

The Racial Frontier in John Ford's *The Searchers*

La Frontera Racial en *The Searchers* de John Ford

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Recibido: 5 de febrero de 2004

Aceptado: 8 de julio de 2004

ABSTRACT

Western American society has often been portrayed in a simplistic manner in many Hollywood Western films. In *The Searchers* (1956), however, John Ford creates one of the more complex representations of social issues on Western frontiers, in which he explores not simply interactions between whites and Indians, but those between immigrants and Hispanics as well. In addition to showing social interactions between different groups, Ford's film deals with interethnic sexual relations, which was one of the most divisive issues in American society, with the theme of miscegenation actually dominating the film. Noting that *The Searchers* was made and released during the early days of the Civil Rights movement, the article examines how the major themes of the film parallel issues of race and integration that were being discussed in contemporary American society, and Ford's own interest in those themes.

Key words: Race, miscegenation, civil rights, the American West, film, John Ford.

RESUMEN

La sociedad del Oeste americano a menudo ha estado representada de una manera muy simple en muchos de los «westerns» de Hollywood. Por contraste, en *The Searchers* (1956) John Ford crea una de las representaciones más complejas de cuestiones sociales en las fronteras occidentales, en la cual explora no sólo las interacciones entre los blancos y los indios, sino también las relaciones entre inmigrantes e hispanos. Además de abordar las interacciones entre grupos sociales diferentes, la película de Ford también trata de las relaciones sexuales interétnicas, que era uno de los temas más conflictivos de la sociedad americana, convirtiendo el mestizaje en tema central de la película. Considerando que *The Searchers* fue elaborada y estrenada durante los inicios del movimiento por los derechos civiles, este artículo analiza cómo los temas principales de la película reflejan problemas relacionados con la raza y la integración que se estaban debatiendo en la sociedad contemporánea americana, así como el interés del propio Ford en tales cuestiones.

Palabras clave: Raza, relaciones inter-raciales, derechos civiles, la sociedad del Oeste americano, cine, John Ford.

CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. Race in the American West. 3. Race and miscegenation in John Ford films. 4. Miscegenation in *The Searchers*. 5. Post-war America and the movement towards Civil Rights. 6. Ford's views on race and politics. 7. Conclusion. 8. Bibliography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the earliest years of filmmaking, the American West has been a popular setting for films. Even before the arrival of cinema, many people were familiar with

stories about the West from various expressions of popular culture. As Richard Slotkin notes: «The West was already a mythologized space when the first moviemakers found it, and early Westerns built directly on the formulas, images, and allegorizing traditions of the Wild West show and cheap literature. No other genre has pre-cinematic roots of comparable depth and density»¹. The Western itself as a genre was a distinctly «American subject.» Richard Abel suggests that silent Westerns functioned «within a rejuvenated discourse of Americanization, an overtly racist discourse that sought to privilege the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (and the masculine) as dominant in any conception of American national identity»². This type of approach continued to exist, with very few exceptions, in the western film.

In the period between the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, particularly after the release of Delmer Daves's pro-Indian film *Broken Arrow* in 1950, there was a shift in some of the major representations of western themes. During the course of the 1950s, Westerns began to offer more sympathetic depictions of Indians at the same time as they treated white males in a more complex, and occasionally critical, manner. During this period Western films also provided an opportunity to reflect on contemporary political and social issues by displacing them to the safety of a historical setting. John Ford's *The Searchers* is an example of these new trends. Released in 1956, the overall integrationist tone of the film reflected the social events and movements that coincided with its production. At the same time, Ford's work was also affected by the declining influence of the Production Code on the industry. Although the way in which *The Searchers* dealt with some themes still had many limitations, this film nonetheless explored issues concerning race, miscegenation and kinship which had very seldom been discussed previously, save in the most oblique and simplistic way.

The Searchers was based on a novel of the same title by Alan LeMay. The story dealt with the return of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), a veteran of the Confederate army, to his brother's farm in Texas in 1868. Living on the farm is his brother Aaron, Aaron's wife Martha, their three children Lucy, Ben and Debbie, and their adopted son, Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), who was rescued as an infant by Ethan after his parents were massacred by Indians. Soon after Ethan's return home, he, together with Martin, joins the Texas Rangers to pursue what appear to be cattle rustlers. When they find the cattle dead, Ethan realizes that they have been lured from their homes by Comanche Indians, who are on a killing raid. When Ethan returns to his brother's house, he finds it destroyed, Aaron, Martha, and Ben killed, and their two daughters taken captive. The search then begins for the two girls. Lucy is soon discovered: she has been raped and killed. Ethan and Martin then continue with their increasingly obsessive search for Debbie, which lasts approximately seven years. Martin soon realizes that Ethan is searching not to rescue Debbie (played by Lana Wood as a child, and Natalie Wood as an adult), but to kill her for «living with a buck.» In the end they find Debbie, now an adult and a wife of the Comanche chief Scar (Henry Brandon). Martin rescues her before a raid

¹ SLOTKIN, 1992, p. 234.

² ABEL, 1999, p. 152.

on the Indian encampment, and Ethan – relenting – finally takes her back to the Jorgensen family, friends of the Edwards's and a symbol of society and civilization on the frontier. Ethan himself disappears into the desert.

The Searchers represented the revival of a basic form of American popular culture, the captivity narrative, which had been first popularised in the late seventeenth century after the publication of Mary Rowlandson's account of her captivity among the Narragansett and Wampanoag Indians. The captivity narrative often contained strong religious overtones, particularly in early narratives, and presented what would become a stereotyped depiction of the savage Indian captor displaying wanton cruelty to the captives. At the same time, many captivity narratives also articulated a fear of unrepressed sexuality, notably the lust of the Indian male for white women³. Such narratives expressed the anxiety that white women who were held captive might develop emotional and physical intimacy with their Indian captors and eventually choose life with such men rather than wish to return to their white homes⁴.

