letter to Laurie: that involving 'Look' (Beulah Archuleta), the young Indian woman whom Martin inadvertently 'marries' as he trades with her tribe, and the slightly later scene involving the White women recaptured from the Comanches. The fact that each is contained in Martin's letter invites the thought that Martin's sceptical and questioning attitude to Ethan might govern the ways in which we are invited to respond to the two scenes. Certainly, there are parts of the letter narrative in which Martin's voice signals a cognitive and evaluative distance from Ethan, as in his introduction to the shooting of the Buffalo as 'Something . . . I ain't got straight in my own mind yet'. But the episodes of Look and the captives are much less obviously framed. Point of view proves much more fugitive in each case.

The only words of Martin's that we hear in the Look section give little away. The initial lines that Laurie reads about Look come *after* we have been shown the scene in which Ethan tells Martin that he has inadvertently bought a wife and are in fact quite misleading: Martin proposes to tell her 'how I got myself a wife . . .' Nothing in his language here or later corresponds to his response to Look in the dramatised, as opposed to narrated version of events.

When we witness the events with Look, there is nothing in the treatment which suggests a mediated or partial view; the episodes are presented in ways consistent with other episodes in the film, including those outside Martin's letter. The next voice-over, which comes after Ethan and Martin discover the next morning that Look has gone, leaving the sign of an arrow made of small stones, acts as a bridge to the shooting of the buffalo. Here Martin's voice begins, with 'Maybe she left other signs for us to follow but . . .' There is a cut to Laurie, who continues, '. . . we'll never know, 'cause it snowed that day and all the next week.' Another cut introduces the two men approaching the buffalo herd in a snowy landscape. The only other voice-over about Look comes after they have found her dead in the Comanche village. As Martin leaves the tepee containing Look's body, his voice picks up the narration and concludes: 'What Look was doing there – whether she'd come to warn them or maybe to find Debby for me – there's no way of knowing.' Look and her actions, in other words, remain enigmas to Martin; his words in the letter convey little in the way of attitude.

In the wider structure of the film, one determinant on the presentation of Look is that she has the function of paralleling Charlie McCorry (Ken Curtis), each being constructed as a comically (even grotesquely) inappropriate potential partner for Martin and Laurie respectively. To cement that link, Ford dresses each in a bowler hat (Charlie as part of the outfit he wears to marry Laurie), one of a network of linking details between characters that permeates the film. One function of the grotesquerie, at any rate in Charlie's case, is as part of a wider vision of marriage and its possibilities that is central to the

film's critical perspective on civilisation. The implication is of women becoming tired of waiting for the desirable men who refuse to settle and marrying the available Charlie – in the way, perhaps, that Martha married Ethan's dull and worthy brother Aaron. For the parallel to work, both Charlie and Look have therefore to be created in ways that invite us to laugh at them, although this cannot fully account for the way in which Look is represented and treated.

She is from the outset a figure of fun – fat, comically modest and, in conventional terms, sexually unattractive. Martin's dismay at the fact that he has unwittingly bought her and his frustration at being unable to make her understand what he is saying are also comically treated, his discomfort underlined by Ethan's laughter at Martin's embarrassment. If the terms of Look's representation are in themselves problematical (though in line with the structural role assigned to the character), the episode creates more intense difficulties when Martin literally kicks Look down the hill as she settles down to sleep beside him. What are we to make of the film's point of view? Ethan's laughter and the conventionally funny image of Look rolling down the hill might suggest that we are intended to share Ethan's response.

But 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. If, on the other hand, we are being invited to be critical of Ethan's response, or indeed of Martin's action, it is difficult to account for the decisions that have gone into the construction of Look as a character. In terms of the way the episode is organised – narratively, within Martin's





letter, as well as visually and dramatically – it is hard to mount an argument that will convincingly show how point of view is being *controlled* here. We may want to suggest that the episode is intended to be suffused by Ethan's distorted way of seeing, but evidence for such a view is, as Peter Lehman argues in his article on the Look episodes ('Looking at Look's Missing Reverse Shot', *Wide Angle*, vol.4, no.4, 1981), hard to find. It becomes difficult not to suspect that Ford can treat Look in this way because in terms of the traditions within which he is working, sex between a White man and a Native American woman is unthreatening and so capable of treatment as comedy, while sexual contact between a White woman and a non-White man is an entirely different matter. This is of course Ethan's view, and in this respect as in the whole presentation of Look, the film seems uncomfortably close to attitudes of which elsewhere it is critical.

