

What Is a Western? Politics and Self-Knowledge in John Ford's *The Searchers*

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It is generally agreed that while, from the silent film *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) until the present, well over seven thousand Westerns have been made it was not until three seminal articles in the nineteen fifties by André Bazin and Robert Warshow that the genre began to be taken seriously. Indeed Bazin argued that the “secret” of the extraordinary persistence of the Western must be due to the fact that the Western embodies “the essence of cinema,” and he suggested that that essence was its incorporation of myth and a mythic consciousness of the world.¹ He appeared to mean by this that Westerns

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1. André Bazin, “The Western, or the American Film *par excellence*,” *What Is Cinema?* trans. and ed. Hugh Gray, 2 vols. (Berkeley, 1971), 2:141. See also Bazin, “The Evolution of the Western,” *What Is Cinema?* 2:149–57, and Robert Warshow, “The Westerner,” in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York, 1998), pp. 35–47. Warshow does not talk explicitly in terms of myth, but his essay is all about “patterns,” “structure,” and “codes.”

tended to treat characters as types and narrative as revolving around a small number of essential plots, offering various perspectives on fundamental issues faced by any society, especially the problem of law and political authority.² Bazin expressed great contempt for critics who thought that Western plots were “simple” and insisted that the right way to understand such simplicity was by reference to the “ethics” of epic and tragic literature, and he called the great French playwright Corneille to mind as a worthy forerunner. The Western, he said, turned the Civil War into our Trojan War, and “the migration to the West is our Odyssey.”³ One could go even further, paraphrasing a German commentator. The Greeks have the *Iliad*; the Jews, the Hebrew Bible; the Romans, the *Aeneid*; the Germans, the *Nibelungenlied*; the Scandinavians, the *Njáls saga*; the Spanish have the *Cid*; the British have the Arthurian legends. The Americans have John Ford.⁴

2. There are various ways of counting such plots. The most prevalent plots are probably (i) the gunfighter trying to find a way to quit, which is in tension with the town’s need for his violent skills, or the general travails of ex-gunfighters who have simply become irrelevant; (ii) the empire-ranch story, where a kind of feudal lord holds power threatened by the coming of civilization and the dissolution of the next generation; (iii) episodes in the Indian wars, especially journeys across hostile territory; (iv) captivity narratives; (v) free-range ranchers trying to stop homesteaders and farmers from putting up fences and establishing claims to land; (vi) revenge quests; and (vii) wagon train movies, colonizers out to stake claims further west. Compare Kitzes’s “antinomies” series in his *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (Bloomington, Ind., 1969), p. 11, and Frank Gruber’s list of seven plot types, from his *The Pulp Jungle* (Los Angeles, 1967), cited in John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971), pp. 34–35.

3. Bazin, “The Western, or the American Film *par excellence*,” 2:148.

4. Some think that the prototypical early fictional Western, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), simply transposed the Knights of the Round Table into the American West with cowboys as knights, tyrannical owners of vast private cattle empires as kings, and their families as royal families. See Hannes Böhringer, *Auf dem Rücken Amerikas: Eine Mythologie der neuen Welt im Western und Gangsterfilm* (Berlin, 1998), p. 9, and Kurt Bayertz on the “Klassizität” of

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Mythic accounts are about events in the remote past of decisive significance for the present (often about foundings), and they assume that the course of these events is the result of actions undertaken by heroes of superhuman abilities. The tone is one of quite elevated seriousness, and so the form of such mythic storytelling is usually epic. This elevation of Westerns (or the handful of great ones among that seven thousand) into epic literature with mythical heroes and events was not of course universally accepted. The idea of a “bourgeois epic” or the idea that commercial republics could have an epic dimension can seem faintly comic. Some commentators saw many fifties Westerns as mostly about cold war politics, or argued that their appeal could be explained by reference to the fantasies of white, working-class, male adolescents, or insisted on their essentially deformed, masculine, patriarchal (and so hardly universal) perspective, or claimed that no progress would be made until we included the Western within a general theory of cinematic pleasure, usually a psychoanalytic theory. But when this mythic notion was combined, as it frequently was, with Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous frontier hypothesis (that many aspects of something like an American national character could be understood by reference to the experience of the frontier and the expansion west, the long struggle so vivid in our national memory of “a place where advancing civilization met declining savagery”) such an interpretive frame became an even more powerful one.⁵

And I shall adopt a version of Bazin’s claim in the following.⁶ For many great Westerns are indeed about the founding or the early, struggling stages of modern bourgeois, law-abiding, property-owning, market-economy, technologically advanced societies in transition from, mostly, lawlessness (or corrupt and ineffective law) and war that border on classic state-of-nature thought experiments (or mythic pictures of origins). The

Westerns in “Hegel und der wilde Westen,” *Hegel: Perspektiven seiner Philosophie heute*, ed. Bernhard Heidtmann (Cologne, 1981), pp. 138–41. Bayertz is the German commentator who compared Westerns with other national epics. See Bayertz, “Zur Ästhetik des Westerns,” *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 48, no. 1 (2003): 69–82, esp. p. 74. The Lancelot-Guinevere issue, for example, certainly plays a part in *Shane*, *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Seven Men from Now*, and many B Westerns, such as *Man in the Saddle*.

5. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, p. 38.

6. I am just going to assume here that the battle over the issue of whether Hollywood movies merit close, sustained attention as serious works of art (and not merely as revealing artifacts of use for sociology, history, or anthropology) has been settled on the side of Hollywood and that one can hold such a view without being committed to any particular version of auteur theory and without a commitment to any particular film theory. For a compelling defense, see V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (1972; London, 1993).

question often raised is the question of how legal order (of a particular form, the form of liberal-democratic capitalism) is possible, under what conditions it can be formed and command allegiance, how the bourgeois virtues, especially the domestic virtues, can be said to get a psychological grip in an environment where the heroic and martial virtues are so important. To say that, however relevant to history, the narrative form is not historical or realistic but mythic means seeing such films as attempts to capture the fundamental, common problems in a founding and in the institution of law (sometimes as attempts to understand what the law comes to mean in such situations) or to capture the core drama in a particular form of political life. Indeed in many American Westerns there is something even broader at stake: the question of the possibility of the political itself. Politics at least has something to do with ruling and with obedience and that means the use of coercion and violence. So for many the issue is, What, if anything, distinguishes the organized use of violence and coercion by one group of people against another from the exercise of power in everyone's name? Can someone really act as a representative in this way and so not as an individual or group member? The question is whether there is—especially in modern America—a unique sort of social bond that links individuals, often strangers, together in a distinctive ethical relationship and distinctive sort of enterprise—citizenship. The question is the one raised by Rousseau's famous statement in 1750 in the *First Discourse*: "We have Physicists, Geometricians, Chemists, Astronomers, Poets, Musicians, Painters; we no longer have citizens."⁷

With the stakes raised so high, the heroes of such dramas are indeed often superheroic, near divinities. One man can outduel five others in a shoot-out (as in the Achilles and Patroclus ending of *Unforgiven* [dir. Clint Eastwood, 1992] or the final gunfight in *Stagecoach* [dir. John Ford, 1939]); a hero can be accurate with a pistol (at a full gallop) at two hundred yards, and so on, just as Odysseus can slay all the suitors and Achilles can terrify an entire army with one war cry. Accordingly, the acting styles and visual sweep are, in their grandiosity and ambition, much closer to opera than to filmed domestic dramas. (Not for nothing are they derisively known as horse operas.)