Anxiety over interracial sexual relationships was traditionally strong in white America, but concern tended to be especially strong regarding relationships between white women and non-white men. While anti-miscegenation laws referred to «whites» in general, their real or implied focus was on white women. Most of these laws were designed primarily to bar marriage. The implication was that interracial sexual relationships, particularly those between white men and non-white women, while morally and socially questionable, were not illegal. Anti-miscegenation laws were often passed after scandals of white women involved in interracial relationships, and the majority of couples charged for violating anti-miscegenation laws involved white women and black men⁵.

2. RACE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

Barbara Mortimer defines the frontier as «an undeveloped borderland of interaction between competing societies, which, from the perspective of whites, is unowned and therefore contested ground»⁶. For a time in the West, the frontier was one which included multiple races (Indians, Blacks, Asians, Mexicans, and White migrants and immigrants), all of whom were attempting to carve out their own place in the unknown, and supposedly unowned, territory. The multi-cultural character of western society provided greater opportunities for the races to mix, and also posed challenges to racial boundaries set when the emphasis was primarily on black and white classifications ingrained in the North and the South in the ante-bellum era⁷.

³ See BARNETT, 1975, pp. 7-8, for a general description of the stereotype of the cruelty which an Indian would inflict upon his captive.

⁴ MORTIMER, 2000, pp. 4-5.

⁵ PASCOE, 1999, pp. 215-230.

⁶ MORTIMER, 2000, p. 3.

⁷ The use of the word «Anglo-Saxon» sprang into popularity in the 1840s and 1850s, primarily to distinguish whites in general (despite the mixture of their European background) from blacks, Indians, Asians, Spaniards and Mexicans. HORSMAN, 1981, pp. 3-4.

The Searchers is an investigation of race, and one of the major themes of the film is miscegenation, the sexual mixing of white and non-white races. Ford examines the variety of the racial mixture in Texas and the South-west, with the representation of a Western society whose inhabitants included Indians, Mexicans, and whites, and examples of interracial mixing. Although *The Searchers* did not present an accurate view of the settlement of the West, it did suggest just how varied and intermixed Western society might be⁸.

The majority of American Western films presented a very simplified view of the West, primarily pitting heroic, God-fearing white American settlers against uncivilised and savage Indians in a harsh and unforgiving frontier environment. In reality, the frontier was characterised by an ethnic and cultural mixture that included not only Indians (who were themselves diverse in their tribal, cultural, and linguistic differences), a long-established Hispanic population in large sections of the West, Mexican immigrants, native-born whites (including a large number of Mormons), and African Americans, but also immigrants from numerous countries in Europe and Asia. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage note that the West in the nineteenth-century was «the most culturally diverse section of the country. From 1860 to 1900 between a third and a fourth of all people living in the West had been born in another country»⁹. The cultural and ethnic diversity in the West also questioned long-existing constructions of racial superiority. Patricia Nelson Limerick argues that such diversity raised new questions about race:

Were Indians better than blacks – more capable of civilization and assimilation – perhaps even suitable for miscegenation? Were Mexicans essentially Indians? Did their European heritage count for anything? Were «mongrel» races even worse than other «pure» races? Where did Asians fit in the racial ranking? Were they humble, menial workers – or representatives of a great center of civilization, art, and, best of all, trade? Were the Japanese different from, perhaps more tolerable than, the Chinese? What about southern and eastern Europeans? When Greek workers in the mines went on strike and violence followed, was this race war or class war? Western diversity forced racists to think – an unaccustomed activity.¹⁰

This Western diversity led to constant redefinitions of race and ethnicity on all social levels. This ranged from political power to access to jobs to relationships between friends, neighbours and sexual partners. Definitions of race became especially complicated when miscegenation occurred between the Indians and the traders, settlers, and manual labourers of the West. Spanish colonisers in North America

⁸ *The Searchers* contains a wide variety of characters of disparate backgrounds, representing different races and classes, as well as nationalities. There is the white Edwards family, the Scandinavian immigrant Lars Jorgensen, the mix of Spaniards and Mexicans in the cantina, the Indians, and those who are mixed-race. Martin himself is one eighth Cherokee. Interracial relations depicted in the film were both economic and sexual. Whites, Mexicans, Indians, and Spaniards mix through trade. Examples of the sexual mixing (or the possibilities of it) are presented through Martin and his marriage to the Indian woman Look, Debbie and her relationship with Scar, and the white women rescued by the Cavalry after their captivity among the Indians.

⁹ JAMESON and ARMITAGE, 1997, pp. 3-16.

¹⁰ LIMERICK, 1987, p. 260.

had recognised the variety of racial and ethnic mixing that occurred with a categorisation of persons of mixed race, among them *mestizos* (descendants of Spaniards and Mexican Indians), *coyotes* (Spanish and New Mexican Indians), *mulattoes* (black-white mixture, but sometimes with Indian ancestry), and *lobos* (racial mixture), to name a few¹¹. Angloamericans, and white ethnic immigrants applied a more simplistic racial categorisation. They attempted to define «whiteness» to insure their dominance in the social order, and, as Richard White notes, to «justify white expansion at the expense of nonwhite peoples»¹². Nonwhites were divided into four theoretically distinct racial categories in the West: Indians, Mexicans (Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants), Mongolians (Chinese, although sometimes used to describe all Asians), and blacks. In the late nineteenth century, numerous Western states passed anti-miscegenation laws in order to prevent nonwhites from marrying whites. While anti-miscegenation laws had existed in the United States since the late seventeenth century, they had been passed primarily to restrict marriages between whites and blacks. The laws passed in the Western states in the late nineteenth century were far more complicated and clearly expressed support for white supremacy¹³. Some Western states prohibited whites to marry blacks, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Malaysians, or members of other ethnic groups¹⁴.

3. RACE AND MISCEGENATION IN JOHN FORD FILMS

Race and ethnicity have been important themes in many of John Ford's films, and particularly his Westerns. While Ford's interest in race has been investigated in a more complex manner in films produced later in his career, ethnic diversity and intermixture were also features in his sound Westerns in the 1930s and 1940s. In *Stagecoach* (1939), Ford offered a brief portrait of a more racially complex west than many of his contemporaries. Although the dominant racial figures in the film were Indians (a Cheyenne warrior and the war-like Apaches), there was also the character of the Mexican manager of the Apache Wells stagecoach station, Chris (Chris Pin Martin) and his Apache wife, Yakima (Elvira Ríos), as well as humorously complaining stories by the white stagecoach driver Buck (Andy Devine) about his marriage to a Mexican woman. *My Darling Clementine* (1946) contains the representation of a racially ambiguous saloon singer/prostitute whose ancestry is either Indian or Mexican. *Fort Apache* (1948) gave a more complex view of Indians. The Apaches in the film are portrayed as honourable men who are escaping crooked white officials but return to American soil in order to make arrangements for peace.