In almost the next sequence, Look is found dead in a tepee, killed in the cavalry's attack on the Comanche village. We might consider that in this chilling moment there is an implicit rebuke to our previous attitude to Look – as well as Ethan and Martin's. It certainly confirms a presentation of the US Cavalry (now killers of innocent women) very different from that in Ford's earlier films. But the sentimentalisation of Look's death can also seem a conventional way of evading the problems of her continued presence in the narrative.

Peter Lehman accounts for the uneasy treatment of Look in psychoanalytical terms: 'Ford has "let too much" into the film – . . . there is too much dangerous, repressed, sensitive material being dealt with', material, that is, about inter-racial sexuality. 'The almost unbearable tensions raised by *The Searchers* need an outlet . . . Ford needs to be able to behave like a high-school kid. He needs to kick Look down the hill – he needs to laugh at it' (p.68). This argument perhaps makes the matter too individual. If it is plausible to speak of 'repressed material' here, it is the nature of representation within the tradition that needs addressing rather than (or at least as well as) the psychology of John Ford. In Ford's films, after all, sex is frequently deflected into horseplay. What makes this scene different is its focus on a Native American woman, a character who can be constructed and treated as she is – a way few other women are treated in Ford, though aspects of the treatment of Chihuahua (Linda Darnell) in *My*

Frames: *The Searchers*. Left – Laurie (Vera Miles) reads Martin's letter to her parents (John Qualen and Olive Carey). Above – Martin and the White captive

Darling Clementine offer uncomfortable parallels because the tradition allows it. In other words, the film is complicit with Ethan here, because, in terms of the genre, it doesn't matter that Look is presented in this way; and it is highly unlikely that the film-makers in 1956 would have considered the decisions in any way problematic.

In this sense the Look episode may be a moment 'profoundly and symptomatically out of control', Peter Lehman suggests (p.68), but it is a moment representative of rather than out of line with the film's negotiation of its material. It is certainly not, Lehman argues, the sole exception to the film's otherwise mature and complex handling of its sexual and racial themes.

Comparable but even more extreme problems of interpretation surround the White captive sequence. Ethan and Martin ask at the army camp to see the White women recaptured in the raid on the Comanche village. Martin produces Debby's doll in the hope that one of the women or girls will recognise it. Although the episode is still within Martin's letter, narrative voice is suspended throughout this section so that no perspective is offered through voice-over. Two women are seen initially, one seated on a bench against the wall, a wide-brimmed hat masking her face, a dark blanket round her shoulders. She is never shown in close-up, does not speak or act only by leaning forward to pat the more obviously distressed woman seated at her feet. The second woman seems not only upset but, as we see her and hear her cries in the course of the scene, appears to have been mentally unhinged by her experiences. In the way she cradles something in her arms and later snatches the doll from Martin, there might be an implication that she has lost her baby. The other two women are much younger – one perhaps in her mid teens, the other younger still. The younger clings to her companion and stares fearfully up at Martin as he holds out the doll. The older girl smiles almost manically, and her equally direct look at Martin carries strong sexual overtones. The representation of the women carries powerful connotations of *at least* traumatic shock; in two cases – the woman on the floor and the older girl – of experiences that have driven them mad.

The scene is presented simply, in six shots. The first frames the door at the rear left of the frame and the first pair of women. The woman on the floor croons softly to herself or to something she is holding in her arms. She turns towards the door and screams as the men enter, until a soldier (Jack Pennick) gives her what seems to be a child's rattle on a piece of leather or cloth, and she quietens, comforted by the other seated woman. Martin walks forward, looks down at the women, and turns frame right; the camera adjusts right to reveal the backs of the two girls, wrapped in a red blanket. As they begin to stand, helped to their feet by two soldiers, there is a cut to almost a reverse angle, showing the two girls from the front and from Martin's left (his shoulder is just in shot). Martin produces Debby's doll, but the girls make no response. Cut back to the first set up; Martin turns to leave and the camera moves left with him, excluding the two girls and reframing the woman on the floor, who snatches the doll and screams. At the rear of the shot, the army officer says, 'It's difficult to believe they're White.' Ethan takes a step or two towards the camera and the woman and replies 'They ain't White anymore - they're Comanche.' As he moves back towards the door, there is a cut to a shot of the doorway, Ethan walks into frame from the left, turns and looks back out of frame towards the woman on the floor. The camera dollies into medium close-up. Shot 5 is Ethan's point of view of the woman on the ground, holding and crooning at the doll. Shot six returns to Ethan and he turns towards the door.