So in Howard Hawks's *Red River* (1948), for example, we get a myth about how a patriarchal and charismatic form of rule is overthrown and replaced by a more fraternal, humanistic, and egalitarian form of rule, one that is clearly supposed to be close to our own avowed commitments. Or in

7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts or First Discourse* (1750), in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), §54, p. 24.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (dir. John Ford, 1962), there is an attempt to come to terms with the fact that the establishment of any legal order, of whatever doctrine, even liberal-democratic humanist, must be illegal, violent, unjust, and brutal, and a society must find a way to represent that fact to itself as a national memory. It usually does this, as in this movie, by lying, by a distorting mythologizing.

And in *The Searchers* (dir. John Ford, 1956) there is a direct confrontation with the fact that the origin of the territorial U.S. rested on a virulent racism and genocidal war against aboriginal peoples, a war that would not have been possible and perhaps would not have been won without the racist hatred of characters like the John Wayne character. The official avowal *now* is that we regret this and have overcome such attitudes. But the film manages to raise a number of subtle questions about the relation between such avowals and what is done or not done in any political present. That is, in *Red River*, what makes a political bond possible is leadership of a certain sort: charismatic or fraternal. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, what makes it possible is a story or myth about origins, unfortunately a lie. And in *The Searchers* the basis of our common belonging is the most powerful and explosive human passion—hatred, the other side of some putative natural blood kinship or common ethnicity.

2

One more preliminary observation about Westerns, the Westerns of John Ford in particular: There is very little romanticism in his and in many of the great Hollywood Westerns. The core narrative in many films involves three basic elements, in varying degrees underlying or explicit in the plots. One concerns the conquest by force of arms of an aboriginal people, and these people are not represented as innocent or naturally good or gentle. They are understandably resisting with ferocious violence the seizure of their land and a campaign of extermination and are often portrayed as a warrior people by nature, as if to make the point that the state of nature is the state of war.⁸ Sometimes their willingness to risk life and their devotion to honor is contrasted with the shopkeeper and often craven mentality of the invading whites, to the obvious detriment of those settlers. The cowboys who are portrayed as heroic are most often associated with the

8. Obviously, Native Americans had a complex and distinct civilization and cannot in any sense be represented as “natural savages.” But Westerns are not historical but mythic accounts, much less about history than expressions of the American imaginary, and in that context the symbolic role played by Indians, however historically inaccurate, is what is at issue. There are clearly a number of political reasons why it was also important to portray Indians in such a clumsy, stereotypical way, but that would be a separate discussion.

Indian virtues of honor, loyalty, and courage.⁹ The doomed fate of both the Indians and heroic cowboys is often treated mythically as the doomed fate of these very traits and virtues in the modern world, a world now complex enough to require a level of cooperation, compromise, prudence, hedging, and repression that is inimical to such states of the soul.

A second narrative element concerns the conquest by labor, persistence, violence, and technology of an extraordinarily hostile, inhospitable natural world, as much an enemy of human civilization as some demonic, angry god. (Ford's Monument Valley landscapes make this point with immediate, visually compelling power.) One could put the point about the violent conquest of nature this way: we speak of the American founding, but America has been founded several times. Narratives of the original colonization and rebellion were often accompanied by images of Eden and innocence destroyed or lost, promised or redeemed; and they were all bloody. The Civil War required another fresh and new sort of violent founding, an attempt at reconciliation that many Westerns often imply was a failure. And then there is the conquest of the West and the Indian wars, the founding of the continental United States and the westward expansion. Here the shift from images of forest and meadow to rock and sand reframes the mythic self-image of America and suggests the need for a new and much more complicated hero, but the conquest-of-hostile-nature theme remains constant.

And a third narrative element concerns what could be called the conquest of inner nature, the need to establish a stable political order and so some strategy for the suppression of those passions both hostile to and yet often central in politics that are released in the lawless situation of the West and the suppression (and yet use) of those individuals—outlaws—given to those passions. These are all obviously also linked because, given the stereotypical way Indians are presented, all three “enemies” are at bottom the same enemy: *nature*. The outlaw passion that humans are naturally heir to, treated with remarkable, even crude frankness in *The Searchers*, is an explosive and still all-too-familiar one: racism and racial hatred. The questions raised by the film concern the origin and meaning of racial and ethnic hatred, the effect of such hatred on the possibility of communal life, the role played by racial identification in forging the social bond necessary for political life, and, especially, the prospects of overcoming such passions, both racial passions and the passions inflamed by any war, especially a fratricidal war like our Civil War. The framework of *The Searchers* thus poses a question about politics and political psychology that would have been familiar to Carl Schmitt: the role of the enemy

9. For a somewhat simplistic example of this frequent trope, see Martin Ritt's *Hombre* (1967).

and the resources of modern bourgeois societies for dealing with the enemy. It also treats an issue Schmitt was not terribly concerned about but should have been: the destabilizing and politically uncontrollable aspects of a world dominated by friend-enemy distinctions.

And so as noted the framework within which these questions are asked is not a romantic one. Nature in all the various senses mentioned is hostile, the greatest enemy, dangerous and treacherous, and any successful political redemption from human passions that we are subject to by nature will have to be the result of a long and hard and unpredictable struggle. Or at least that is clearly the self-understanding of the characters and the meaning of visual images given us by Ford.