¹¹ JAMESON and ARMITAGE, 1997, p. 6.

¹² WHITE, 1991, pp. 320-21.

¹³ Southern states also updated their anti-miscegenation laws in the early twentieth century, including racial categories that were first listed by states in the West. PASCOE, 1999, pp. 216-217.

¹⁴ FOWLER, 1987, pp. 336-439. Fowler lists the anti-miscegenation statutes and cases that were passed or tried in the states between 1662 and 1930, giving information as to the subject of the case, the groups that were targeted by the state, what punishment or fine was involved, and the status of marriage and other provisions.

The violence they commit against the cavalry troop, led by the racist Colonel Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda) is to defend themselves from a trap, but they refuse to massacre the entire cavalry troop, which Cochise realises has been led by the madness of Thursday. Ford also looked at the issue of race in several non-Western films. For example, racist lynch mobs appeared in *Judge Priest* (1934) and *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953). *The Searchers*, however, is one of his more elaborate representations of the West with its depiction of various western geographical locations as well as its emphasis on the theme of miscegenation throughout the film.

The diversity of Western society revealed in *The Searchers* is a result of the different geographical locations covered by the search and the nature of the search itself. The location of the Edwards's farm is never mentioned, but it is assumed that it is on the frontier, in the Western part of Texas, an area where the settlers still have problematic relationships with the Indians such as the Comanches and Kiowas. When, at the beginning of the film, a search party is organised to find cows that have disappeared from the Jorgensen farm, Mose Harper (Hank Worden) mentions his belief that Indians, either Caddos or Kiowas, have probably stolen the cattle. The search for Debbie covers a wide geographical area. On his first return to the Jorgensen ranch, Ethan tells them of the places they have visited that year: «Fort Richardson, Wingate, Cobb, Anadarko Agency.» Richardson was located west of the Dallas/Fort Worth area, Wingate in New Mexico on the other side of Albuquerque, Cobb and the Anadarko Agency in Oklahoma in the Indian territory, over two hundred miles east of Ford Richardson. During the five-year section of their search, although the territory is not named, Ethan and Martin obviously go into Hispanic regions in the Southwest, and possibly into Mexico itself. When they eventually find Scar and Debbie at the end, it is at «Seven Fingers» at the «south end of the Malapai, » in the Northwest section of Texas¹⁵. The extent of their search brings them into contact with the Seventh Cavalry after their massacre of an Indian village, frontier traders such as the white Jerem Futterman (Peter Mamakos) and the Hispanic Emilio Gabriel Fernandez y Figueroa (Antonio Moreno), and various Indian tribes with whom they trade and attempt to get information regarding the whereabouts of Scar.

The vast territorial distances involved in the search permitted a more complex representation of different communities' attitudes toward racial relations on the frontier in *The Searchers* than Ford had attempted in his previous Westerns. The Edwards family, for example, was portrayed as part of a close-knit, white, farming and ranching community. There are indications that life on the frontier is difficult, as Aaron notes that several families have given up farming and returned to picking cotton. Yet at the same time, there is a certain amount of success, and not just among American settlers in the area. Lars Jorgensen (John Qualen) is a Scandinavian immigrant who reflects the fact that settlers in the West were not only whites from the East. In Texas itself there were approximately 30.000 European-born citizens

¹⁵ BUSCOMBE, 2000, pp.31-32.

in 1860. Many of these primarily French, German and Irish immigrants became assimilated into the Anglo-Texan communities and lost their European cultural identity, although some immigrants did form their own enclaves¹⁶. Although Lars still retains his accent, he has married an American woman and together they have raised a family and are attempting to make a success out of cattle ranching. They consider themselves «Texicans», identifying themselves with Texas rather than their original birth places. Thus, the family and their farm become symbols of white civilisation and mores in the film.

The Indians, while at times adhering to known stereotypes of either bloodthirsty brutes or noble savages, were often placed by Ford in more demanding roles and situations. Throughout the film, there is regular communication between Indians and whites. Indians trading with Futterman provide one of the first clues to the possible whereabouts of Debbie. Ethan and Martin are in constant contact with the Indians in order to obtain goods and information. During the course of one transaction, they not only receive information but Martin also accidentally gains a wife, Look (Beulah Archuletta). Later, Martin and Ethan come across the aftermath of a massacre of an Indian tribe by the Seventh Cavalry. The massacre is indiscriminate, with men, women, and children all victims. One of the innocent victims is Martin's Indian «wife» Look. Although Look had previously been introduced as a comic figure, a homely, plump, and obedient «wife», her death is presented in a more sensitive light. She is no longer the object of Ethan's ridicule towards Martin, or the cause of Martin's frustration at his mistake in conducting his trade negotiations. Instead, her death is treated as a tragic waste of life. When her body is found, Ethan respectfully covers it and calls Martin's attention to her death. Martin himself asks Ethan plaintively after the discover of her body, «What did them soldiers have to go and kill her for, Ethan? She never done nobody any harm.» Despite the raid on the Edwards home, the Indians are not shown simply as murderous savages, but as victims of the American military in the West. Although Scar did murder the Edwards family, he did not do so purely out of cold-blooded cruelty. His reason for committing the act was to avenge the death of his two sons, who were killed by whites.