This is to say that Ethan's point of view (in the limited, visual sense of the term) is given in one shot (shot 5), and the scene ends by stressing the effect on him of seeing the captives. The other shots, however, are spatially quite independent of Ethan - in fact, he is a significant visual presence in only one - shot 3 - and then at some distance from the camera.

What does Ethan think he sees when he looks back and how does it relate to what we are shown? His dialogue is clear and brutal: 'They ain't White anymore - they're Comanche.' For Ethan, the horror of miscegenation is so great that he perceives it as producing a racial change - a change in *nature*. It seems clear from its context within the film that Ethan's appalling belief is intended to distance us even further from him. He takes what has happened to the women as vindication of his hatred of Indians and of his attitude to miscegenation. Following the dialogue as they do, the last three shots seem to underline this, but also, in the shots of Ethan's face, make graphically clear that Ethan himself is on the verge of madness caused by his obsessive hatred. In other words, the detached and critical point of view on Ethan developed in the scene is consistent with what the film has been doing in its representation of Ethan since Martin's first appearance.

Yet the presentation of the women themselves is much more puzzling. If Ethan's response to them is to be rejected, their trauma and madness nevertheless seem to be given to us objectively, independent of any informing and potentially distorting view.

They *have* been traumatised and driven mad. If the implication is that captivity inevitably produces such effects, this again seems rather too close to Ethan's view for comfort. Even if we stand back from the distressing, even horrific, effect of the scene and try to ask whether any explanations of the women's states are possible other than their sexual experiences, the scene offers us no significant help. Details may imply fear of the soldiers (with the possibility that it is the attack on the village has traumatised them) or loss of a child, but there is no real support for a view markedly different from what Ethan thinks he sees. This seems a different case from the wider pattern of what Peter Lehman (in William Luhr and Peter Lehman, *Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema*, Putnam, New York, 1977, p.134) calls the film's epistemological theme - the network of moments in which actions or their consequences are not shown, or questions of perception or knowledge are posed. We may be distanced here from Ethan, but there seems little or no ambiguity in the presentation of the women.

These sequences create perhaps the most obvious questions for interpretation in a film which is full of such questions. The representations of Look and the White captives sit very uncomfortably, in their apparent complicity with Ethan's attitudes, with the film's analysis of racism in White society.

There is a further apparent contradiction between the implication of the captive scene and the very different outcome of Debby's captivity and her experiences as one of Scar's wives. How has Debby escaped the fate of the other White female captives? There is no convincing explanation. There is no evidence, for instance, that she was captured younger than the others (a frequent suggestion by students in class discussion) and therefore has been able to assimilate more easily, or that her experience has been qualitatively different. The film is silent on these matters. It is finally as difficult here as it is in the other problem moments that I have mentioned to square this contradiction with the sense of the film's viewpoint being complex but also under control. This is what Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington (*John Ford*, Secker and Warburg, 1974, p.162) attempt in proposing that the representation of Debby enables us to *place* the White captive scene: 'The scene in which Ethan finds the mad White women is so disturbing that the spectator may momentarily wonder whether Ford is not succumbing to the same fear of miscegenation . . . But our first glimpse of Debby as a woman makes it clear that the fear has a purely neurotic base . . . Miscegenation has not destroyed her identity, but deepened it.' The problem with this, I think, is that the way Debby is represented can extend our sense of the different impulses at work in the film's treatment of miscegenation but it cannot change the way in which the captive sequence is realised or the problem of viewpoint it contains. If the fear is neurotic, then the neurosis is not wholly confined to the film's characters.

Each of these problems points to a highly fraught negotiation of issues that cannot be resolved, in the film's context, into a coherent set of perspectives.

At the heart of this troubled and troubling process of negotiation is miscegenation itself, the sexual act which is the focus of Ethan's and Laurie's fear and hatred but which the film, in its commitment to dramatising its material, has itself to confront imaginatively. It is much to the film's credit that it refuses to take refuge in easy liberal attitudes but tries to engage with the horror that the act or the thought of it generates in the society Ford is representing. The consequence of doing this, however, is to produce these fundamental inconsistencies. In the material we have looked at here, two attitudes are present: in one, inter-racial marriage can produce the well-balanced Martin and apparently well-integrated Debby; in the other, miscegenation can be imagined only as rape and its results as madness, violence and death. The film might wish at one level of intention to embrace the first and distance us from the second, but the imaginative power of the latter in the traditions of the captivity narrative on which the film draws is such that it blurs the more rational discriminations at which the film seems to aim.

