

The Searchers (1956) Ford

Notes by P Michell, 2017

“My name is John Ford. I make Westerns.”

“Horse-operas’ have been the bread and butter for Hollywood for so long.” (Kitses, p 21)

Considered not only one of the greatest Westerns *The Searchers* has assumed ‘heroic’ proportions in film discussion both in written and spoken word, since its release over 60 years ago. Books keep on revisiting Ford and his work. One of the latest by Glenn Frankel is described below. Seems to be an endless array of Internet links. Below is a sampling. Included also is quotes from two seminal books on The Western.

Synopsis:

Tells the emotionally complex story of a perilous, hate-ridden quest and Homeric-style odyssey of self-discovery after a Comanche massacre, while also exploring the themes of racial prejudice and sexism. Its meandering tale examines the inner psychological turmoil of a fiercely independent, crusading man obsessed with revenge and hatred, who searches for his two nieces (Pippa Scott and Natalie Wood) among the "savages" over a five-year period. The film's major tagline echoed the search: "he had to find her...he had to find her."

Class Thoughts:

Do we still watch Westerns and why?

Is it uniquely American?

Genre has changed over time.

Selections from ‘Horizons West’ (1969) by Jim Kitses

(The Western) is placed at exactly the moment when options are still open, the dream of pimitive individualism, the ambivalence of at once beneficent and threatening horizons, still tenable. For the film-maker who is pre-occupied with these motifs, the Westerns has offered a remarkable expressive canvas. Nowhere, of course, is the freedom that it bestows for personal expression more evident than in the cinema of John Ford.” (p 12)

“Andrew Sarris (described John Ford) “... no American director has ranged so far across the landscape of the American past ...” (p 13)

The romantic mainstream that the Western took from pulp literature provided I with the stately ritual of displaced myth, then movement of a god-like figure into the demonic wasteland, the death and resurrection, the return to a paradisaal garden. Within the form were to be found seminal archetypes common to all myth, the journey and the quest, ceremonies of love and marriage, food and drink, rhythms of

waking and sleeping, life and death. But the incursions of melodrama and revenge had turned the form on its axis, the structure torn in the directions of both morality play and tragedy.” (p 20)

Selections from ‘Westerns’ (1973) by Philip French:

“The Western is not merely a cinematic form, but relates to a much larger international set of attitudes and beliefs, ranging from the symbolic status conferred on ‘the West’ from the dawn of civilisation, through everyone’s ambivalent feelings about American culture, to the need for American politicians to define the public posture in relation to a national mythology. The notion that America was shaped by the frontier experience ...” (pp 21-2)

Three questionable aspects of the Western:

1. It is ill equipped to confront complex political ideas in a direct fashion.
2. It is an occasion for various kinds of virtuosity.
3. Anachronism. The genre is a charming example. (So much historical data known.) (pp 43-7)

“Model Western: Hero embodiment of good. Upright, clean living, sharp-shooting, WASP who respects the law, flag, women and children. Dresses in white clothes and rides a white horse, his closest companion. Uses bullets and words with equal care. Disinterested upholder of law, uninterested in personal gain. Always wins. The villain, is the embodiment of evil; dresses in black, rides a dark horse, doomed to die. Smooth talker, lecherous designs on women, advancing personal cause, commitment to destruction.” (p 48)

John Ford Biography:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/ford/>

Trivia:

With dazzling on-location, gorgeous VistaVision cinematography (including the stunning red sandstone rock formations of Monument Valley) by Winton C. Hoch in Ford's most beloved locale, the film handsomely captures the beauty and isolating danger of the frontier. It was even a better film than Ford's previous Best Picture-winning [*How Green Was My Valley \(1941\)*](#). However, at its time, the sophisticated, modern, visually-striking film was unappreciated, misunderstood, and unrecognized by critics. It did not receive a single Academy Award nomination, and was overwhelmed by the all-star power and glamour of the Best Picture winner of the year, *Around the World in 80 Days (1956)*. Source: <http://www.filmsite.org/sear.html>

Rock musician Buddy Holly wrote a song based on John Wayne's trademark line: "That'll Be The Day," popularized by the Beatles.

In the opening credits of the majestic Cinerama movie "How the West Was Won" has the words 'The Civil War Directed by John Ford'. [Hint ... did John Ford 'invent' the Western?]

Director John Milius describes John Ford's style in terms of the Japanese idea of "conservation of line", saying Ford can do with a couple of "brush strokes" what it takes others six or eight to do. Early in his career, Ford talked about what he called "invisible technique", to make an audience forget they were watching a movie. But later he refused to dissect his work, saying things had to be dead before dissection, and telling young directors like myself only to "make sure you can see their eyes".

Orson Welles called John Ford the greatest "poet" the cinema has given us. He is at the very least the US's greatest historian (his films having examined virtually every era from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam) and his landscape surpasses that of say a Remington. His images of the individual dwarfed by this landscape, of family and community huddled against the brutality (and primal beauty) of Monument Valley in *The Searchers* is unsurpassable. It is not necessarily a true history, but as Ford says in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, "when the legend becomes truth, print the legend".

The actors playing Comanche Indians are all Navajo, with the exception of Chief Scar, played by [Henry Brandon](#), a German-born Jew. The language, traditional dress and dances depicted in the film are all Navajo, not Comanche. The "Comanche Death Song" is actually a social Navajo "Squaw Dance" song.