The ethnic diversity that Ethan and Martin encounter on the frontier is not limited to their relations with the Indians. Their search leads them into the Hispanic sections of the Southwest, and possibly into Mexico. One of their most important leads about locating Scar comes from a Hispanic trader, Emilio Gabriel Fernandez y Figueroa, who is introduced to them by Mose, who has been the only other person to continue the search for Debbie. He conducts trade with Scar and it is he who guides Ethan and Martin to Scar and who introduces them to him. When Scar and Ethan finally meet, they speak in both the Comanche language and in English. Scar knows who Ethan is and the reason for his search, possibly learning about it through his own communications with various traders and Indians. The meeting with Scar does not culminate in the release of Debbie to Martin or Ethan, but they do see her for the first time since her abduction. Debbie, adopted by the tribe, is grown up,

¹⁶ FEHRENBACH, 2000, pp. 290-96.

safe and well, and married to Scar. This meeting with Scar brings together the different groups presented in the film, and the relationships these different groups have with each other.

4. MISCEGENATION IN *THE SEARCHERS*

The discussion of miscegenation made *The Searchers* stand out in particular from Ford's previous Westerns. Sexual relationships between whites and Indians occurred almost from the moment the two groups first met in America. It was not uncommon for explorers and even early settlers, who were usually men, to establish sexual and domestic relations with Indian women. The most famous case of intermarriage between an Indian woman and a white man was that of Pocahontas's marriage with John Rolfe in 1613¹⁷. During colonial times, some hunters and traders had «squaw wives», though these marriages were not necessarily approved by white society¹⁸. In most cases, intermarriage was between an Indian woman and a white man. Sometimes they came about in order to secure peace between Indians and whites, as in the case of Pocahontas and Rolfe. Sometimes it was to stave off loneliness in the wilderness or to have the aid of someone who could act as interpreter to other Indians, as was the case with some traders. Whatever the reasons, personal relationships between Indians and whites seemed to develop very early in the settlement process, and a stereotype of them was developed through literary narratives. It was often on the basis of stories from these fictional works that films first began to explore the theme.

In dealing with miscegenation, *The Searchers* was not only linked to a long-existing historical and literary tradition but was also confronting an old movie taboo, since depicting miscegenation was specifically banned by the motion picture industry's Production Code between 1930 and 1956¹⁹. But by 1956, the Production Code was outdated, and in that year would be revised, with miscegenation being among one of several themes no longer banned²⁰. *The Searchers*, like many captivity narratives of the past, investigated the idea of the sexual threat that was faced by

¹⁷ PEARCE, 1965, p. 9.

¹⁸ KOLODNY, 1984, p. 70.

¹⁹ Miscegenation was defined as «sex relationship between the white and black races» and was forbidden in the original 1930 Production Code. While the Code expressly defined miscegenation to be relationships between blacks and whites, filmmakers were often hesitant to use the theme at all, particularly after the Production Code Administration was formed in 1934 to regulate the tenets of the Production Code. In 1956, the Production Code was revised and among the themes excluded from censorship was miscegenation. For a text of the 1930 Production Code, see «The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930» in MAST (ed.), 1982, pp. 321-333.

²⁰ There is nothing in the Production Code Administration files for this film that showed any concern about the representation of miscegenation or of other racial groups. Rather, there is more concern about the representation of a minister encouraging two men to settle their differences with a fist-fight, protest over the savagery of the protagonist scalping an Indian, and concerns over the vulgarity of several sections of dialogue and one scene of dancing. Geoffrey Shurlock to John Ford, 20 June 1955, *The Searchers*, PCA.

many of the captives. It is this personal threat, and the more general social fear of miscegenation that is the major theme of the film. The way this issue is viewed by various characters in the film not only enriches the portrayal of the characters themselves and their motivations, but provides insight into the racial views of American society. Ford presents the first two examples of the horrors of sexual assault solely through Ethan's eyes, when he returns to the Edwards's home after the Indian raid. Calling for Martha, he first finds her blue dress, torn and covered with dirt, in front of the house. Although the audience is never shown or told exactly what has happened to Martha, we are shown the sadness and mourning in Ethan's stance when he discovers the body, as he collapses slightly and lowers his head. The assumption is that Martha has been raped prior to her death, and possibly mutilated. The extent of the brutality that Martha experienced, and from which we must all be protected, is also shown in Ethan's treatment of Martin, who attempts to go into the house to see what has happened. Ethan strikes Martin down and orders Mose to prevent him from entering the house. The second example is when Ethan finds Lucy's body in a canyon. Lucy's experience is so terrible that the audience does not even see Ethan's initial response to the discovery, but only his attitude after he has buried the body and rejoined Martin and Brad. Refusing to speak about what he saw in the canyon, he angrily digs into the ground with his knife. The violent depravity that Lucy has suffered is so terrible it has virtually rendered him speechless. When Brad learns of Lucy's death, the horror of what he *imagines* she suffered causes him to go insane and to go on a suicidal raid into Scar's camp. Miscegenation itself is never mentioned, but the negative implications of it pervade the film. When Martin asks Ethan if he thinks Debbie is still alive, Ethan responds that she is, and that the Indians will raise her until she is of an age to ..., and then Ethan stops. He was going to say «until she is old enough to marry an Indian», but he simply cannot bring himself to even talk about it.

When Ethan and Martin meet with the Seventh Cavalry the horrors of miscegenation are again shown. But this time the audience is not restricted to Ethan's own view and response, but is itself able to see the effects that living with the Indians have had on white women. The cavalry has rescued some white women who have been held captive by the Indians. Ethan and Martin are led into a room where the surviving captives are held, hoping to find Debbie there. Instead, they find white girls who have gone crazy as a result of their captivity. The girls laugh hysterically, and clutch at each other. They are no longer able to converse at all and instead speak some kind of gobbledygook. When one girl notices Debbie's doll, which Martin has been carrying with him in the hopes that they will recognise her by her reaction to it, she (the captive girl) grabs it from Martin and starts cooing at it. The implication in this scene is that captivity amongst Indians makes white women insane and/or regress into childhood. Having been raped by an Indian, and having survived it, is basically «a fate worse than death»²¹. When a cavalry officer

²¹ This is the belief that the sexual transgression of a white woman with a non-white man (usually Indian or black) is so brutal and savage that it is better to be killed than to endure it. The theme has been

makes the comment «It's hard to believe they're white», Ethan responds, «They're not white, anymore.»

