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Andrew Sarris is the film critic of The Village Voice. Among his current projects are books on the Thirties in Hollywood and on John Ford.

THE SEARCHERS was generally misunderstood by American reviewers in 1956. Adapted from the Alan LeMay novel by Ford's family scenarist Frank S. Nugent, THE SEARCHERS represents Ford's ultimate divergence from the dramatic ironies of Dudley Nichols to the epical directness of Nugent. The Fifties marked the breakdown of traditional dramatic forms by a new surge of stylistic ambitiousness. 1956 was the year also of such official big pictures as George Stevens' GIANT, John Huston's MOBY DICK, William Wyler's FRIENDLY PERSUASION and Laurence Olivier's RICHARD III. But even to the conventional reviewers of the period, there was something flawed, unwieldy and heavy about these preconceived classics. And so the critical consensus settled upon AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS, a producer's package of highly-publicized cameo vaudeville bits glossed over with the superciliousness of an alleged S. J. Perelman script that later became the cause of litigation with two other screenwriters. Between the official classics and Michael Todd's camp classic there were a group of genuinely picaresque movies which were fully appreciated only in France. Among these were THE SEARCHERS, Alfred Hitchcock's THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH, George Cukor's BHOWANI JUNCTION, Budd Boetticher's SEVEN MEN FROM NOW, King Vidor's WAR AND PEACE and even Cecil B. De Mille's THE TEN COMMANDMENTS. And the best of these is still THE SEARCHERS, which manages to sum up stylistically all the best of what Ford had been with all the best of what he was to be.

The innate pictorialism of Ford's style, evident as early as 1917 in STRAIGHT SHOOTING, finds in THE SEARCHERS a majestically familial context in the very first shot of a door opening onto the screen and the world and the past, extending outward to a solitary figure inching his way forward to the enclosure, the sanctuary, the long-lost home, the full measure of his aching aspirations. However, Ford's pictorialism is just angular enough and windswept enough to avoid the too contrivedly concentric compositions of George Stevens' SHANE in which an antelope turns its head at that precise moment

that its antlers will frame the mysterious horseman (Alan Ladd) in the distance. But then SHANE is story-book (and storyboard) myth par excellence whereas THE SEARCHERS is lived-in epic with the kind of landscaped pastness across which the characters hang up their laundry and other hang-ups.

THE SEARCHERS is concerned as much with a peculiarly American madness and wanderlust as with anything else. Some of the characters start out mad, some achieve madness, and some have madness thrust upon them. Ford's world accommodates madness as it accommodates everything else, and with madness there is wisdom and robust humor, as with Mose Harper (Hank Worden), a certified lunatic who asks only to while away his last days in a rocking chair by a fireplace, and who gains his rocking chair for services rendered (to Ford as well as to John Wayne's Ethan Edwards.)

There is a fantastic sequence in THE SEARCHERS (I wrote some years ago) involving a brash frontier character played by Ward Bond. Bond is drinking some coffee in a standing-up position before going out to hunt some Comanches. He glances toward one of the bedrooms, and notices the woman of the house tenderly caressing the Army uniform of her husband's brother. Ford cuts back to a full-faced shot of Bond drinking his coffee, his eyes tactfully averted from the intimate scene he has witnessed. Nothing on earth would ever force this man to reveal what he had seen. There is a deep, subtle chivalry at work here, and in most of Ford's films, but it is never obtrusive enough to interfere with the flow of the narrative. The delicacy of emotion expressed here in three quick shots, perfectly cut, framed and distanced, would completely escape the dulled perception of our more literary-minded film critics even if they deigned to consider a despised genre like the Western. The economy of expression that Ford has achieved in fifty years of filmmaking constitutes the beauty of his style. If it had taken him any longer than three shots and a few seconds to establish this insight into the Bond character, the point would not be worth making. Ford would be false to the manners of a time and a place bounded by the rigorous necessity of survival.

Yet when Peter Bogdanovich asked Ford "Was the scene, toward the beginning, during which Wayne's sister-in-law gets his coat for him, meant to convey silently a past love between them?" Ford answered somewhat gruffly (in *John Ford* by Peter Bogdanovich produced by Design Yearbook Limited for Movie Magazine Limited, 21 Ivor Place, London, N. W. 1.): "Well, I thought it was pretty obvious—that his brother's wife was in love with Wayne; you couldn't hit it on the nose, but I think it's very plain to anyone with any intelligence. You could tell from the way she picked up his cape and I think you could tell from Ward Bond's expression and from his exit—as though he hadn't noticed anything."

The scene may be "obvious" now that we have been alerted to the larger implications of THE SEARCHERS, but in its own time, the scene, like Poe's purloined letter, was overlooked because of rather than in spite of its very obviousness. The intended



From left:
Walter Coy,
Pippa Scott,
Lana Wood,
John Wayne,
Dorothy Jordan.
All photos:
Museum of
Modern Art
Film Stills Archive.



From left:
Ward Bond,
John Wayne,
Dorothy Jordan.



emotion seems early and misplaced. We have just met the characters involved, and we have no inkling that this will be absolutely the last opportunity for a faded frontierswoman (Dorothy Jordan) to express, however covertly, the forbidden feelings of a lost love. We are dealing here with lives that are almost over, and the dreadful constriction of time running out is felt in the pinched awkwardness and cramped closeness of the domestic scenes involving a group of people variously doomed to slaughter, captivity, revenge before the final moments, two hours (screen time) and several years (narrative time) later when a man picks up a girl in his arms and is miraculously delivered of all the racist, revenge-seeking furies that have seared his soul.

