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Prisoner of the Desert

Joseph McBride & Michael Wilmington

There is a strange irony involved in John Ford's visual metaphors for Ireland, the land of his ancestors, and for the American West, the land of his dreams. The rocky, starved soil which so many fled is seen as a lush, green, endlessly fertile valley, and the American Dream to which they fled is a desert valley slashed intermittently by rivers which serve only to emphasize its essential aridity. Yet the America of Ford's stories is presumably a land of fertility and opportunity, or why did the immigrants leave in the first place? The Irish characters of *The Quiet Man* and *The Rising of the Moon* (one of whom actually lives in a national monument) are hemmed in on all sides by centuries-old traditions to which they must accommodate themselves. But in primitive America, every man is his own master. The pioneers are thrown into a testing ground whose only landmarks are the million-year-old rocks of Monument Valley, the vast expanse of land on the Navajo Reservation which Ford first used as a location in *Stagecoach*. D.H. Lawrence could have been describing Monument Valley when he wrote, 'White men have probably never felt so bitter anywhere, as here in America, where the very landscape, in its very beauty, seems a bit devilish and grinning, opposed to us.' Yet Ford, perversely, considers Monument Valley 'the most complete, beautiful, and peaceful place on earth.'

A reviewer of *The Searchers,* attempting to demonstrate Ford's abuse of "realism," observed that the story ranges all over the West, up into Canada, and down into Mexico, but the players never seem to leave Monument Valley. Precisely. Monument Valley is more than a real place to Ford. It is a state of mind. Its beauty is reminiscent of of the decadent poets' theories about the aesthetics of uselessness, for it is both a dead end and an ultimate value, the perfect setting for the *acte gratuit*. Its weird, gargantuan panoramas resemble nothing so much as an extra-terrestrial landscape; indeed, Stanley Kubrick used it in the stargate section of *2001*. Monument Valley is a moral battleground, stripped down and rendered more perfect by the absence of organic life within its boundaries. It is both primeval and beyond society. In Ford's "dream" Ireland, a man returns to his past. In the American Dream, his every move reverberates into the future. The horizons of Monument Valley point toward eternity.

The Searchers has that clear yet intangible quality which characterizes an artist's masterpiece—the sense that he has gone beyond his customary limits, submitted his deepest tenets to the test, and dared to exceed even what we might have expected of him. Its hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), is a volatile synthesis of all the paradoxes which Ford had been finding in his Western hero since *Stagecoach.* A nomad tortured by his desire for a home. An outlaw and a military hero. A cavalier and a cutthroat. Ethan embarks on a five-year odyssey across the frontier after his brother's family is murdered and his niece taken captive by the Comanches. Like Homer's Ulysses, he journeys through a perilous and bewitching landscape. Even more than in Ford's earlier Westerns, the land is felt as a living, governing presence. Previously the great rocks were a backdrop, omnipresent but glimpsed from a distance. Usually it is the Indians (the test) who move among the rocks in Ford's Westerns; the pioneers, vulnerable and exposed, move through the plains below. Here, however, much of the important action takes place up among the rocks, crevices and cliffs. There are many more high-angled shots than is usual in Ford. The epic detachment conveyed by the vast aerial views lends an almost supernatural aura to Ethan's quest which is denied to the more prosaic characters of the other Westerns. The demons which drive him onward, almost against his will, seem to emanate from the "devilish and grinning" land. The killing of the family, an action horrifyingly abrupt, brutal, and gratuitous, is only the first in a long chain of bizarre events which bedevil Ethan and, finally, drive him mad. Within the classical symmetry of the story—the film begins with a door opening on Ethan riding in from the desert and ends with the door closing on him as he returns to the desert —Ford follows a subjective thread.