This extremely negative, and stereotypical, view of miscegenation is, at the same time, negated by Ford. The issue is made much more complex by Martin's character, by his brief «marriage» to Look and his long-term relationship with Laurie, and by the representation of the relationship between Debbie and Scar. Martin himself is part Indian. He is one-eighth Cherokee, seven-eighths Welsh and English. Although he is accepted by the community as white, Ethan remarks on his Indianness. When they see each other at the start of the film, Ethan remarks «A fella could mistake you for a half-breed.» Martin does exhibit certain «Indian» traits. For instance, he is able to read a trail, and notices something suspicious about the trail they are following when the rangers are led away from their homes to find Jorgensen's cattle. Before he is able to tell Ethan what he thinks, he is interrupted by the discovery of the cattle. He also suspects, after he and Ethan have left Futterman's trading post, that they have been followed. When he relates this suspicion to Ethan, Ethan's response is, «That's the Indian in you talking.» Although Martin does display aspects of Indian «instincts», he is primarily a white man. In some ways, he is more white than Ethan who, despite being racially white, displays many cultural attributes associated stereotypically with Indians, thus seeming more «Indian» than Martin. Ethan, not Martin, understands the nuances of Indian culture, customs and beliefs, and can speak the Comanche language. The cover of his rifle has Indian beading and decoration on it. He is the first one to suggest that the Rangers are being led away from their homes in order to commit an Indian murder raid. Yet despite his knowledge of Indian life and culture, Ethan is a fervent racist, who continually mentions Martin's Indianness, appears to dislike Martin because he is part Indian, and refuses to see any relationship between himself and Martin despite Martin's adoption by Aaron and Martha, and his being raised as one of the Edwards children.

Martin's cultural sense of self is examined in the two relationships he is shown to have in the film, one with the Indian Look and the other with the white Laurie. Throughout the film, Martin appears to be more open-minded about miscegenation than most of the other characters, particularly Ethan. But Martin's relationship with Look brings out the limitations of his views on the subject. Martin's acceptance and tolerance are defined by the terms set by white people. While bartering with the Indians, Martin finds out that what he has actually bought is a wife. At the camp he and Ethan have set up, he tries to communicate with her, starting most of his sentences with «Aw, look» or «Hey, look». Not understanding, the woman replies that, although her name is Wild Goose Flying in the Night Sky, she will answer to Look. She tries to do things that she thinks will please him, such as serving him

recurrent in literature, but also very vividly in film, most notably in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Ford himself refers to this threat in *Stagecoach* (1939) when Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt) escapes death at the hands of Hatfield (John Carradine), who saves his last bullet to kill her should the coach fall to the Apaches, with a last-minute rescue by the cavalry. A further study of this theme in film is in TELOTTE, 1998, pp. 120-127.

food or coffee, which he rejects. When he goes to sleep, she lies down beside him. Martin's response is a cruel kick, which sends her tumbling down a hill. Martin shouts complaints about the situation to Ethan, who finds this amusing and has even taken to calling Look «Mrs. Pawley.» During his rant, he mentions the name Scar and they discover that she has some information on him. She does not tell them anything and disappears in the night, leaving an arrow for them as her last sign. Later, when they come upon the remains of an Indian massacre, they find Look in a tent, dead.

The role of Look in the film is curious. From the very beginning, she is portrayed more as a humorous character than a serious one. Her appearance (she is small and chubby, and wears a bowler hat) provides comic relief. The music played in the scenes with Look is also light-hearted²². Then there is Ethan's response to her «marriage» with Martin. Ethan, who is willing to kill Debbie because of her transgression with Scar, does not seem to be horrified about the «marriage» between Martin and Look. Instead, he thinks it is amusing. He acts as translator for them, telling Martin what Look has said and also questioning Look about what knowledge she might have about Scar. While her attempts to serve Martin have been rebuffed, Ethan laughs at them and helps himself to the coffee she offers him. There is no indication that he finds this marriage distasteful. A relationship between a white man (Martin is seven-eighths white) and an Indian woman is more acceptable to him and white society in general. Even more humorous for Ethan is that Martin does not even want this relationship, but is apparently stuck with it. But most interesting of all is the way in which Martin reacts to Look.

Martin, although he is more tolerant than Ethan and appears to be open-minded about Debbie's relationship with Scar, holds some of the racial prejudice that he appears to be fighting. While he is tolerant and accepting of others, this is only on white terms. His relationship with Look is not normal, compared to other white men's relationships with Indians. One reason is that he has accidentally traded for her. Part of his response is due to frustration over his own mistake. Another is perhaps his own racial background. While he might sometimes look part Indian, and while he might sometimes exhibit Indian-type behaviour, he still considers himself white. He has been raised in a white family, is a member of the white community, and is almost engaged to a white woman. Look's actions at the camp, taking care of him and trying to sleep beside him, force him to confront his own views of race. As someone seven-eighths white, who has been raised by white people within a white community, he instinctively feels that Indians should be dealt with on white terms. His relationship with Look takes this out of his hands. It starts on Indian terms, through a misunderstanding in the Comanche language. He cannot force her to return home for fear of offending her father and tribe. Her stay in the camp is not out of *his* desire, but because it is forced on him. She is willing to be his wife; he is unwilling to be her husband. Although he feels

²² LEHMAN, 1981, pp. 65-70.

sympathy for her when she is discovered dead, his relationship with her has basically been presented as a comic one, and one that shows the limitations of Martin's tolerance.

The other relationship Martin conducts is with Laurie Jorgensen, the daughter of a neighbouring rancher. According to Laurie, they have been «going steady» since they were «three years old.» Laurie is, along with her family, at the centre of the Texan community in which they live. Martin and Laurie's relationship is presented in a fairly humorous way. She obviously cares deeply for Martin and is usually assertive in showing her feelings for him. When he returns after two years' searching for Debbie, Laurie virtually throws herself on him and kisses him. Laurie is desirous of a home and wishes to marry and settle down with Martin, but she also understands his desire to find Debbie and, when he and Ethan have very briefly returned to the Jorgensen ranch, she helps him. She first steals for him a letter providing a lead Ethan has left to check and then gives him her own horse for the search. But her desire for marriage and a home is stronger than her desire for Martin. During the second part of the search, lasting five years, in which she has received only one letter from Martin, she becomes engaged to a local cowboy, Charlie McCorry (Ken Curtis), not out of love but because he can provide the marriage and home for which she longs. Martin and Ethan return before the wedding occurs, and he and Laurie come to an agreement that she will marry him. He leaves one last time to get Debbie after Scar's band has once again been found. When they return, Martin enters the Jorgensen home with Laurie at his side and the implication that they will finally be married.