3

The Searchers is one of the greatest and most ambitious films ever made, and so of course it is impossible simply to summarize it. A half a dozen things are going on in each scene. I need to focus on one issue of relevance to the theme of politics and political psychology. The main character, played (in his greatest role) by John Wayne, is Ethan Edwards, a Civil War veteran (a displaced and wandering Southerner, a “Texican”) returning in the film’s majestic opening scene to his brother Aaron’s small (and somewhat pathetic) cattle ranch in south Texas. We learn—very elliptically and indirectly—that Ethan had been very probably fighting as a mercenary for the Emperor Maximilian in Mexico in the three years after the Civil War and that he may be wanted by American authorities for something or other. He has a great deal of money on him, the origin of which is never explained. The main problem in the movie, its main mystery, is very much a kind of epistemological problem of great relevance to any political reflection and is immediately and dramatically raised for those who greet the mysterious and opaque Ethan at the beginning: it is *understanding Ethan*, something that turns out to be extremely difficult if not impossible.¹⁰ The very first word of the movie sums up its question: “Ethan?” And Ethan, as the Reverend Clayton (Ward Bond) says, “fits a lot of descriptions.”¹¹ Since Ethan is both a powerfully disruptive force and an agent of change and even perhaps reconciliation, this question, how to understand him, even what it would be to understand him or anyone, becomes more than one about an individual’s psychology.

10. I don’t mean to suggest that I think there is a strict congruence between the conditions relevant to understanding a character in a film (or a novel) and understanding a person “in real life.” There are important differences. But there is also some overlap, and that is all I need for the moment.

11. See the helpful discussion by Peter Lehman, “‘You Couldn’t Hit It on the Nose’: The Limits of Knowledge in and of *The Searchers*,” in “*The Searchers*”: *Essays and Reflections on John Ford’s Classic Westerns*, ed. A. M. Eckstein and Lehman (Detroit, 2004), pp. 239–63.

Ethan is on a quest that seems to border on something insane (that is, until we realize that he actually embodies, even represents, a shared, hidden mindedness in his community). And he brings that quest to an end in a way that makes us doubt whether we have ever understood him, whether he has ever even understood himself, whether the self-knowledge called for in political life, something like a community's self-knowledge, is ever possible. Given the larger-than-life and mythic dimensions of the narrative, this problem, how to understand Ethan, is also linked to the question of our, the viewers', understanding of our own history, suffused as so much of it is with racial hatred and the promise of its overcoming.

Ford goes so far with Ethan that it is hard to imagine how he thought he could get away with it. This is a central character who spews racist invective at every opportunity, who mutilates the bodies of the dead, shooting out the eyes of a dead Indian and scalping an adversary (even though he did not "earn" that warrior right by killing him himself), who slaughters buffalo in an insane rage just to deprive Indians of food, and who is out to murder a child. (Not to mention that Ethan interrupts funerals, scoffs at religion, uses racial epithets like "blanket-head," shoots both whites and Indians in the back, and runs over women and children when on horseback.) He is probably a criminal, even though he seems paradoxically uninterested in money. How could such a story ever be pitched to a studio head? It is clearly a great experiment, one that baffled and angered early critics. But Ford is also at his most ambitious here, setting out a Conradian framework as sweeping as *Heart of Darkness*, in which an outward quest or search figures the search within, the place of Ethan's heart of darkness. True to all great works of art, nothing is resolved in all this, and the ending scene here is as complex as the fiction that the narrator invents and reports to the beloved in Conrad's novella.

4

The film opens in a way that is mysterious, obviously ambitious, and strangely tense, fraught with noticeable anxiety. Many things have been written about the opening, especially about how quickly it establishes Ethan as an outsider and how our orienting shot is from inside hearth and home, a space with no place for a man like Ethan, even though he will be desperately needed by the insiders. The attempt at a kind of royal or operatic grandeur in the staging is unmistakable; the characters, almost ritualistically, slowly move to what seem assigned spots for the entrance of the monarch, all to the point of Martha awkwardly withdrawing backwards into the house as if before a king to whom subjects must never show their backsides. And there is the remarkable tension already present in a much-too-formal, too-staged kiss on the

forehead, our first signal that this is not a cheery, normal homecoming (figs. 1–3).

We will quickly learn two things about the mysterious man, still draped in the uniform of the defeated South. He is consumed by a racial hatred of Indians,¹² and he covets his brother's wife. Perhaps there is a third thing that links these two, although this is never made explicit by dialogue or event: he seems also consumed by guilt and self-hatred about this lust, and this issue may have something to do with racism. (Making this connection between sexual self-doubt and self-hatred and the projection of just what he hates about what he wants to do onto "the Other," and so with racism, was also remarkable for a commercial film in 1956.)

The complications in Ethan's racial hatred—that he also identifies with what he hates—will soon be established visually by a simple, very visible prop: the Indian rifle scabbard that Ethan carries. More tellingly he possesses intimate knowledge and apparent acceptance of Comanche religion. Some of that complication (what some now call hybridity between occupier and occupied) is presaged by the marks of contact between or interpenetration of Indian and white culture signaled by those prominent blankets in the opening scene and soon by Martin's mixed race status.¹³

One famous scene establishes an illicit sexual desire that is not incidental to Ethan's wild rages but is so subtle that it was missed by many early critics.¹⁴ Bond's character, who is both a captain in the Texas Rangers and the local pastor, enters the cabin. (This small bit of political theology is another remarkably bold characterization. It suggests both that the law's legitimacy might not be sufficient to command allegiance without the "ideological" support of the good book and that in this violent world religious authority must have some teeth, be backed by bullets, if it is to exercise any actual authority.)¹⁵ Some cattle have been rustled, and a posse

12. John Carroll has suggested that it is better to view Ethan's attitudes as more "tribalist" than racist; that his hatred is more the product of the Comanche wars than racism as such. See the discussion in his *The Wreck of Western Culture: Humanism Revisited*, rev. ed. (Melbourne, 2004), pp. 239–46. But Ethan's deep mistrust of Martin from the very beginning (and he clearly doesn't think in military terms, as if Martin might be disloyal or a spy) and his bitter remark in the army hut that life with Indians is not living seem to go well beyond such tribalism.

13. The issue is raised in a particularly dramatic way later, in a tense confrontation between Ethan and the Indian chief Scar. Each speaks some of the other's language, and both, remarkably, have blue eyes.

14. Peter Bogdanovich raised the issue most clearly with Ford himself in a famous exchange. See his *John Ford* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 93.

15. "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development . . . but also because of their systematic structure" (Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab [1922; Chicago, 2005], p. 36).

is being formed to hunt them. This is another much-commented-on scene, as it establishes so indirectly that the Ethan-Martha issue is hidden, even if in plain sight. (Ethan and Martha are somewhat reckless with how they look at one another.) It is also a signal to us that everything we are about to see might be treated as the captain/pastor treats what is to be seen, in knowing ignorance, or we could choose to look at what no one inside the film wants to look at (fig. 4).