The two attitudes are in themselves intimately linked to the dual vision of the Indians which is central to the genre as a whole: they are historically wronged peoples with legitimate grievances against the Whites (for instance, Scar's two sons have been killed by White men), but they are also the 'Other', the monstrous eruption of forces feared and denied in White civilisation. The first offers a historical perspective, represented perhaps marginally in *The Searchers*, with the Comanches as a community, like the White settlers. In the second, they have only a symbolic function; they are not an autonomous people but, in effect, terms in the generic equation. It is at this second level that the frequently discussed idea of Scar and Ethan as 'alter egos' makes sense in the symbolic economy of the film. Its divided vision of miscegenation is rooted in the severe constraints of the Western's ways of seeing.

How deeply the film is informed even by the details of traditional representation in these areas can be seen in the striking difference in appearance between Debby and the other captive women. Debby is the only White woman in the film with black hair and dark colouring. All the White captives we see are blonde; Debby's sister, Lucy, has fair hair and pale colouring. Once perceived, the pattern seems emphatic. In realist terms, it would of course be absurd to suggest that Debby comes through unscathed because of her hair colour, or that the other women go mad because they are blonde. Yet at another, less literal, level and in the context of the traditions on which the film draws, these decisions have a different order of significance.

The division between dark and fair women is deeply rooted in the Western. As in so many other aspects of the genre, James Fenimore Cooper provides an early and telling example. Much of the action in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) centres on Colonel Munro's two daughters: Alice, of the 'dazzling complexion, fair golden hair, and bright blue eyes' and Cora, whose 'tresses . . . were shining and black. Her complexion was not brown, but it rather

appeared charged with the colour of rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds'. They are half-sisters, and Cora's 'rich blood' signifies mixed race. Character traits are developed in a corresponding way: Alice is delicate and fearful, characteristically 'veiling her eyes in horror', and Cora stronger and, crucially, more sensual. She can respond, for instance, to the beauty of the Mohican, Uncas: 'Who that looks at this creature of nature, remembers the shade of his skin', a remark which produces from her White companions 'a short, and apparently embarrassed silence'. The archetypes are very clear, and Alice and Cora have thousands of descendants in the genre, among them Ford's women in *The Searchers*.

The association of sensuality with the dark woman remains very powerful, although the link with mixed race that is made in *The Last of the Mohicans* is not consistently maintained in the genre – Debby, for instance is as 'White' racially as the other women in *The Searchers*. Something of its force and meaning remain, however, as though some explanation is required to account for the phenomenon of the sexual White woman. The fair woman is the essence of White womanhood, unable to withstand contact with the alien other. As Richard Maltby writes in 'A Better Sense of History' in this book, 'The dark heroine is doomed by her knowledge of the hero's sexuality, but the fair, for instance the blonde women captives in *The Searchers*, can be degraded out of their skin colour . . .' Maltby also offers a broader perspective on Ford's use of this system: 'The female survivors of Ford's captivity narratives are dark women, physically unmarked by their ordeal, unlike their fair counterparts. To survive as a woman in the wilderness, to be degraded and yet unblemished, is to embody a contradiction in patriarchy's construction of true womanhood, to indicate, perhaps, a forbidden desire'.

It is in relation to this tradition of representation and its cultural implications that Ford's treatment of Debby and the other captives 'makes sense', although it is not a sense that can be integrated into the film's powerful but partial analysis of racial hatred. It is impossible to know what the film-makers intended by the decisions they took in creating these women, how consciously or unconsciously they drew on the tradition, but the resulting contradictions suggest that in this fraught area of representation the material is in a sense out of control, and that the tradition, powerfully internalised by generations of film-makers and writers, 'speaks through' the film in spite of the presence of other, conflicting intentions.

