

Hero, Text and Ideology in John Ford's *The Searchers*
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A critical theory by Robin Wood posits that the filmic genres popularized by the Hollywood system are not "discrete", but represent "different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions." (478) Wood claims that conventional theories fail to address this ideological phenomenon, and proposes a search for the myths and contradictions, produced by American capitalism, which fuel disparate filmic genres. Wood's attempt to discuss this ideology lists the "components" of a definition of "American capitalist ideology." (476) One component is the character of "the ideal male", the potent hero of the American way. (477) As the films produced out of capitalism tend to uphold the system's ideology, the hero produced by the film tends to represent the values of this ideology. Thus, through its hero, the classic Western naturalizes and justifies the "taming" of the land and the consequent subjugation of its "libidinous" native people in order to build "civilization." (476)

However, genre films are only potent because of the potentially subversive "intervention of a clearly defined artistic personality in an ideological-generic structure." (479) In *The Searchers*, John Ford manipulates the traditional relationship between hero, text, and ideology to challenge the dominant values of American society. The viewer initially identifies with the conventional character of Ethan Edwards, but is gradually forced to reject this "hero" and his values, and to regard Martin Pawley, a representative of more liberal beliefs, as the new-order "ideal male." Martin is both an indicator of how the audience should react to Ethan's extremist tendencies, and an alternative to them. Through the rejection of Ethan, in favour of Martin, Ford's film rejects specific aspects of the capitalist ideology, specifically economic greed, racism and the notion of excusable violence.

It might seem difficult to reappropriate a genre which exists to recount the expansionist myth to denounce the role of money in society, yet Ford successfully contrasts Ethan, the hero in decline, with Martin's quasi-socialist values. The Western hero rarely possesses a penny, even as he acts as the model of personal initiative. (476) This inconsistency founds Wood's belief that the Hollywood system is "ashamed" of its own role in the allocation of wealth in the capitalist structure. (477) *The Searchers*, however, immerses Ethan in the economic sphere in a very negative way. Early in the film, he literally tosses a bag of fresh-minted "Yankee dollars" at his brother. The ominous music, Ethan's refusal to explain his whereabouts since the War, and Reverend Clayton's remark that Ethan "fits a lot of descriptions" make the viewer believe that the alleged hero is actually a bank-robber. A hero could only be excused for such activities if the money was reallocated to the poor afterwards, but this does not appear to be the case; Ethan uses his money to appease people, and to establish his power. Later in the film, the discourse of monetary worth is reintroduced in the characters of Fetterman and the

Mexican, each of whom sell Ethan information regarding Debbie. The viewer is meant to condemn the characters' goals to profit from the Edwards' loss, and to be especially disturbed that Ethan engages and indulges their scheme, that he is dissolute enough to buy compassion.

Martin, similar to the conventional hero whose money is invisible, possesses nothing and avoids the realm of economics. However, attention is drawn to the fact that when Martin lacks something practical, his needs are met, usually by Laurie. (This fact is reminiscent of the communist adage of "to each according to his needs.") She provides him with the "dead man's clothes" which he wears during his quest, as well as the horse he rides. In the western genre, the horse is usually paired with the hero throughout, and it is significant that Ford draws attention to the fact that Martin's is simply "on loan." Martin shuns an economically-comfortable life with the Jorgensens to continue his quest, and later refuses to be named as Ethan's heir, disagreeing with his morals and intentions. The only instance in which Martin does not reject material value is during his trade with the Indians. However, the film's rejection of capitalist profit is maintained, as the deal is a barter (no money is involved) and as the trade goes astray, and Martin acquires a wife instead of a blanket.

Another component of capitalist ideology identified by Wood is the naturalized subjugation of the Indians. (476) This "necessary" racism is challenged through *The Searchers'* replacement of the old-order hero with the new. Ethan is initially rude to Martin, who is essentially Edwards' family, simply because he's one-eighth Cherokee. The viewer easily identifies this prejudice as unfounded, as they have already started to empathize with the young, earnest Martin. Ethan's extremely racist discourse is resumed in his statement that Comanches are not human, but are "things" capable of riding a horse until it dies, then eating it! This statement is emblematic of the hate-motivated hyperbole which the film views as a tragic product of the expansionist psyche. Most importantly, this racial hatred is shown as irrational, as it causes Ethan to attempt to kill Debbie, something the viewer cannot comprehend. Ethan feels that regardless of whether she was abducted, the fact that Debbie has become the wife of an Indian "buck" makes her somehow worse than the natives (otherwise his quest would be to kill Scar). Ethan's intention to kill Debbie recalls the similar instance in Ford's *Stagecoach*, where Hatfield almost "mercifully" kills Mrs. Mallory by shooting her through the head, and reveals two elements of the racist ideology. First, a quick death is better for a moral white woman than being raped by an Indian. Secondly, it reveals the dominant society's fear of interbreeding with the repressed "other", which would threaten the well-guarded boundaries of their "civilization", and which illuminates Ethan's dislike of Martin's multiracial background. Both assumptions by Ethan are seen by Ford's viewer as the products of a vicious ideology, and as such, he can no longer survive as the hero.