The Searchers has had a curious critical history. It was largely misunderstood and underrated at the time of its release in 1956; apparently the only serious contemporary critique was the *Sight and Sound* review by Lindsay Anderson, who was amazed to find that Ethan was "an unmistakable neurotic," and asked, "Now what is Ford, of all directors, to do with a hero like this?" Anderson's *Sequence* articles on *They Were Expendable* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* were the pioneering work in Ford criticism, and his disillusionment with Ford after *The Searchers* was prophetic of the line which the English-speaking critical establishment has only recently begun to reconsider. Odd as Anderson's incomprehension may seem today, we must remember that we are looking at the film with full knowledge of the sombre cast Ford's vision took in such late works as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Seven Women.*

The Searchers did violence to that "simple, sure, affirmative" heroic vision which seemed (and, indeed, still seems to many critics) to be Ford's *raison d'etre.* Even *Cahiers du Cinema* gave the film a scant three-line notice; by 1962 its stature had so increased in retrospect that it placed at the top of a *Cahiers* critic's poll on the greatest American sound films. Fordian scholars Peter Bogdanovich and Andrew Sarris also rate it among the best of Ford's work (Bogdanovich's new film *Directed by John Ford* begins and ends with the beginning and ending of *The Searchers),* compensating for the derogatory remarks made about it in critical studies of the director by Jean Mitry and Philippe Haudiquet, who agree with Anderson that *le vrai* Ford ended in the mid-Fifties and what followed is mostly "self-parody." But *The Searchers* is still so scandalously unknown in the United States that Jean-Luc Godard's tribute in *Weekend* passed over the head of the Grove Press subtitler, who thought that *La Prisonnière du Desert* was the French title for something called *Prisoner of the Desert.*

The film is not in fact an aberration, but a crystalization of the fears, obsessions and contradictions which had been boiling up under the surface of Ford's work since his return from World War II. Godard hints at this in his delightful comment: "Mystery and fascination of this American cinema . . . How can I hate John Wayne upholding Goldwater and yet love him tenderly when abruptly he takes Natalie Wood into his arms in the last reel of *The Searchers?"* Ethan is both hero and anti-hero, a man radically estranged from his society and yet driven to act in its name. His strengths and failings, like the promise and danger of the land around him, are inextricable. *The Searchers* is, on the surface, a highly romantic subject—a knightly quest—but the knight's motives are impure, and as the search progresses, Ford begins to undercut his morality. There is no Penelope to mark the end of his quest, because the woman he loves is his brother's wife and she has been killed at the outset, an event which makes his peregrinations absurd. Ethan starts out seeking the return of his nieces, Debbie and Lucy, but after he finds Lucy's mutilated corpse and realizes that Debbie is being made into an Indian squaw, he becomes nihilistic, seeking only revenge. When he finally catches up with Debbie, he tries to kill her. And the search itself would have been a failure had not Old Mose Harper (a Shakespearean fool played by Hank Worden) accidentally found Debbie after Ethan had spent years losing her trail. Ethan loses her again, and Mose finds her again.

It is this grotesquerie, and the anarchic humor that accompanies it, which the contemporary reviewers found incomprehensible. But Ford's sense of humor is one of his strongest trumps. In his greatest works, the plot line oscillates freely between the tragic and the ridiculous, with the comic elements providing a continuous com-

mentary on the meaning of the drama. The comedy, broad and idioscyncratic and self-conscious as it may seem, is the rough prose to the exalted visual verse. Just as Ford's few actual comedies have had notably grim undertones (such as *The Quiet Man,* which is about the romantic fantasies of a guilt-ridden boxer), his tragedies always have undertones of giddiness. The critic who finds the situations of *The Searchers* or *Seven Women* ridiculous is ignoring or choosing to ignore the fact that Ford finds the situations ridiculous as well. His view of drama embraces the conviction that what is most noble, most poignant and most terrifying in life is frequently a hair's breadth away from howling absurdity. What makes films such as *The Searchers* and *Seven Women* great is the striking manner in which they reconcile the noble with the absurd, the way in which their seemingly straight-forward situations are shaped to encompass the maddest perversities and still retain a sense of order. When Ford fails, his sense of humor is usually the first casualty.

The first images of *The Searchers* are the invocation of a myth. A door opens inside the darkness of a pioneer cabin, a woman appears, and the camera glides behind her through the door and outside to reveal Ethan, a tiny moving form, gradually materializing on horseback out of the morning mist surrounding one of the great rocks. Ethan rides slowly, silently, inexorably toward the little homestead, Ford cutting again and again from him to the waiting family; the intercutting gives a feeling of magnetic attraction. When Ethan dismounts and shakes hands wordlessly with his brother, his face is mysteriously shadowed by the turned-down brim of his battered hat. The ostentatious way he wears his sword and his fading Confederate cloak alerts us to his futile absorption in the events of the past. As Ethan goes to kiss his brother's wife, Ford gives us, for the first time, a full shot of the home, harmonious with the landscape. The home is a shrine of civilization in the wilderness, a shrine almost as ridiculous as it is sacred, for we see only one other pioneer home in the entire film. The communal impulse around which the generative principles of Ford's universe are organized is centered precariously around these tiny dwellings. The two pioneer families are infinitely precious and infinitely vulnerable.