We quickly discover that the cattle rustling was a feint by the Indians to draw the ranchers and rangers away so they could attack the ranch. They do attack, kill Aaron and his son, abduct Lucy and Debbie, and rape and kill Martha. We should note, by the way, that it is clear in the film that Ethan could have stayed instead of taking Aaron's place with the posse. Mose Harper had already sounded the warning that these were Comanches on a raid, not ordinary cattle rustlers. Ethan may be acting out his bitterness over having lost Martha to Aaron; it's as if he says, "You, Martha, chose him as your protector, so let him protect you." The family does mention, in a plaintive, pathetic way, that they wish Ethan were there and not Aaron. This may feed into the obvious self-hatred and great guilt visible in Ethan's quest. But for his pride and resentment he might have saved them.

Ethan, Mose, and Martin discover the burned-out ranch and find Martha's body. Ford uses for the second time the inside-looking-out-from-the-dark shot that had opened the film, this time from inside the small hut where Martha lies (fig. 5). The discovery of Martha's raped body is certainly shocking and horrific enough all by itself to generate Ethan's desire for revenge, but the hints we have been given about him and Martha also hint that some of this rage is tied to his own guilt and self-hatred. His love for Martha was after all deeply illicit; not only was she married, she was married to his brother, and yet he desired her still (and the love seems to have been reciprocated). One way or another everything in the film will turn on this fact, its meaning, and the way its implications are lived out. It is biblical in its force here, something like the ur-drama of civilized repression, worked out around the marriage promise and the question of whether such a promise and so the establishment of perhaps *the* civilized norm, all in the face of one of the most powerful passions, is possible and if so how. Ethan accepts the sanctity of the institution (it seems clear that neither he nor Martha ever acted on their passion),¹⁶ but the irrational

16. At least the tension and palpable frustration in their scenes together make it clear to me. One sometimes hears it suggested, though, that they had had an affair and that Debbie is its product.

explosions such acceptance spawns constantly unsettle everything. He is a kind of walking manifestation of the costs incurred by the repression necessary for civilized life, and his eruptions of hatred, revenge, racism, and blind fury are tied to these inner dynamics as much as they are to the external threats and projects of the “official” or conscious civilized world.¹⁷ (When Ethan later interrupts the comically inappropriate marriage of Laurie and Charlie, we are perhaps meant to think of it as recalling Martha’s mistaken choice in opting for Aaron.)

The deputized group starts off after the Indians, and they and we are startled by Ethan’s ferocity when they discover an Indian body that has been hastily buried. When Brad, the captured Lucy’s intended, hurls a rock at the dead Indian in fury and frustration, Ethan calmly and with a kind of sarcastic edge to his voice says, “Why don’t you finish the job?” draws his pistol, and shoots the corpse in the eyes. He explains that for the Comanche this means that the brave will not be able to enter the spirit land. (“Ain’t got no eyes, he can’t enter the spirit land, must wander forever between the winds.”)

The eerie “signing” by Mose of what Ethan is saying about wandering (fig. 6) suggests some commonality between Ethan and Mose’s near madness, even as it also establishes the seriousness with which Ethan takes Indian beliefs. It also manifests again the hatred/self-hatred theme, since the description of someone who must “wander forever between the winds” fits Ethan more than anyone.¹⁸ It is telling, and will be important, that this wandering and homelessness is linked to blindness (“ain’t got no eyes, he can’t enter the spirit land”), an emergence of our self-knowledge theme again. Ethan clearly thinks he hates Indians because they killed some white people he knew. But he doesn’t hate just those Indians but obviously all Indians, and, like all of Ethan’s attitudes, this is held in a kind of silence without reflection or justification. It is a striking thing about the film that Ethan never makes a racist speech, never explains, even to himself, why his attitude seems so much like Kurtz’s (“exterminate all the brutes”). He generalizes about Indians, but there is no sloganeering or racist theorizing. It is a brilliant move on the screenwriter Frank Nugent and Ford’s part; we are clearly called on to try to provide what Ethan cannot or will not. And it is consistent with so many unknowns intimated visually, demanding some pursuit of purely visual intelligibility: why Ethan is dressed as he is, what he

17. The fact that Debbie begins her sojourn with Scar from in front of a gravestone has suggested to some that she is taken to the land of the dead, and Ethan’s journey is a *katabasis*, a mythic descent into hell. See James Clauss, “Descent into Hell: Mythic Paradigms in *The Searchers*,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27 (Fall 1999): 2–17.

18. As in the movie’s theme song, which asks, “What makes a man to wander?”

has been doing, what he and Martha did or did not do before or after her marriage, what was Ethan's relation to Martin's parents, what happened when Ethan found Lucy, the various dramatic, long close-ups of Ethan and Scar, and of course what is the meaning of Ethan's famous gesture at the end, raising Debbie above his head.

Then the search begins for Lucy (who is herself soon discovered raped and killed) and the youngest, Debbie. There is a small piece of stage business that Ethan performs after the discovery of Lucy, a very brief scene, but it indicates the visual suggestiveness of virtually everything in the film. When Ethan returns from the canyon where he has discovered Lucy's body and buried her, he takes out his knife and begins furiously digging in the earth (fig. 7).

Why have Ethan dig with his knife so violently in the earth after discovering a rape? Of course Ethan has not been fantasizing about raping Lucy or Martha, but I think there are plenty of indications that he regards himself, as the lover of his brother's wife, as not much better than such a rapist. He could be remembering "burying her with his own hands," as he admits later, but, if so, the part of the burial he remembers is instructive. His acting out this violent penetration of the earth seems to call such (wholly unreasonable and extreme) guilt to mind.

It is hard to establish the exact number of years covered by the search; most commentators count five, some count seven—from the time Debbie is nine until she is sixteen. The great shock of the movie begins when we realize after a while that Ethan is not trying to find Debbie (the very young daughter of the woman he obviously loved dearly) to rescue her but to kill her. He seems to believe that any white girl raised to be an Indian squaw would be better off dead, although, as noted, this is never articulated as such, and the brutality of this intention and the ferocity and near insanity with which it is pursued is what stuns the viewer and prompts the attempt to understand who this man is. Martin Pauley (Jeffrey Hunter) stays with him not merely to help him find her but to be there when they do, so he can stop the murder.