With regard to race, Martin's values are again held as morally superior. While it is difficult to declare Martin completely non-racist by modern standards, his views would have been radical in 1868 or 1956. Martin's dialogue establishes that he is trying to find Debbie simply because she has been abducted, *not* because she was taken by Indians. It is illuminating to compare this nonchalant view of the Nyeka as the enemy because of their

deeds, not their race, with Ethan's obsessive need to kill Debbie. In fact, Martin is completely unmoved by the notion that Indians are inherently evil, and even Ethan's revelation that Martin's mother's scalp was on Scar's lance does not drive him to vengeance. To Martin, both sides are capable of compassion and brutality, and the stereotype "doesn't matter" to his present quest to rescue Debbie. Another subtle glimpse of Martin's essentially non-racist beliefs is found in his narration / letter to Laurie: he gives Look the benefit of the doubt regarding whether she was killed while trying to warn the Nyeka, or to find Debbie for him. His open-mindedness, and lack of vengeance is also evident when he finds Look dead, an obvious parallel to Ethan finding Martha Edwards at the beginning, and feels remorse, not vindication.

The issues of force and violence surround any discussion of the "virile", "potent" Western hero. (477) Once again, Ford rejects the reality of the capitalist project by representing Ethan as the potential extreme of individual violence. One theory suggests that the function of the "ideal male" is to provide a model of a moral code for killing, idealized in the convention of a shoot-out between good and evil. (Warshow: 466) The need to subjugate evil (the Indians) that fuels the conventional duel seems to have consumed Ethan, and his unrepentant, excessive violence is a repeated motif throughout *The Searchers*. Early in the search, Ethan shoots out the eyes of a buried Comanche, knowing (somehow...) that this will prevent the soul from entering the spirit world. This example shows Ethan not only as physically violent, but also deeply malicious, even psychotic, and not the controlled persona with which the viewer expects to identify. Later, he persists in his attack on the retreating war party, against the more sympathetic advice of the Reverend. He slaughters a herd of buffalo under the already dubious claim that it will make them unavailable to feed the Indians, but more likely to "vent" his extraordinary rage. In fact, Ethan's right to bear arms makes him more of a threat to the new-order hero's rescue of Debbie than her captors as Martin has to risk his life when Ethan attempts to kill her. Lastly, when he is denied the "hero's" opportunity to kill Scar, Ethan scalps him, rendering himself on the same plane as "the savages." The image of the old-order hero, with a bloody scalp in hand, is Ford's piercing rendering of the expansionist project.

Martin again opposes Ethan, *and* the conventional role of the hero as the harbinger of "stylish violence." The new hero does not glorify killing, rather he avoids it accept as self-defence. The first time Martin shoots anyone (the unidentified Indian at the initial confrontation) he actually cries and throws down his gun. Later, he pulls a knife on Ethan, who has tried to kill Debbie, but is "too civilized" to murder out of anger, even though the audience might see it as justified! Lastly, Martin fulfils the important heroic function of killing the villain, but unlike the convention of the Western, he does not involve himself in a shoot-out in the street. Instead, undramatically shoots Scar in the door of Debbie's tepee, to defend himself and his foster-sister. This action is de-emphasized by the film, as we never see Martin shoot Scar, but hear the gunfire from the position of the cavalry. (cf. *Stagecoach*) So, although Ford's new hero qualifies as Wood's "adventurer, ... man of action", he rejects the expansionist mandate to glorify "necessary roughness."

In *The Searchers*, Wood's generic component of the "ideal male" is the primary vehicle used to challenge of the capitalist ideology. Martin, the *new hero* who ascends to "ideal" status, represents values of economic cooperation and modesty, social equality and pacifism. Through forcing our realization of the old-order "hero's" greed, racism, and violence, Ford intends to show the inevitable outcome of the absolute capitalist ideal, an ideal that in practice is entirely undesirable. Manipulating our expectations, *The Searchers* makes the viewer temporarily compliant in the values embodied by Ethan, and thereby makes us question our own values.

Ford attempts much in this film: John Wayne is the most popular and long-revered of all Western hero's, and it is difficult to make the viewer reject their favourite, even as a victim of the psychological reach of the expansionist credo. Clearly, revealing the damage done by the capitalist ideology, whether individual or social, in the frontier society of 1868, or in the "separate but equal" context of 1956, was important to the director. Fortunately, Wood's theory, examining the new meaning created by the juxtaposition of the thesis of a preexistent text with the antithetical views of the auteur, reaffirms Ford's success, and the potency of the genre film.

Works Cited

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