Ethan is a descendant of Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, whose character, according to Henry Nash Smith in his classic study of the Western myth, *Virgin Land,* is based on a "theoretical hostility to civilization." Ford is usually considered a conservative, but despite his nostalgia for traditional values, the term is somewhat misleading. Like Cooper, he is impatient with the artificial harmony of organized society, as his fascination with the West and with all varieties of nomads, outlaws, outcasts and warriors makes abundantly clear. There is a strong streak of anarchy in his Irish temperament. His characters are typically refugees from constricting societies (Europe, urbanized America) in which once-vital traditions have hardened into inflexible dogmas. The traditions he celebrates are the tribal traditions of honor, justice and fidelity, and all of these come together in the image of the family, the purest form of society.

Ford's heroes, whether they are outlaws (Harry Carey in his early silents, the bandits in *Three Bad Men* and *Three Godfathers,* Ringo in *Stagecoach)* or lawmen (Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine,* the soldiers in the Cavalry films), all have a primitive awe for the family. (This, to Ford, is beyond reason. When a French interviewer asked why the "theme of family" is so important in his work, he replied, "You have a mother, don't you?") Some of these men seek revenge for the murder of members of their own families; others sacrifice themselves for orphans; the cavalrymen act to keep the plains secure for the pioneer homesteads. All, to some degree, are also loners and outcasts: their role as the defender of primitive society forces them to live in the widerness with its enemies, the Indians. But of all Ford's Western heroes, only Ethan turns his violence *against* his family—against Debbie, who could just as well be his own daughter—and that is what makes him such a profound and unsettling figure.*

As the search progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to appreciate the difference between Ethan's heroism and the villainy of Scar, his Indian nemesis. Ethan hates Indians—is he envious of their freedom? Certainly Scar and Ethan are the only characters who fully understand each other, because their motives are so similar. We learn eventually that the massacre, which seemed at first totally willful, was performed in revenge for the death of Scar's own children. "Two sons killed by white men," he tells Ethan. "For each son, I take many scalps." The pattern of primitive revenge is endless; Ethan will eventually take Scar's scalp. (And as an added fillip, Scar does not know the word for scalp, and has to be supplied with it—scalping was the white man's invention.) There is a very strange scene early in the pursuit when Ethan shoots out the eyes of an Indian corpse so that, according to Comanche belief, the dead man will never enter the spirit-land and will have to "wander forever between the winds." Seemingly a blind act of vindictiveness—or a gesture of contempt toward an alien culture—the act in fact has undertones of kinship. Ethan himself is doomed to wander forever between the winds. He takes on the nature of a primitive in desperate recognition of his own failure to find a place in civilized society. Since the Civil War ended, he has been fighting in Mexico and, apparently, robbing banks; he has developed a seemingly limitless knowledge of Indian tricks, customs and language.

What lures him out of the wilderness is a home impulse—his love for Martha—but it is also an anarchic impulse, for his presence threatens the stability of the family. Ethan's attachment to his sister-in-law is futile, and any overt action would be unthinkable, the shattering of a taboo. Martha shares his feelings—it is she who opens the door on the wilderness—and she inadvertently speaks them to the Rev. Samuel Johnson Clayton (Ward Bond) on the morning of the massacre. When the communal breakfast is finished, Clayton, alone now, stands up to drink a last cup of coffee. His eyes wander, and he sees Martha through the doorway of her bedroom, caressing Ethan's cloak. He slowly turns back, staring straight ahead and sloshing the coffee reflectively in his cup, as Ethan enters behind him to accept the cloak and kiss Martha goodbye. As Sarris puts it, "Nothing on earth would ever force this man to reveal what he had seen." When the massacre occurs (the very day after Ethan's arrival), it has the disturbing feeling of an acting-out of his suppressed desires—destruction of the family and sexual violation of Martha. With the links between Scar and Ethan in mind, it becomes easy to see why Ford, much to the consternation of certain critics and contrary to his usual practice, cast a white man (Henry Brandon) in the Indian role. Scar is not so much a character as a crazy mirror of Ethan's desires.