It is very important to note that Ethan's pursuit and intention to kill Debbie is not a peculiar, individual neurosis. A national character is one defined against others, against real or imagined enemies, and this sort of hatred is not peculiar to Ethan. Vera Miles plays an interesting role in the movie as Laurie, the longtime friend of Martin. They were obviously assumed always to be meant for each other, and there is one stunning scene that establishes the generality of the problem of Ethan and suggests that Ethan is not the crazy outsider or the dark and repressed side of this white American society. He is its representative. In the scene Laurie is dressed in

virginal white. This is her wedding day (she has given up waiting for Martin), and we are once again faced with a core civilizational “promise”: sexual desire should be regulated, confined to marriage. And we face again the fragility and uncertainty of such promises to control the passions. Clad in such virginal white, Laurie also seems to hold the most innocent, unreflectively held, and common views from her world. In many ways, the revelation of her views on Indians is even more shocking to the viewer than the knowledge that Ethan is out to kill Debbie.¹⁹

When Martin insists that he must leave again and continue the search, Laurie responds,

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. [Fig. 8]

We will see later that Laurie is not untypical. When Reverend Clayton's posse is poised for the final attack, no one is at all concerned that, as Martin immediately points out, Debbie will be killed if they simply attack with full force. It takes Martin a while to persuade the posse to let him try to save her first.

5

With this much of the film in view, I want now to start to address the issue of understanding Ethan and the roles of psychological knowledge and self-knowledge in political life. Once the viewer is over the shock of learning that Ethan is planning on murdering a perfectly innocent and already long-suffering sixteen-year-old girl, we come to think we know something about him, although much remains shrouded in mystery. We at least think we know something of the ferocity and near insanity of his sentiments and the content or object of his passions. The scene in which Ethan shoots out the eyes of the dead Comanche already establishes how much Ethan knows about the Comanches and why. We are close to the issue noted by many film critics: the chief Indian character, Scar (the one

19. Almost all of the domestic scenes and, very oddly, some of the attack and violence themes force on the viewer the question of the film's use of humor. One is tempted to treat it as typically Fordian, the domestic pleasures and familial warmth, the dancing and music and intimacy, that all the struggle and war is for. But it is also possible to see the humor as Brechtian, following some remarks by Gil Perez. The fact that, as the rangers begin their assault on a village full of noncombatants, there is all this comic byplay between the pastor and the lieutenant about the latter's sword, and the sudden shift in Ethan from maniacal searching to joking sarcasm, does also seem deliberately off-putting, suggesting a level of insensitivity and blindness that alienates us from their world.

who steals Debbie), sometimes seems another part of Ethan's character—his alter ego, that part of him we need to understand to understand him. It's as if Ethan has projected an emanation (in the Blakean sense) of himself, everything illicit that he nevertheless devoutly wants, such that, by killing Scar, Ethan will prove that those desires were never part of himself. They are in fact mirror or twinned characters in many ways. They are both on ferocious revenge quests; Ethan wants to do to Scar what he imagines Scar did to him—steal and kill his “woman.” They both seem hybrid characters, as revealed in the scene near the end of the movie in which Scar reveals he is as knowledgeable about Anglo language and ways as Ethan is about Comanche.

Ethan and Martin at one point come upon some soldiers who have found some captive white girls, which occasions one of the most important scenes in the movie, a scene that is as much about the intimate relation between the face and the human soul that is behind the great emotional power of close-ups. Also, Ford, well-known for his classic, stationary camera, wants very much to heighten our attention to the question posed by Ethan's look, and so he tracks in, a rare moment of both motion and psychological intensity, as if the tracking in is a way of asking the question, What does this look mean? (fig. 9).

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. It clearly has something to do with the fragility of what makes up the content of a civilizational identity, the basis of a national or individual character. Ethan seems to look full in the face the mutability and instability of such civilizational values. One might even say that it is an archetypal modern anxiety. “All that is solid melts into air”: Marx's famous characterization of modern experience is evoked here by Ethan's pronouncement, “She ain't white.” (One of the most disturbing aspects for audiences of “captive literature” from the seventeenth century on was the not-infrequent phenomenon of captive women who, when “rescued,” chose to remain with “the savages.” This choice obviously unsettles the whole notion of civilized order and its putative superiority, and part of this issue seems visible in the look.) This is a major issue in the film, the issue of kinship and adoption, and resonates with the civil rights issues current in 1956. Ethan's position, on view in this look, is quite complicated and unstable. He believes, as a staunch defender of the confederacy, that convention cannot alter the facts

of nature, that it is not good by nature that races mix, that Martin's having been adopted and raised as white cannot change the fact that he is basically, for Ethan, colored, of Indian blood. Yet he also seems to believe that Debbie, while biologically white, *can* become so corrupted by Indian mores that she must be killed rather than saved. (As in this scene: "She ain't white.") In the later will-and-testament scene, Ethan also clearly believes he can simply end his kinship relation with Debbie, as if it is a matter of some convention.²⁰ And, contrastingly, we see that by Indian law Debbie seems pretty clearly a wife among equals; she even seems a kind of princess, not at all treated to any equivalent of Ethan's "blanket-head" taunts of the "half-breed" Martin. This is all to be contrasted with what both Martin and Ethan seem to regard as the utter and comic inconceivability of Martin's "marriage" to the Indian Look (whom Martin has mistakenly married in a trading agreement), who is treated as a figure of derision until Martin and Ethan both must face what their attitude entails.²¹

This complex situation has a number of implications relevant to the meaning of the final Ethan-lifting-up-Debbie scene. To lift Debbie seems like the reemergence of a kind of humanity in Ethan, but it could also represent the realization by him as he looks in Debbie's eyes that she is despite all (and for him, thankfully) *still white*. "Let's go home" could just emphasize this racial solidarity. Such a reading would also explain the absence of any full or satisfying reconciliation scene with Martin.²²

We need a couple of final plot elements in order to return to the question of Ethan. Word reaches the searchers that Debbie is being held in an Indian encampment, and the army joins the Texas Rangers and Ethan and Martin in preparation for a raid on this camp. This scene

20. This is a scene right after Ethan has almost succeeded in killing Debbie. The two searchers are recuperating from an attack by Scar's men, and Ethan has Martin read out a new will he has written in which he disowns Debbie and, remarkably, leaves everything to Martin, even though Martin is no "blood kin," as Ethan has often reminded him. This could have been a powerful scene, the first crack in Ethan's racist commitments. But the power of the scene is undermined by Hunter's performance, which is not up to this moment. Hunter has one emotional register throughout the film: eager, intense, emotional involvement. Hawks said he was always worried about Wayne as a leading man, that he had such screen presence that he could blow away other actors, and that is certainly what happens here.