The kinds of tension that the film has generated are highlighted starkly by its final movements. Here, in a number of ways, contradictions inherent in the film's conflicting relationships to tradition are exposed in the evasions that come with the push towards resolution. In two key ways these relate to the dual vision of the Comanches and of miscegenation. The need to close down ambiguity in these areas can account, for instance, for the treatment of the final battle. In the overall pattern of the film, the attack on the Edwards's ranch is paralleled by the cavalry's massacre of the Comanche village, and logically

the final attack on Scar's camp could become the third in a series of massacre and counter massacre that embodies one aspect of the film's view of the destructive relationship between the races. In fact, the treatment of the attack is partly but crucially deflected into comedy by the inept young lieutenant (Patrick Wayne), his sabre, and the undignified wound suffered by Sam Clayton (Ward Bond). Although we have no choice but to *understand* what is happening as a massacre, very little that we *see* offers us this view. Strongly related to this is Debby's sudden willingness to go with Martin when he enters Scar's tent. Earlier she had refused; the Comanches were her people. When she responds 'Yes, Marty, yes' to his waking her with the prospect of rescue, her conversion seems to relate less to psychologically motivated change than to the need to switch the Comanches into their 'Other' mode prior to the final attack on their camp, in order to move the film towards its resolution. Unlike our view of the aftermath of the cavalry attack in which Look was killed, it is clearly important that in this final battle we should be left with no sense of outrage or of human loss.

Equally, it is vital in terms of the need to achieve some kind of affirmative ending to the search that Debby should be returned safely to White society. Her wholly unmotivated change is the more or less desperate strategy that will enable her to go willingly. The film simply has to drop its earlier suggestion of her contented assimilation. Along the way, it is important to note, the signifiers of Martin's Indian ancestry have also been dropped; when he wraps himself in a blanket to enter Scar's camp, it is simply a disguise – there are no implications about his cultural identity.

This simplifies the complex connotations of the last section of the film. There are, for instance, very uncomfortable undercurrents, after Laurie's outburst, to Debby's return, although the film chooses not to foreground these in the way that, several years later, *Two Rode Together* (1961) does. And whatever

Still: The Searchers – Sam Clayton (Ward Bond) and Lt Greenhill (Patrick Wayne) before the attack.



the contortions of the last movement, the ending, as it refocuses on Ethan, remains remarkably moving. The film sustains complexity around Ethan but finds it impossible to sustain other complexities that it has generated.

It is tempting to refer these various aspects of incoherence in *The Searchers* to Ford himself – there is after all plenty of biographical evidence to suggest that he was as contradictory as any of us. But as I have written elsewhere, much of what is of major interest in Ford's films, as well as many of the deepest contradictions, come from his recurrent encounter with generic material and traditional images (*Movie 22*, 1976). Ford's personality as a film-maker was formed in considerable part by the forms and meanings of the tradition, and, in turn, his films have become part of what we understand the Western to be. This is not quite to say, as Richard Maltby does that 'Every Western is a palimpsest, a manuscript written on the pages of an earlier, partially erased book, carrying traces of its previous inscriptions'. Although the metaphor is extremely evocative, it implies too inert a model of the relationship between individual film, film-maker and the tradition. Perhaps it would be more accurate, though equally metaphorical, to say that Ford internalised the 'language' of the Western and, however unconsciously, its accumulated resonances.

The tradition remained an active presence, not an underlying, partly suppressed layer, in his films, which might be seen, as his career develops, as a dialogue both in and with the 'language' he inherited. The films make clear – none more so than *The Searchers* – that some parts of the 'language' became more visible to him than others, more amenable to engagement and inflection. He could respond 'to a problem he had found in tradition', the words used by E.H. Gombrich to describe Raphael engaging with inherited ways of painting the Virgin and Child (*Norm and Form*, Phaidon, London, 1966, p.69). Some problems, however, are less tractable than others and in 1950s America, tackling miscegenation in popular cinema and particularly in the Western was probably as intractable a problem as one could find. It is hardly surprising that the film contains both material that has been critically worked on and given forceful dramatic form and material that seems barely to have been engaged with imaginatively at all. The aspects of the film I have discussed can be seen as offering available solutions from the repertoire of the genre to problems the film cannot solve or even fully articulate. The particular contradictions of the film are testimony to the intensity with which Ford and his collaborators wrestled with the ideological complex of racism and sexuality within a genre the basic terms of which exist to incorporate rather than to criticise racist fears and phobias. It is an attempt which is as perverse as it is admirable – in fact admirable partly because it is perverse.

There is perhaps a further perversity in claiming that the film's incoherence is an essential aspect of its greatness. But this is actually to say that the greatness of *The Searchers* lies in what it achieves within its context and its traditions.

The Book of
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