The Searchers stands midway between the "classical" or psychologically primitive Western and what could be called the "neoclassical" Western (more commonly, if rather crudely, known as the "psychological" Western). It was not, of course, the first Western to criticize the basic assumption of the genre—that the solitude of the hero, because it is an instinctive revulsion against the hypocrisy of civilized society, is *a priori* a good thing. In the decade before *The Searchers* appeared, a whole rash of Westerns were made in which the hero's solitude was presented as socially unjust *(High Noon),* wasteful *(The Gunfighter),* callous *(The Naked Spur),* insane *(Red River),* or impossibly pure *(Shane).* Little as Ford is usually influenced by film trends, he could hardly have escaped coming to terms with the radical questions posed by this departure. Shortly before he began shooting *The Searchers,* Ford described it as "a kind of psychological epic." The terms are contradictory, certainly, but contradictions are what the film is about.

Its debt to *Shane,* the apotheosis of Western epic romanticism, is clear (particularly in Shane's wordless flirtation with Mrs. Starrett), but the influence of Howard Hawks' *Red River* is far more important. Tom Dunson was the first anti-hero John Wayne had ever played. In his films with Ford before *Red River,* the director had stressed his gentleness, his simplicity, the quiet authority beneath his rough exterior. After *Red River,* however, Ford began to use Wayne in parts which were more psychologically complex: the ageing cavalry captain in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,* the neurotic captain in *Rio Grande,* the pacifist boxer in *The Quiet Man.* This change in Ford's view of Wayne was evidently no coincidence. Discuss-

*Apparently the only comparable example in Ford's career is *Pilgrimage* (1933), which deals with a possessive mother who sends her son to his death in World War I rather than lose him to the girl he loves—one of his strangest and most moving works.

ing Ford recently, Wayne said, "I don't think he ever really had any kind of respect for me as an actor until I made *Red River* . . . Even then, I was never quite sure."

Wayne's most powerful quality as an actor is his mysteriousness. The audience is never quite sure what he is going to do next, and every shift in mood is a revelation of something which, at the end of the film, will still remain partly inexplicable. Dunson, like Ethan, is a good and noble man soured by a tragic mistake. It is a strong performance, but what makes his Ethan so marvelous is the way that Ford, instead of keeping the character's innate gentleness buried, lets it break through the sullen facade in flashes of sudden sentiment and humor. Besides the character influence, the two films are remarkably similar in plot: both begin with a woman being killed by Indians because the man she loves has deserted her, both have the man rescue a boy—in *The Searchers,* the half-breed Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), his brother's ward—and embark with him on an obsessive epic task, both transfer our allegiance to the boy when the man becomes deranged, and both end with a showdown in which the man is unable to kill his kin—in Dunson's case, his ward Matthew, and Ethan's, Debbie. And there are more localized connections: Dunson's bracelet which the Indian takes from Fen becomes Ethan's medal which Scar takes from Debbie; Dunson's cold-blooded murder of the "quitters" is echoed in Ethan's ambush of Futterman and his men, an action unprecedented for a Ford hero; and Hank Worden's performance as a barmy trailhand foreshadows the Mose Harper character.†

What this elaborate pattern of borrowings indicates is not so much that Ford was constructing an answer to Hawks' film (some of these elements are also present in the crude novel by Alan LeMay from which Ford and Frank Nugent adapted the script for *The Searchers),* but that the "anti-Westerns," particularly *Red River,* jarred Ford into a new area of thinking by suggesting an alternative course for the working-out of the hero's impulses. In the classic *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine,* Ford seemed to be endorsing an uneasy equation between force and morality by portraying revenge as socially beneficial and morally pure. The revenge transformed the community by cleansing it of its internal pressures—which were also the hero's pressures—and it won the hero the community's respect because he had done a necessary deed of which they, because of their civilized stultification, were incapable. When Ringo and Wyatt Earp take leave of Lordsburg and Tombstone at the end, it is of their own volition. Though they are still men of the wilderness, their desires and ideals are close to those of civilized men.