21. Compare the discussion in Brian Henderson, "The Searchers: An American Dilemma," in *John Ford: Le Pionnier du septième art, 1894–1973*, ed. Scott Eyman and Paul Duncan (Cologne, 2004), pp. 47–73. Henderson also makes some good points about the effect of Martin's complicated status on his behavior. He cannot aggressively or even actively court Laurie, is very passive and almost feminized, and must be pursued, all as if he would be a threat if more active. And he must act out his loyalty to whites more than anyone else. See p. 71.

22. Such a reading is not impossible, but I don't think it is correct. If it were right, we would expect a very different (and more welcoming and reunifying) homecoming than we get. What we get is a deeply sad and somewhat broken Ethan, walking away from the "white" world.

turns out to be one more and in effect the final piece in the puzzle of understanding Ethan. We think we understand how all his significant actions flow from a common source: his racism and self-hatred, his belonging more with Indians than whites and his great discomfort with this, his guilt at his desire for his brother's wife, and so forth. Accordingly, we are not surprised when he is willing to attack the camp straight on, even though he and the others know this will result in Debbie's death. In fact, he says, "that's what I'm counting on." (Only shortly before this he had actually tried to shoot Debbie after leaving the meeting with Scar. That is, even with Martin between them, Ethan fires. An Indian arrow hits him at the same time, but that is all that saves Debbie—and Martin.) But now Martin persuades them all to allow him what seems a suicidal chance to rescue her before the attack. He does save her and shoots Scar in the process. That shot starts the general raid. During the course of the raid, Ethan finds Scar's tent, enters, draws his knife, and scalps Scar. He emerges from the tent with Scar's bloody scalp in his left hand, and, yet again, Ford in effect pauses to concentrate on another extremely complicated, quite puzzling look on Ethan's face (fig. 10). We will return to this look in a moment.

So we think we are prepared for the final scene with Debbie, and we know, following conventional movie logic of course, that Ethan will not kill Debbie, but I would wager that most of us expect *Martin* to stop him somehow (and certainly expect Ethan to kill Scar) and not Ethan to transform internally so that he may do what he does here. Ford shows us, for the third time, an inside-out shot, this time from inside a cave as Ethan rides down the fleeing Debbie. But we hear him call her name, and we know immediately that something has changed. It is not the tone of voice of an enraged man. And in the most famous scene in the film, he bends down and lifts her up in the air, exactly as he had lifted the young Debbie years earlier. But now he cradles her in his arms and says simply, "Let's go home, Debbie." She hesitates, but then she nestles her head into his shoulder and they depart (figs. 11–13).

6

So we come again to the two mysteries posed by the movie: Why does Ethan seek to kill Debbie, and, Why *doesn't* Ethan kill Debbie?

There are some obvious possible answers for his unexpected return to recognizable humanity:

1. This act could be spontaneous, impulsive, out of character, but understandable in the way impulsive gestures sometimes are. That is, given

what Ethan sincerely believes, this must count as a momentary act of *weakness*; given that it is also morally praiseworthy, it is of course ironic that he cannot hold true to his racist principles. (In this respect he is like Huck Finn, who feels guilty for not turning in Jim even though he sincerely believes Jim is stolen property and that he is morally obligated to return him.)²³ Remarkably, in the Nugent and Ford shooting script for the movie the last scene involved the camera sighting down Ethan's gun barrel as he prepares to shoot Debbie, and he says, "You sure favor your mother."²⁴ Ford eliminated this all-too-easy explanation.

But this appeal to impulsive charity does not seem likely. For one thing it just pushes the question back psychologically. *Why*, when he had drawn his gun and had been prepared to shoot Debbie a bit before, stopped only by Martin, and then an Indian arrow, and why, right after the most brutal enactment of racial hatred, his scalping Scar, would he feel this "weakness"? We have seen no evidence of such a side to Ethan's character, and it is far too easy an explanation. Impulsive actions, if they are still to be counted as actions, are still motivated and intentional.

2. We might say that Ethan's basic character, his orientation, *changes*. Perhaps the long seven-year experience with Martin (whom he had originally considered a "half-breed") and the gradual fading of his anger, self-hatred, and guilt have now produced a more humane character.

This is also not likely. The scalping scene certainly does not reveal a changed, kinder, gentler Ethan, and, as we shall see, his eventual (understandable and justified) rejection by the social and familial world makes very difficult any transformation or redemption explanation. No one in the film believes he has changed into Uncle Ethan, and we are clearly meant to agree. In the film's final scene, it is somewhat shocking that the characters file by Ethan as if he were invisible. No one hugs him or thanks him and certainly no one invites any new Ethan inside. (The shooting script again *had* a kind of reunification scene. Again, Ford eliminated it in favor of the family ignoring Ethan.)²⁵

23. I borrow this example from Nomy Arpaly's interesting book *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford, 2004). See also Robert Pippin, "Can There Be 'Unprincipled Virtue'? Comments on Nomy Arpaly," *Philosophical Explorations* 10 (Sept. 2007): 291–301, for more discussion of this example.

24. Nugent, revised final screenplay for *The Searchers*, www.aellea.com/script/searchers.html, scenes 231–32. The scenes are both more brutal and the actions more explicable in Nugent's script. Ethan prepares to shoot Debbie and says, "I'm sorry, girl. . . . Shut your eyes." And then, after they stare at each other, he simply says, "You sure favor your mother" and helps her up.

25. See Nugent, revised final screenplay for *The Searchers*, scene 239. Ethan really has become kindly Uncle Ethan. He rides in, holding a sleeping Debbie. This is how Nugent describes the final scene: "He smiles and puts a finger to his lips—cautioning [Laurie] against

3. There are two striking close-ups in the film: Ethan in the army hut with the white girls and the strange look after scalping Scar (see figs. 9–10). We might read the latter as some sort of *release*. There is a look of puzzlement on Ethan's face, not a triumphalist gloating or even simple grim satisfaction. Does he believe that some score has now been settled? Does this bloody, brutal act strike his conscience, move him to back away from his violent intention? Is he confused that after achieving what he had wanted all these years he does not feel satisfied, that he feels only empty and is puzzled at his lack of satisfaction?

Ford leaves all this wonderfully and richly ambiguous. But I would suggest that the primary expression here is *puzzlement*, some indication that Ethan does not know his own mind and suddenly realizes he does not know his own mind. And that brings us to a fourth alternative.

4. Perhaps we should start from the acknowledgement that the viewer by this point must have formed a view about Ethan, about his character, who he is, perhaps even about what he represents nationally or mythically, and has come to view him as simply a murderous, vile psychopath. Then our question changes. Of what significance is it that *we* were, if not wrong, then at least hasty? He does *not* “put a bullet in her brain” as the virginal Laurie had so enthusiastically suggested. Perhaps, having made the inference towards a generalization about “Ethan,” we are learning that an inference *from* this generalization is radically uncertain and fraught with its own problems. (That is the most interesting question: of what significance is it that Ethan's own expectations *about himself* turn out to be wrong?)