Laurie is initially presented in a sympathetic manner, as one of the more sane and understanding characters in the film. She supports Martin's search by sacrificing her own needs and desires for marriage and family, but in the end gives up hope that he will return. When he at last returns, after finally finding Debbie but having failed to talk her into returning with him, he arrives the evening Laurie is to be married to McCorry. That same evening, after having decided that they will stay together, he and the Texas Rangers again learn of Debbie and Scar's whereabouts, and Martin joins them, eliciting a surprising reaction from Laurie:

LAURIE: Martin, you're not going. Not this time.

MARTIN: You crazy?

LAURIE: It's too late. She's a woman grown now.

MARTIN: I gotta go, Laurie. I gotta fetch her home.

LAURIE: Fetch what home? The leavings of Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder with savage brats of her own?

MARTIN: Laurie, shut your mouth!

LAURIE: 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 him to.

MARTIN: Only if I'm dead.

Because of the sympathetic characterization of Laurie during the whole film, these racist views and objections to miscegenation come as a great surprise. She appeared to be the one person who most understood Martin's need to search for Debbie. Her love for Martin, who sometimes «looks» Indian and is one-eighth

Cherokee, made it appear as if she did not have a problem with racial mixing. But the opinions she expresses in this scene seem to reflect white views on miscegenation, and the belief that Indians are unable to maintain «normal» sexual and personal relationships similar to the life-long marriage and commitment that whites share. In Laurie's eyes, Debbie is not the wife of Scar, as Scar had introduced her when Ethan and Martin first found her, but the «leavings of Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder.» Debbie is not an individual person, but an object to be used for sexual gratification and assuage the lust of Indian men. In spite of Laurie's objections to Debbie's miscegenation, she does not appear to mind her own interracial relationship and actually yearns for it. Laurie's reasoning is not in fact «racial», but cultural. While Martin's genetic inheritance is part Indian, he is predominantly white. He has also been raised among whites to be white, and is accepted by the white community as more white than Indian. In the film, it is only Ethan who comments on Martin's Indianness.

The relationship between Debbie and Scar is the least seen and but it is the most dominant in the film. Both are seen only briefly at the beginning of the film and then at the end. Debbie is seen first as a young girl, and then as a young adult. While Scar is the murderer of her family, he is at the same time Debbie's saviour and protector, saving her from death twice: once when her family is massacred, and a second time when Ethan attempts to kill her after she has been found. When Ethan and Martin first find her, Debbie's first words, addressed to Martin, are in the Comanche language, and she tells him to go away, that she wants to stay with her people, the Comanches that have raised her since her abduction. She has been fully accepted into the tribe and is one of Scar's wives. Although she does eventually return to the white community with Martin and Ethan, her initial instinct is to stay with the Indians. Debbie herself does not appear to be victimised by miscegenation. Unlike other white captives shown in the film, she has not gone insane. She has instead grown to be a beautiful and healthy young woman, who has found a place for herself within the Comanche tribe. Debbie differs from the traditional captivity narrative because, unlike other captives, she *resists* the attempts at rescue by the white «heroes»²³.

5. POST-WAR AMERICA AND THE MOVEMENT TOWARDS CIVIL RIGHTS

The plot and character choices in *The Searchers* speak, according to Barbara Mortimer, «to a post-war America increasingly defined by cultural self-doubt and

²³ Alan LeMay was inspired by the story of Cynthia Ann Parker to write *The Searchers*. In 1836, Parker was kidnapped by Comanches, Kiowas and Caddoes from her home in Texas. She was raised by them and later married the war chief of the Noconi band and became mother of Quanah. She was recaptured in 1860 but, unable to return to her tribe and held under guard, she starved herself to death. For more about her story, see FEHRENBACH, 2000, pp. 445-45, 450-51; MCBRIDE, 2003, p. 552. Ford himself stated in an interview with Larry Swindell that he had always intended to make a film about Quanah Parker, discussing ideas concerning the script with both Dudley Nichols and Lamar Trotti, but was diverted from the story by World War II. SWINDELL, 2001, pp. 145-50.

the collapse of stable, uncontested, social meanings»²⁴. In this way, the film also suggests an ideological crisis, which Mortimer herself believes ultimately «raises questions about racial and cultural identity and poses an implicit challenge to American cultural self-confidence, » particularly in light of the aftermath of the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954²⁵.

The post-World War II period certainly witnessed changes within American society, particularly in race relations, which some in the United States hoped would improve in the aftermath of the war itself. Many blacks who had fought and risked their lives in the war were reluctant to face a return to second class citizenship. The war also awakened the U.S. to the dangers of extreme racial ideology. After seeing the extent of Nazi atrocities, many Americans felt less inclined to support America's own racist policies in the aftermath of the war²⁶. Furthermore, from the late 1940s and early 1950s, blacks began making advances, both legally and symbolically, which seemed to encourage racial integration in the United States. Jackie Robinson became the first black to play in major league baseball when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Despite the taunts of other players and spectators, and the discrimination he faced in restaurants and hotels, Robinson managed to win the honour of rookie-of-the-year. Ralph Bunche won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for arranging an armistice in the Middle East. The army, which had integrated its officer training programme during the war, began to desegregate in 1950. Blacks also benefited from the post-war economic boom. More states and cities began to adopt fair employment laws, and the median black family income rose from \$1.614 in 1947 to \$2.338 in 1952²⁷. Blacks also began to win legal challenges to segregation. The white primary was declared unconstitutional in 1944 in *Smith v. Allwright*, and attempts to register black voters heightened in some parts of the South. Between 1940 and 1950, blacks registered to vote rose from 250.000 to over a million. Nonetheless, despite significant progress, the vast majority of blacks were still without the franchise²⁸. In 1948 President Harry S. Truman backed a civil rights package, the first that had been sent to Congress since Reconstruction. This gesture was, however, only a symbolic one, for in the end Truman did not press Congress to enact it. Despite this setback, Truman did act to end discrimination in federal employment, and marked himself as the first president in eighty years to try to work against racial discrimination²⁹.