Now what is Ford, of all directors, to do with a hero like Ethan? *Red River* may have a parallel plot, but it is really about something altogether different, the maturing of the relationship between Dunson and Matthew. *The Searchers* is about Ethan's relationship to society, and the film's abruptly shifting moods and moral emphases are determined by the imbalances in that relationship. Since Ethan, for instance, finds it impossible to enter society through marriage, all of the marriages the film portrays are grotesquely unbalanced. Either the female dominates the male (the Edwardses, the Jorgensons), or the female is held in literal bondage to the male (Scar and his wives) or the partners are wildly incongruous (Laurie Jorgenson and the goonish cowboy she turns to in Martin's absence; Martin and Look, the chubby Indian wife he inadvertently buys at a trading post). Fundamentally alone though Ethan is, all of his dilemmas are shared by the community around him. When Brad Jorgenson learns, as Ethan did, that his lover (Lucy Edwards) has been raped and killed, he rushes madly off to be slain by the Indians, who are lurking in the darkness like the unseen, ungovernable forces of the libido. Martin, who is more restrained and civilized than Ethan, nevertheless resembles Ethan enough to suggest that his continual fleeing into the wilderness, away from Laurie's advances, holds a clue to what drove Ethan and Martha apart in the first place: a fundamental reluctance to become domesticated. Just as Laurie turns to the dull, dependable cowboy in despair of taming Martin, so it must have been that Martha turned to Ethan's dull brother for stability.

Even after Martin becomes, in effect, the hero by attempting to restrain Ethan's nihilism, he is merely following the principles with which the search began. And despite Martin's actions, it is finally Ethan who makes the decision about whether to kill Debbie or bring her home. Gestures against Ethan tend to remain only gestures; minor characters are continually frustrated in their attempts to change his course. Toward the end, Martin draws a knife on Ethan, but throws it down when he remains immobile. Martin cries, "I hope you die!" and Ethan responds with his characteristic assertion of invulnerability: "That'll be the day."

The one white character who is able to give Ethan pause is Clayton, who keeps his schizoid roles of minister and Texas Ranger in a subtle, if disturbing, balance: shouting "Hallelujah!" when he gets off a good pistol shot and snapping "Bible!" as if calling for a gun. Ward Bond is the authority figure in Ford's stock company—he is the one who explodes with joy and runs the first Stars and Stripes up the flagpole at the end of *Drums Along the Mohawk*—and he often seems to be the spokesman for Ford's own ambiguous outlook. (In *The Wings of Eagles,* made the year after *The Searchers,* he literally becomes the director, playing "John Dodge," the gruff maker of Westerns and sea stories.) It is a clue to Ford's outlook that Bond's three fullest roles—*Wagon Master, The Quiet Man* and *The Searchers*—all have him playing clerics who are also secular leaders, and even, in the latter two cases, warriors (in *The Quiet Man* he is involved in an I.R.A. cell). Because both roles are necessary for the survival of a primitive community, the Bond character is able to sacrifice the purity of one to satisfy the demands of the other. The most pragmatic of Ford's characters, he is a representative of civilized order who has won his position by restraining an innate primitivism. He averts his eyes on witnessing Martha's infidelity—just as his priest in *The Quiet Man* lies to save a marriage—in acknowledgement of the tissue of discreet lies and tactful evasions which enables a struggling society to stabilize itself.

The difference between Clayton and Ethan is succinctly expressed in their first meeting since the end of the war, when Clayton asks Ethan why he didn't show up for the surrender. "I don't *believe* in surrenders," says Ethan, adding sarcastically, "No—I still got *my* sabre, Reverend. Didn't turn it into no ploughshare, neither." Ethan, the eternal rebel, carries his rebellion to the point of madness. Clayton compromises, and this is what makes him a leader. The two men are several times seen tossing things back and forth—a canteen, a coin, a gun—in wary gestures of mutual forbearance. Although they never come to blows, they are close to it several times. What holds Ethan back is the same fundamental indecision which holds him back from Scar. To make a decisive move against either one would imply a commitment to either civilization or primitivism, and Ethan's dilemma is that he can't make the choice. When he finally meets up with Scar, it is the ultimate expression of John Wayne *macho*—he stands literally inches from Scar's face and growls insults at both his body ("Scar, eh? Plain to see how ya got your name.") and his soul ("You speak pretty good American—for a Comanch'—someone teach ya?"). Scar is equal to the *macho* ("You speak good Comanch'—someone teach you?") but he is similarly unable to make the decisive physical move.