Jean-Luc Godard once observed that as much

as he despised the reactionary politics of John Wayne he could never help but be moved by the emotional sweep of the awesomely avuncular gesture with which Wayne gathers up Natalie Wood after having given every indication that he wished to kill her for defiling his sacred memories of a little girl accepting his medal as a token of his chivalric devotion to her mother. Deep down we don't really expect him to kill her, any more than we expect Wayne to kill Montgomery Clift in Hawks's *RED RIVER*, but nonetheless the *dénouement* of *THE SEARCHERS* is infinitely more moving and artistically satisfying than that of *RED RIVER*, even discounting the intrusion of Joanne Dru's *deus ex machina* in the latter film. Part of the disparity of emotional effect can be attributed to the philosophical distinction between two visual styles—Hawks the eye-level vision of man as the measure of all things, Ford the double vision (through classical editing) of an event in all its vital immediacy and yet also in its ultimate memory image on the horizon of history.

Hence, the dramatic struggle of *THE SEARCHERS* is not waged between a protagonist and an antagonist, or indeed between two protagonists as antagonists, but rather within the protagonist himself. Jeffrey Hunter's surrogate son figure in *THE SEARCHERS* is the witness to Wayne's struggle with himself rather than a force in resolving it. The mystery of the film is what has actually happened to Wayne in that fearsome moment when he discovers the mutilated bodies of his brother, his beloved sister-in-law, his nephew, and later his niece. Surly, cryptic, almost menacing even before the slaughter, he is invested afterward with obsessiveness and implacability. We in the audience never see the bodies or the actual slaughter, only the smoke passing across Wayne's face at the moment of discovery, a cosmic composition of man ravaged by revenge-seeking emotions in the aftermath of an atrocity, but that cosmic composition reprinted so often in specialized film magazines never breaks the flow of action, but instead accelerates the development of characters, and cracks open, as violence traditionally does in drama, all their massively encrusted psychological secrets.

THE SEARCHERS is rich in the colors and substances of the seasons and the elements, from the whiteness of winter snows to the brownness of summer sands. When Wayne pledges his implacable presence at the last hiding place of his niece's Comanche captors "as sure as the earth turns," the film switches seasons with a swiftness that augments the metaphysical majesty of Wayne's turn of phrase. And with the change of seasons, come changes in the searchers, changes of costume, mood and even silhouette. The startling sight of Wayne in a sombrero is the final confirmation of psychological adaptability obliterating the conventions of a genre. The mere *litterateurs* who still infest the field of film reviewing may tend to overlook *THE SEARCHERS* as just another western. The fact remains that few westerns even in the so-called modern mold are so resolutely untraditional in their trappings. Ward Bond's head Texas ranger wears a stovepipe derby, and the rifles are sensibly if tackily sheathed

to keep out the dust. The only bona fide gun fight between good guys and bad guys ends with the bad guys shot in the back and robbed besides. Ford and Wayne tried back as long ago as *STAGECOACH* (1939) to introduce suspenders to the standard western costume, and they failed miserably.

Ford's humor is something else again. I must confess I found it eminently resistible back in the Forties and Fifties in that period when I, like most of the critical establishment, was unable to adjust to and discern the emotional connections in the new direction that Ford had taken. Nowadays I welcome the rugged frontier slapstick in *THE SEARCHERS* as a necessary humanizing modification of characters otherwise too excruciating to watch in their more serious pursuit. The community involvement, to which Ford's slapstick tends (with the help of reaction shots, that banal bugaboo of modern *cinéastes*), reduces some of the overwhelming solitude felt by the protagonist, and thus intensifies our own awareness of feelings that are all the more vivid for being momentarily relieved. It is much easier to see now than it was in 1956 that if Ford had been more solemn, *THE SEARCHERS* would have been less sublime.

It is our misfortune as film critics that we must discuss a film one-thing-at-a-time when on a screen so many things are happening and reverberating at the same time. How to evoke, for example, the conjunction of a geometric convergence of three columns of horsemen, two Indian, one Texan, with the evocative magnificence of Monument Valley, Ford's own slice of stylized Nature. All we can suggest is that Ford began filmmaking as a painter and added drama and music as he went along. In these terms, *THE SEARCHERS* is his greatest symphony. ■■■

THE SEARCHERS

1956, Warners, 119 minutes.

director John Ford; producer Merian C. Cooper; Screenplay Frank S. Nugent; from the novel by Alan LeMay; photography Winton C. Hoch (Technicolor and VistaVision); art direction Frank Hotelling and James Basevi; editing Jack Murray; assistant director Wingate Smith; music Max Steiner; title song ("A Man Was Born to Wander") Stan Jones.

CAST:

John Wayne	Ethan Edwards
Jeffrey Hunter	Martin Pawley
Vera Miles	Laurie Jorgensen
Ward Bond	Captain Reverend Clayton
Natalie Wood	Debbie Edwards
John Qualen	Lars Jorgensen
Olive Carey	Mrs. Jorgensen
Henry Brandon	Chief Scar
Ken Curtis	Charlie McCorry
Harry Carey, Jr.	Brad Jorgensen
Antonio Moreno	Emilio Figueroa
Pat Wayne	Lieutenant Greenhill
Hank Worden	Mose Harper
Lana Wood	Debbie, as a child
Walter Coy	Aaron Edwards
Dorothy Jordan	Martha Edwards
Pippa Scott	Lucy Edwards
Beulah Archuletta	Look



Opposite page top:

Jeffrey Hunter,
John Wayne and
Natalie Wood,

Bottom:

Olive Carey,
John Qualen
and John Wayne.

This page top:

John Wayne,
Beulah Archuletta
and Jeffrey Hunter.

Bottom: John Wayne.