I mean something like the following. Ethan had clearly formed the intention to kill Debbie. But we have seen that it is impossible to separate what that means for him—perhaps one can even say the full content of the intention—from (a) his illicit desire for his brother's wife and so his viewing himself as like Scar, as wanting to do what Scar did, to break apart his brother's family and “steal” Aaron's wife and children;²⁶ (b) Ethan's natural sympathy for the martial, wandering, and heroic culture of Indians, even as he realizes (thinks he realizes) how unacceptable and “barbaric”

waking Debbie—and then he rides by. Laurie looks then at Martin. He doesn't know whether to smile or not; he just waits. And then she is beside him and she steps onto his stirrured foot and vaults up beside him, and she kisses him just as she had on the day he left the graves to take up the search. And still holding her beside him, he rides slowly after Ethan and Debbie toward the house.”

26. And we should recall that, while perhaps many have lusted after their brothers' wives, and many wives might have felt some pull to respond, the somewhat careless and public display by Ethan and Martha at the beginning of the film has to count as reckless and no doubt guilt-producing. It is certainly “noticed” (by being so deliberately ignored) by the pastor.

this is; (c) his projection of his own self-hatred for all these feelings onto Indians and so his desire to kill them all if he could as proof to himself that all these desires are not truly his; and thus (d) his profound anxiety about miscegenation as apparently the worst human sin, as if such an extreme dedication to white racial purity could prove his civilized standing among whites despite his violent temptations. So while the intention seems simple enough, it is actually embedded in an extremely dense and relatively unstable complex of supporting attitudes and beliefs and remains largely provisional until Ethan must act. He will also be proving something by killing Debbie, cleansing something by killing Debbie, expiating some guilt by killing Debbie, saving Debbie from a fate worse than death, and so forth. None of these are properly unconscious; they are just indications at this point that he does not *merely* want to kill Debbie because she has been polluted or spoiled.

We need a somewhat broader if very sketchy framework to appreciate this difficulty. Actions are purposive deeds, and we understand an action by understanding the intention avowed or manifested by an agent. Or at least we start there. We must also be able to understand something of the reasons that led an agent to the formation of such an intention. If we ask someone why he is methodically killing his relatives and he says, "I am killing them so that I might eat them and prevent the appearance of the angels," we would have literally understood his intention but not in a way that would render his action intelligible. So our attempt at understanding is always rationalizing, holistic, and psychological in this sense. The great problems occur when intentions do not match deeds and when the question of what exactly *was* done becomes quite complicated and contested. That is our problem here.

I would suggest that Ethan has not acted impulsively or revealed he is weak-willed with respect to deeply held beliefs or been transformed by the quest or been shamed or humanized by the scalping of Scar. What we and he discover is that he did not know his own mind well, that he avowed principles that were partly confabulations and fantasy. We (and he) find out the depth and extent of his actual commitments only when he finally must act. Moreover, we also learn just how extraordinarily difficult it is to provide the proper act-description of just *what it was* that was done, to describe properly the quest in the first place and its unexpected ending, and to determine how many psychological or social factors are involved in trying to say what Ethan did, what he revealed, by saving rather than killing Debbie.

Now many philosophers will say that even though this—the multiple descriptibility of actions—is true, the event qualifies as an action just in

case it might be intentional under some description *for the agent*; what is relevant to understanding and to an explanation is the description the agent applied and thus the intention formulated in light of this description. But this is still much too narrow. For one thing, with respect to understanding, such a proposal lands us back with the explanation that “I am killing them so that I might eat them and prevent the appearance of the angels.” It is hard to call understanding *that* understanding much of anything and, so, very hard to understand why the cold-blooded murder of a clearly much loved and cherished innocent white child is required by some racist code. For another, agents themselves are often aware of the multiplicity of possible descriptions and have no clear sense of what it is they take themselves to be doing or what they intend by doing something. We *could* simply say, “Clearly Ethan believes what he is doing in killing Debbie is saving her from the ignominy of spending her life as a squaw. He intends to do this and regards himself as justified in so acting because of some belief about the shamefulness of Indian life for a white girl and perhaps even because he believes the love of his life, Martha, would have wanted this.” But all one need do is imagine how much interest is drained from the film with such an “explanation.” The roles of revenge, self-hatred, Ethan’s identification with Comanches, his self-deception, and the meaning of his reversal, among many other things, get no traction if we settle for such a flat-footed version of an adequate psychological explanation. Nothing of the dense layers of meaning in that famous look by Ethan remains if we settle this way.

This is all of course fairly messy psychologically and philosophically, and it greatly complicates the question of the possibility of an American politics. It being so messy is one of the reasons why what could be called political psychology is not among the prominent issues under discussion in contemporary political philosophy. (Liberal political philosophy has come to focus almost exclusively on the question of legitimacy.) If the issues are as described in *The Searchers*, then clearly the assessment and understanding of human motives and reasons in political situations of dependence and independence, of the weak and the powerful (which all greatly complicate any straightforward self-avowals and self-understanding), will require a subtlety, tentativeness, hermeneutical finesse, and exploratory approach that can be frustratingly incomplete and very difficult to deal with in theory. This difficulty is especially true in an age in which great promises are being made for the potential of naturalist psychology, the neurosciences in particular, to unlock the mysteries of human conduct, human morality, and politics, and even to make great progress in understanding racism, criminality, sexism, and so forth. But for any such progress to be made we need some way of individuating

a person's standing attitudes and of identifying properly his effective motives, not his merely avowed intentions. All this is not even to begin to deal with the problem of appropriate act-description and description of consequences within some community of assessment. All of this is prior to any natural-scientific explanation.

This messiness prompts another, potentially dangerous temptation. By potentially dangerous I mean that some common forms of character judgments or other forms of holism in everyday explanations of action are quite close to the typology at work in the film's treatment of racism: views about white, Indian, mixed blood, Texican, and so on. Ford is most certainly making use of the John Wayne type or icon to set up the viewer, inducing an identification he will also completely undermine, relying on our confidence that we know that type, as if we know who "John Wayne" is or for that matter as if we know what America is. One element of the enormous emotional power of that famous scene of transformation and redemption is the realization that none of these archetypes is adequate to the sudden, transformative gesture of Ethan in picking up Debbie, nor does it help us understand well the bitter, racist outburst of Laurie, who had been such a faintly comic and pleasant character.