When Scar dies, it is Martin, the half-breed, who kills him. In transferring the actual heroic deeds, the killing of Scar and the finding of Debbie, to Martin and to Mose, the fool, Ford is destroying the myth of the heroic loner. If Ethan's search is motivated by a desire to preserve the community, then the community, even against its will, must participate in the action. It would never have taken place if the outsider had not initiated it, but it is fundamentally a communal action. If the pragmatists (Clayton, the Jorgensons, Martha) are needed to stabilize society, the visionaries (Ethan, Martin, Mose) are needed to motivate it and define its goals. All, whether they realize it or not, are part of society, a fact which Ford visually underscores with his repeated shots through the doorways of homes. But the film is, as Ford has said, the "tragedy of a loner": Ethan must reject a society he can neither accept nor understand, and the society must reject him, since he belongs to neither the white nor the Indian world.

Martin belongs to both, which is why he is able

†With perhaps a borrowing from Worden's crazy Indian in Hawks' *The Big Sky* thrown in for good measure. One of the most astonishing visual *tours de force* in *The Searchers,* the procession of the horsemen between the parallel lines of Indians, is embryonically present in the scene in *The Big Sky* in which the Indians follow the keelboat along the river bank.

to accept both Debbie's miscegenation with Scar and Laurie's desire for a home. Until the search is consummated, however, he is unable to accept Laurie and civilization, for her perspective is just as distorted as Ethan's. Resplendent in the virginal white of her wedding dress, she urges that Ethan be allowed to kill Debbie because "Martha would want him to." Martin has told Laurie that Ethan is "a man that can go crazy-wild, and I intend to be there to stop him in case he does," but it is chillingly clear that Ethan's craziness is only quantitatively different from that of civilization in general.

Even the United States Cavalry, which Ford had eulogized in his 1940s Westerns, have bypassed their role as truce-keepers and become vindictive white supremacists. (It was around this time that Ford first commissioned a screenplay for *Cheyenne Autumn.)* Immediately after Ethan begins slaughtering buffalo so that the Indians will starve, a cavalry bugle merges with his gunshots. Ford gives the cavalry his traditional romantic trappings—jaunty marching lines, "Garry Owen" on the soundtrack—but he undercuts their romanticism, as he does Ethan's. The cavalry has frozen into an inflexible role: they make their entrance against a background of snow; they gallop through a river whose natural current has turned to ice; and—pre-dating *Little Big Man* by fourteen years—we are taken into an Indian village whose inhabitants they have massacred. Like Scar and Ethan, the cavalrymen have been trapped in a social tragedy whose terms have been established long before their arrival. The innocent Indians they slaughter, like the family slaughtered by Scar, have become pathetic pawns in a cycle of retribution which will end only when one race exterminates the other. In this context, it is surely no accident that Mose Harper is both the craziest of all the characters and the one who has the most obsessive need for civilization: all he talks about is being able to sit in a rocking chair. That is what he does when he arrives with Ethan at the burned-out home, and what he is doing at the end, when Debbie comes home. An even more ambiguous figure than Ethan, Mose wears a feather in his hat, does war dances, and speaks in a queer Indianized lingo ("Caddoes or Kiowas—Old Mose knows"), which is maybe why he finds Debbie so easily.

Miscegenation, next to war itself, is probably the most dramatic form of collision between cultures and by exploring a community's reaction to miscegenation, Ford is testing its degree of internal tension. The dark man, red or black, occupies a peculiar position in the American mythos: he is both a cultural bogey and a secretly worshipped talisman of the libidinous desires which the white man's culture takes pains to sublimate. The Western genre in both literature and film, which usually replaces the black man with the red man, is particularly expressive of the American psychical dilemma; Leslie Fiedler's celebrated thesis about American culture, which was received with scandalized disbelief at the time of its propagation, is rooted about equally in the writings of Cooper and the New England Puritans. (Ethan's name, which in the book was Amos Edwards, suggests a fusion between Ethan Allen and Jonathan Edwards—between the adventurer and Puritan impulses in the American personality.)