During these years, the NAACP was also attempting to restore the legal rights of African Americans through litigation and political lobbying, with its main goal being to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case that legalised segregation provided it was «separate but equal.» The NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund, led by Thurgood Marshall, fought segregation at all levels from minor issues

²⁴ MORTIMER, 2000, p. 2.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

²⁶ WEISBROT, 1990, p. 10.

²⁷ SITKOFF, 1981, pp. 18-19. Sitkoff also cites encouraging statistics concerning home ownership, labor, and education during these years.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

²⁹ SALMOND, 1997, pp. 19-20.

concerning the inequality of separate facilities to full attacks on the institution of segregation itself. In 1950, Marshall's efforts won three unanimous decisions from the Supreme Court that attacked the idea of «separate but equal.» The court struck down segregation in railway dining cars in the South, it ruled that a state could not segregate blacks within a white school if it did not establish a separate and equal school for blacks, and the court so emphasised the «intangible factors» in determining equality of separate schools, that segregation looked to be on the verge of extinction³⁰. Marshall worked to end segregated education and did this by coordinating a series of lawsuits, among them a case in Topeka, Kansas involving Oliver Brown, who was fighting a state law that permitted segregated schooling, which forced his daughter to travel one mile to her black school despite living three blocks from an all-white elementary school.

The production period of *The Searchers*, between 1954 and its release in May 1956, coincided with two major events in the burgeoning Civil Rights movement: the unanimous Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which prohibited segregation in public schools and overthrew the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision; and the 1955-1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which led to the end of segregated seating on that city's buses. Of the two events, it was the *Brown* case that would most parallel the production of *The Searchers*. In addition to Oliver Brown's case, the NAACP also brought forth a combination of several other cases representing students in Clarendon County, South Carolina, Prince Edward County, Virginia, and New Castle County, Delaware. Arguments in *Oliver Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka* began before the Supreme Court in early December 1952. The court deliberated during the first half of 1953 and announced a postponement of any decision before it adjourned for the summer. But progress on the case was delayed by the death in the summer of 1953 of Chief Justice Fred Vinson, who was replaced by California Governor Earl Warren. Reargument commenced in December 1953 and another half year passed before a decision was announced. When the decision was finally delivered in May 1954, it had been a year and a half since the case had first been argued in court and it had almost been forgotten. After the announcement, many blacks celebrated the case, hailing the efforts of Marshall and declaring the case would mark the end of Jim Crow. The euphoria over the success was short-lived. Although public schools were finally legally desegregated, there was no attempt to back the decision with action. President Dwight D. Eisenhower did not insist that the decision be complied with either. While silent about his views in public, privately Eisenhower disagreed with the decision and regretted appointing Earl Warren to the Supreme Court. In the end, it would take most Southern schools years to desegregate³¹.

There is no direct evidence to show how deeply affected Ford was by the events in race relations occurring in the 1950s. But in light of events during the period of production of the *The Searchers* it is significant to note one major absence: the exclusion of African American characters in Ford's multi-racial West. The film

³⁰ SITKOFF, 1981, pp. 19-20.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 23-25; SALMOND, 1997, pp. 27-31.

begins in 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War. While the Civil War is mentioned in the film, and Ethan refuses to take any oath, declaring he has already taken one to the Confederate States of America, the film is lacking in any reference to the presence of blacks in Texas. The majority of Western states passed laws prohibiting the settlement of blacks in their territories after the war, along with black attendance in white schools³². Yet over 200.000 former slaves were in the state of Texas at the end of the Civil War³³. By 1870, approximately 284.000 African Americans lived in the sixteen territories comprising the West, approximately twelve percent of the population. The vast majority (253.475) were in Texas³⁴. Slavery had flourished in east Texas, and after the war many former slaves migrated to cities such as Houston, Austin, and San Antonio, seeking the protection offered by the federal garrisons. In post-war Texas, there was talk in favour of the colonisation of freed slaves in west Texas among the Comanche and Apache. In the end, settlement in west Texas was made difficult by black codes restricting land sales to freed blacks³⁵. Yet Ford makes no mention of this population in the film, and no blacks are shown in the film at all.

6. FORD'S VIEWS ON RACE AND POLITICS

Ford's own interest in race and ethnicity came about in part because of his own background as the son of Irish immigrants. As a child, he became aware of the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice that existed in Maine, and the family, who spoke Gaelic at home, were, according to Ford's biographer Joseph McBride, aware of their status as outsiders³⁶. At the same time, Ford grew up in a multi-cultural society in Portland, Maine, where Irish immigrants lived alongside Polish and Jewish immigrants, among whom there was much tolerance. There were not many black families in Portland, but Ford recalled that they were not segregated but lived in the community. Ford stated they «lived with us. They didn't live in barrios. Our next-door neighbors were black. There was no difference, no racial feeling, no prejudice. My sister Maime's closest friend was a Mrs. Johnson who was black. A wonderful woman»³⁷.

Ford's character, as well as changes to the plot made by Frank Nugent and Ford, indicate the way in which the events of the mid-1950s may have influenced the development of the story. Despite accusations that Ford was racist, based mainly on his treatment of Indians in his films, there is some evidence to the contrary. Tag Gallagher, in investigating Ford's political views, observed that «Ford, as a child of immigrants and member of a (then) persecuted racial and religious minority,

³² FEHRENBACH, 2000, p. 399.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 396.

³⁴ TAYLOR, 1998, pp. 103-105.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 106-107.

³⁶ MCBRIDE, 2003, pp. 40-41.