Influence:

Considered by many to be a true American masterpiece of filmmaking, and the best, most influential, and perhaps most-admired film of director John Ford. It was his 115th feature film, and he was already a four-time Best Director Oscar winner (*The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), and *The Quiet Man* (1952)) - all for his pictures of social comment rather than his quintessential westerns. The film's complex, deeply-nuanced themes included racism, individuality, the American character, and the opposition between civilization (exemplified by homes, caves, and other domestic interiors) and the untamed frontier wilderness.

[David Lean](#) watched the film repeatedly while preparing for *Lawrence of Arabia* to help him get a sense of how to shoot a landscape.^[38] The entrance of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, across a vast prairie, is echoed in the across-the-desert entrance of Sherif Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia*. [Sam Peckinpah](#) referenced the aftermath of the massacre and the funeral scene in *Major Dundee* (1965) and, according to a 1974 review by [Jay Cocks](#), Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* contains dialogue with "direct tributes to such classics as John Huston's *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and John Ford's *The Searchers*."^{[39][40]}

[Martin Scorsese](#)'s 1967 film *Who's That Knocking at My Door* features a sequence in which the two primary characters discuss *The Searchers*. In 2012, in a *Sight & Sound* poll, Scorsese listed *The Searchers* as one of his all-time favourite films.

Scott McGee, writing for [Turner Classic Movies](#), notes "[Steven Spielberg](#), [Martin Scorsese](#), [John Milius](#), [Paul Schrader](#), [Wim Wenders](#), [Jean-Luc Godard](#), and [George Lucas](#) have all been influenced and paid some form of homage to *The Searchers* in their work."^[28] In a 1959 *Cahiers du Cinema* essay, Godard compared the movie's ending with that of the reuniting of [Odysseus](#) with [Telemachus](#) in [Homer's *Odyssey*](#).^[20] In 1963, he ranked *The Searchers* as the fourth-greatest American movie of the sound era, after *Scarface* (1932), *The Great Dictator* (1940), and *Vertigo* (1958).

Scott McGee further notes that "...more than just making a social statement like other Westerns of the period were apt to do, Ford instills in *The Searchers* a visual poetry and a sense of melancholy that is rare in American films and rarer still to Westerns.

Reviews & Analysis:

Wayne's Finest Performance, in Ford Masterpiece...

24 May 2004 | by [Ben Burgraff](#)

Even if you've never seen John Ford's *THE SEARCHERS*, you will have, undoubtedly, seen a film that owes its 'style' to the film. *DANCES WITH WOLVES*, *THE OUTLAW JOSIE WALES*, *UNFORGIVEN*, *JEREMIAH JOHNSON*, and *OPEN RANGE* are just a few westerns that have 'borrowed' from it, but *THE SEARCHERS*' impact transcends the genre, itself; *STAR WARS*, *THE English PATIENT*, *THE LAST SAMURAI*, even *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* have elements that can be traced back to Ford's 1956 'intimate' epic. When you add the fact that *THE SEARCHERS* also contains John Wayne's greatest performance to the film's merits, it becomes easy to see why it is on the short list of the greatest motion pictures ever made.

The plot is deceptively simple; after a Comanche raiding party massacres a family, taking the youngest daughter prisoner, her uncle, Ethan Edwards (Wayne), and adopted brother, Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), begin a long quest to try and rescue her. Over the course of years, a rich tapestry of characters and events unfold, as the nature of the pair's motives are revealed, and bigoted, bitter Edwards emerges as a twisted man bent on killing the 'tainted' white girl. Only Pawley's love of his 'sister' and determination to protect her stands in his way, making the film's climax, and Wayne's portrayal of Edwards, an unforgettable experience.

With all of Ford's unique 'touches' clearly in evidence (the doorways 'framing' the film's opening and conclusion, with a cave opening serving the same function at the film's climax; the extensive use of Monument Valley; and the nearly lurid palette of colour highlighting key moments) and his reliance on his 'stock' company of players (Wayne, Ward Bond, John Qualen, Olive Carey, Harry Carey, Jr, Hank Worden, and Ken Curtis), the film marks the emergence of the 'mature' Ford, no longer deifying the innocence of the era, but dealing with it in human terms, where 'white men' were as capable of savagery as Indians, frequently with less justification.

Featuring 18-year old Natalie Wood in one of her first 'adult' roles, the sparkling Vera Miles as Pawley's love interest, Wayne's son Patrick in comic relief, and the harmonies of

the Sons of the Pioneers accenting Max Steiner's rich score, THE SEARCHERS is a timeless movie experience that becomes richer with each viewing.

It is truly a masterpiece!

Xan Brooks, 2014:

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/nov/17/most-overrated-films-the-searchers>

Deeper Analysis by Jason Fraley, 2011, with screen shots:

<http://thefilmspectrum.com/?p=3655>

Book Review by J Hoberman:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/books/review/the-searchers-by-glenn-frankel.html>

National Public Radio interview with Glenn Frankel (above book):

<http://www.npr.org/2013/02/17/172235275/in-the-searchers-a-hunt-for-the-western-film>

John Flaus' thoughts from 1966:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/john-flaus-dossier/the-western-myth/>

Wagner's concept of the Grotesque in Ford's work:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2008/feature-articles/john-ford-monsters/>

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