As Ford, starting with *The Sun Shines Bright* in 1953, began to probe deeper and deeper into the causes of social dissolution, racial conflict began to assume almost obsessive proportions in his stories, providing the dramatic center of *The Searchers, Sergeant Rutledge, Two Rode Together, Cheyenne Autumn, Seven Women* and even the comic *Donovan's Reef*. LeMay's novel lingers over the grisly details of the murders and rapes committed by the Indians on the frontier women. Ford's treatment of the massacre, by contrast, is marked by a devastating elision. The Gothic shot of Scar's shadow falling on Debbie in the graveyard and the fade-out on his blowing the horn are far more suggestive than an actual depiction of the massacre would have been. Our minds work much as Ethan's works when, in the next scene, he stares at the burning home with a fixed expression of horror. He is contemplating the unthinkable.

The emotion Ford emphasizes in the moments before the massacre is the women's fear, conveyed through the camera's compulsive pull into a large close-up of Lucy screaming (a very uncharacteristic shot for Ford and, as such, a doubly brutal shock) and through Martha's anxiety for Debbie. When Ethan, toward the middle of the film, finds a group of white women driven mad by their years among the Indians (one of them croons distractedly to a doll), he reacts with revulsion, and the camera pulls in to a large close-up of *his* face. He has become possessed by the same fear which possessed the women in the home. Eldridge Cleaver has given a cogent analysis of why this act above all is so inflammatory: "In a society where there exists a racial caste system . . . the gulf between the Mind and the Body will seem to coincide with the gulf between the two races. At that point, the fear of biological miscegenation is transposed into social imagery . . . The social distinction is made sacred." Therefore, as Cleaver puts it, "rape is an insurrectionary act." It is revealing that the archracist Ethan finds Martin's "marriage" to Look, the Indian woman, amusing rather than frightening. It has nothing to do with white culture. If a white man impregnates a dark woman, he is planting his seed in an alien culture; but if a dark man impregnates a white woman he is, in the eyes of the primitive white, violating her. 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 and trying to convey it to us with the subjective camera movement toward Ethan. But our first glimpse of Debbie as a woman makes it clear that the fear has a purely neurotic base. Like Martin, she has accepted her dual heritage; resigned to her role as Scar's wife (These are my people"), she nevertheless remembers her childhood (I remember . . . from always . . ."). Miscegenation has not destroyed her identity, but deepened it.

Ethan's climactic encounter with Debbie occurs in a rock cleft similar to the one in which, years before, he had found Lucy's body. He takes her roughly by the shoulders—their first physical contact in five years—and, in the same movement, suddenly swings her body into his arms. He says softly, "Let's go home, Debbie." It is not *just* the physical contact that prevents Ethan from killing the last of his family; there is also a sense of the profound memories which are flooding into his consciousness as he touches her. The lifting gesture, which seems almost involuntary, recalls the moment inside the home long ago when he lifted the child Debbie into his arms. Gone now is the hatred caused by his knowledge that she has slept with the man who violated his lover; gone are the years when she only existed for him as Scar's squaw. The proximity of his scalping of Scar is vital. When Ethan rises after the scalping, we do not see the corpse. We see only his face, and it is a face almost identical to the one which looked upon the burning home, a face purged of all passion. When Ethan chases Debbie, it is more out of reflex (this is the moment he has been steeling himself to for years) than from any real hatred or desire to kill her. He has been freed from his memories of Martha by a deeper, tribal memory.

At the end, the symbolic sublimation of red into white takes place as Martin accepts Laurie and the family embraces Debbie, still wearing her Indian clothes, on the doorstep of their home. And it is then that Ethan, who seemed on the verge of entering the Jorgensons' doorway (the future), steps aside to let the young couple pass him by and turns away to "wander forever between the winds" like his Indian nemesis. Scar and Ethan, blood-brothers in their commitment to primitive justice, have sacrificed themselves to make civilization possible. This is the meaning of the door opening and closing on the wilderness. It is the story of America.

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