³⁷ Quoted in GALLAGHER, 1986, p. 5.

tended to ally himself with blacks or Indians or anyone victimized by discrimination»³⁸. However, Ford was involved in political actions of both the left and right in Hollywood, and consequently his political views remain an enigma. In the early 1950s, he spoke out against the attempt of right-wing directors to take over the Directors Guild of America and enforce their own blacklisting policy, at a time when the industry was in chaos as a result of the intrusive investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which investigated Communist influence in the film industry. But he also allied himself, in some part, to the causes of the right as well. Although he was known to despise the extreme right-wing political leanings of friends John Wayne and Ward Bond, he himself was also a member of the conservative Motion Picture Alliance for the Protection of American Ideals (MPAPAI), which attempted to search out Communists in the industry. While his political views were never clear, he seemed to have a growing interest in the issue of race that would recur in his later films. Ford tended to present a more ethnically diverse society compared to many of his fellow directors³⁹. In the case of *The Searchers*, Ford made changes in the film that were not in the original story.

The novel was slightly different from the film in several ways. The protagonist's name was Amos, not Ethan. Ford and Frank Nugent changed the name to avoid any confusion with the character from «Amos 'n' Andy»⁴⁰. In the novel Martin Pawley is white, but Ford and Nugent changed his background and made him one-eighth Cherokee, contributing decisively to shift the focus from that of a simple captivity story to the more complex theme of racial mixing. As one who is part Indian, who is accepted fully into the local Texan society, and who eventually marries into the Jorgensen family, Martin's character brings a more integrationist message to the film. Another change from the novel is the darkening of Ethan's character. Although Ethan is racist in the novel, in the film his racism is made stronger, and his character is more complex and flawed. It is suggested that he has been an outlaw before his return to the family. We see him shoot people in the back and then rob them. He is secretly in love with his sister-in-law, which is apparently the reason for his extended absence from the family. His actions against Indians are incredibly brutal (such as the desecration of their dead by shooting out their eyes and scalping them)⁴¹. The extreme racism of Ethan, who first looks for Debbie to rescue her, simply because she is his blood kin and then wants to murder her because of her sexual transgression with the Indians, contrasts greatly with Martin's

³⁸ GALLAGHER, 1986, p. 339.

³⁹ For more on Ford's representations of minorities in his films, see BERG, 2001, pp. 75-101.

⁴⁰ Mentioned by Barbara Ford in a Dan Ford interview with John Ford and Barbara Ford, undated, Box 11, Folder 34, John Ford Papers, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.

⁴¹ ECKSTEIN, 1998, pp. 3-24. The article goes into detail in the ways in which the Nugent screenplay darkens the character of Ethan, and how Ford darkened it further while making the film. The representation of the characters is also analyzed in detail during the pre-production period of the film, and the personalities of the characters are summarized in a memo from Patrick Ford to John Ford, M.C. Cooper, Frank Nugent, and Frank Beetsen, 1 February 1955, Box 6, Folder 21, John Ford Papers, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.

attitudes. Martin's mixed-race and family circumstances lead him to hold a more flexible view of kin-ship (he calls Debbie his sister throughout the film although they are not related by blood) and a more tolerant view concerning miscegenation than Ethan's. Martin's devotion to Debbie was described by Patrick Ford in the following way:

His pursuit of her is as enduring as that of Amos [Ethan], partly because of something akin to love of her, partly because of a desire to re-pay a debt to his foster parents, but mostly because the captive girl is his only tie in life. She is in every sense of the word his family, and the only kin he has left.⁴²

7. CONCLUSION

Although Ford had explored the theme of race in his earlier films, the issue had usually remained subordinate. While his western films presented a social mix of Indians, Mexicans, and blacks, they seldom dealt directly with the theme of racism. *The Searchers* was one of the first of Ford's late films to discuss the issues of racism and miscegenation in a significant manner⁴³. He would investigate the issue of race on the frontier more fully in his later Westerns. *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960) was about the black «Buffalo» soldiers in the American army who fought in the Indian wars in the 1870s. The film's central theme was racism against blacks and, in particular, the myth of the black rapist, the spectre of which had hung over film since *The Birth of a Nation*⁴⁴. *Two Rode Together* (1961) expanded on the theme of captivity by looking at the life of captives among the Indians and the reception the captives received when they returned to the white community. *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) was Ford's attempt to «redeem» himself from his earlier misrepresentation of Indians, by telling the story of their victimisation by whites for the first time in film⁴⁵. While Ford's attempt to deal with these issues was in itself problematic, with Ford occasionally resorting to stereotype in order to make certain points, he must still be credited with examining issues that few other directors were willing to confront at the time.

The Searchers, while seemingly adhering to the stereotypes of the Western, undercuts them as the film unfolds. The white male hero (Ethan) is not heroic, but a racist and psychologically-disturbed man who will always remain outside society and the community. The true hero is a mixed-race man (Martin), noble, protective of white womanhood but not so obsessed with its purity that he will destroy it. In his representation of the dogmatic racist bent on destruction and oblivious of the

⁴² Memo from Patrick Ford to John Ford, M.C. Cooper, Frank Nugent, and Frank Beetsen, 1 February 1955, Box 6, Folder 21, John Ford Papers, Lilly Library, University of Indiana.

⁴³ MALTBY, 1996, pp. 34-49. Maltby analyzes the representation of Indians within the parameters of white views of race and history, with particular attention to, among other films, *The Searchers*, *Two Rode Together*, *Sergeant Rutledge*, and *Cheyenne Autumn*.

⁴⁴ WHITE, 2000, pp. 32-39.

⁴⁵ DARBY, 1996, pp. 257-59.

rules of society, Ford seemed to present (and perhaps consciously to present) a metaphor for American society at that time. While advances were being made in the area of race relations and attempts to overturn segregation had been won in the courtroom, in reality racial injustice and segregation continued in the United States for at least another decade. The theme of the ultimate triumph of integration, — in which Debbie is accepted back into white society and the part-Indian Martin is not only recognized as a fully fledged member of it but also marries into it —, was thus suggested at a difficult period in American history when reformers were attempting to integrate schools and public places in American society. By making adjustments to LeMay's story when producing the film, Ford not only displaced the traditions of the Western, but also responded with the changes needed for the quickly-changing society of his own times.

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