In fact this technique—the invitation to an identification that is then frustrated, undermined, or in some way turned against the identifier—is both a frequent device in the film and often overlooked. I have just noted that Ford is inviting us at the beginning of the film to take Ethan as *the* John Wayne character, an immensely competent, tough loner of great integrity and heroic capacity. This assumption is so strong that I would venture the guess that many, perhaps most, of the film's viewers simply glide over the fact that Ethan is such a vicious racist and are able to keep ignoring this until he finally rescues Debbie and this presumption can finally seem confirmed. Likewise, we seemed to be invited into the jocular, racist hilarity enjoyed by Ethan when Martin marries Look, only to be shocked (and, one hopes, ashamed) when Martin brutally kicks her down a steep hill and when we discover her murdered by white soldiers. And in an equally dangerous and tricky episode (for Ford), we are invited to apply the crudest of stereotypes when Ethan must pay for information from Futterman, clearly a Jewish trader who has information about Debbie. We think that the stereotype about moneygrubbing and treacherousness is confirmed when Futterman and some confederates sneak into Ethan and Martin's camp and try to kill and rob them. But we then find that Ethan was willing to use a sleeping Martin as bait in an extremely dangerous, risky trap, that he shoots all three robbers in the back and makes sure he rifles through Fut-

terman's pockets and "steals" back his money. It is Ethan who turns out to be avaricious and treacherous.

7

In the last scene (fig. 14), we get the fourth and final use of the inside-outside shot in the film, and I agree with those critics who argue that the shots often help thematize the issue of who belongs to the civil community and who does not. That is, one could say that what the searchers have been searching for is not just Debbie but home, or even the meaning of home, kinship, or some form of belonging-together. And it does at first glance look as if Ethan represents an archaic, even primitive reliance on race, blood, and ethnicity to establish such a home, and Martin seems the modern or even American hope—that race and ethnicity might eventually fade as markers of community. He is the product of intermarriage who will also intermarry, while Ethan's primitivism is banned and left outside.

But I also think that something much more complicated is going on. In the first place, there is another possible interpretation of the fact that there is no reconciliation scene with Ethan, that Ford took out the one that was in the shooting script. The last scene could suggest that Ethan cannot come in because he knows that what the Jorgensens are staging, the aspiration embodied in Martin, is, while not a complete fantasy, much more fragile than those inside are prepared to admit. (Throughout the film, Ethan has taken on the role of protector, of protecting other characters from seeing something: Martin from seeing Martha; Martin and Brad from seeing Lucy's body; Martin from entering Scar's tent. He even tries to stop Mrs. Jorgensen from seeing the fight over her daughter. In this case, too, he will simply leave them to their aspirations.) It is after all Ethan who stands in the light and the community who retreats to darkness, a complete and somewhat unnerving darkness when the door shuts. I do not mean either that Ethan is simply right about the fragility of conventional or constructed rather than "natural" political identity or that he has achieved any genuine self-knowledge. He is still blind in many ways and so still must wander off, as he does in the last shot we have of him, as if broken and newly burdened by what he has been through. But much of what he actually believes and is willing to do has been illuminated in the public world of action, has been exposed as it were, and that is not true of the darkness inside (the community's self-understanding has not been tested like Ethan's, and he sometimes seems to be trying to help them prevent such a testing). So the contrasting light and dark places can stand at least as a warning by Ford not to take for granted the overcoming of a racism like Ethan's or Laurie's.

Put another way, with this last inside-out shot, Ford is also thematizing something much more speculative: both the relation between the inside of a person and the outside—the observable, public bodily movements that constitute action—and the great difficulties in understanding this connection. At the beginning of the film, we have no reason to suspect any disconnect between what characters avow and what they do, and the transition from inside to outside is seamless and unproblematic. The family moves outside and welcomes Ethan; he moves inside and accepts the welcome. In the scene where Martha's body is discovered, Ethan can be said to start his own journey into the darkest recesses of his heart, his "inside," the formation of what he takes to be his obligation for revenge and the murder of Debbie. (It is dark because his avowals and expressions of commitment and real desires are not transparent and not straightforwardly accessible to him. It is the beginning of a kind of insane resolve that will be manifest in the world, but not wholly or not, finally, wholeheartedly one might say, not in a way he can finally take responsibility for.) It is also from that perspective, from inside Ethan, as if inside the frame of the experience for him, that we view the action from inside the cave as he rides Debbie down, and, given the way he calls her name, we understand from his point of view that he cannot kill her. In this sense, the withdrawal of the community back into the dark interior in this final scene suggests that we will be *left* with this gap between interior and exterior, with a self-understanding that cannot be made external or public because it is so self-deceived and content.

So while we are encouraged to believe that Ethan's racist pathology has no place in the "civilized" world and so is somehow rejected, two other issues stand out. First, we already know that Laurie shares the goals of Ethan's mad quest, and she certainly has not been redeemed, even though, to add to the complexity, she is to marry a "one-eighth" Indian. So the comforting geography of the last scene, a safe, civilized inside and an excluded violent outside, is a lie—one, I would again venture to guess, the audience is all too happy to accept and that Ford is deliberately ironizing. (The interiors, again, are *dark*, as dark or opaque as the characters' self-knowledge. And we tend to forget that only Ethan could have rescued Debbie. Apart from Martin, the rest of them wanted to forget about her capture.) Second, the community does *not* reject Ethan. They rather ceremoniously *ignore* him. They pretend he does not exist; no one speaks to him, says goodbye, tells him he can or cannot come in. He is instantly forgotten, as if literally invisible. I take this as Ford's indication of their willful ignorance of their own racism (or their blindness, to go back to that

theme: "Ain't got no eyes, can't enter the spirit land") and their own (unacknowledged) need for a character like Ethan.

What might all this say about the American imaginary, if anything? I am sure that the character of Ethan, as the inheritor of the legacy of Natty Bumppo, Ahab, Sutpen, and the like, is meant to raise that issue, but those questions are, I have tried to show, quite complicated. More obvious is Ford's unusual treatment of the smugness, complacency, and blindness of the white civilized world. Perhaps the most shocking scene in the movie, in other words, is not Ethan's shooting the eyes out of a dead Indian, or slaughtering buffalo, or trying to shoot Debbie, or scalping Scar, but that little scene at Laurie's aborted wedding, when she says:

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.



FIGURE 1.



FIGURE 2.



FIGURE 3.



FIGURE 4.



FIGURE 5.



FIGURE 6.



FIGURE 7.



FIGURE 8.



FIGURE 9.



FIGURE 10.



FIGURE 11.



FIGURE 12.



FIGURE 13.



FIGURE 14.