



Camden Council Library Services – Movie Club

The Searchers (1956)

Discussion Questions

1. What are your thoughts about John Wayne's Ethan Edwards? "Wayne is plainly Ahab. He is the good American hero driving himself past all known limits and into madness, his commitment to honour and decency burned down to a core of vengeance" (Greil Marcus, quoted in Frankel, *The Searchers: The Making of an American Legend*, 2013). What is the reason for Ethan's obsession? Is the setting related? What about the genre of a Western, is it related to the theme of obsession and searching?
2. Race relations are prominent in the film. Ethan dislikes Native Americans and miscegenation is only curable by death in his eyes. However, something that is unique in *The Searchers* is that evil is represented on both sides of the equation, explaining Scar's motivations ("Two sons killed by white men. For each son, I take many... scalps") but also placing Ethan as a negative character, obsessed to the point of inhumanity (note, for example the leer he gives the two women saved from Comanches only to dismiss them with "They ain't white. Not anymore. They're Comanch.") (Priestley, ["They ain't white. Not any more. They're Comanch": Race, Racism and the Fear of in The Searchers](#)). Equally, *The Searchers*, like many films of the era, has a problematic display of race relations not just within the film but also in the making of the film. For example, Scar is played by Henry Brandon, a German born American actor—a common practice in Hollywood at the time. How does the film handle these racial elements? How prevalent and accepted is racism in the white and Native societies depicted in the film? Is the film racist?
3. Ethan's fellow searcher is Martin Pawley. Ethan learns that Martin is one-eighth Comanche, and although this earns Martin a disgusted leer, Ethan nonetheless enlists his help in the search. Although assisting him with his quest and their links from earlier in life (Ethan saved Martin from Native Americans when he was young) he treats him poorly, instructing him and even refusing to let him share a drink in a saloon. Considering the length of the quest, it seems strange that he would not warm to Martin. What does this relationship reveal about Ethan's character? How does the film deal with this revelation? Is his treatment racially based?
4. How would you describe the portrayal of women in the film? Martha and Lucy Edwards become hysterical beyond control when they are attacked. The women saved from the Comanches are raving mad. Laurie Jorgensen is obsessed with marriage. Worst of all is Look,

who is presented as a subservient, oblivious, comic buffoon (Priestley, ["They ain't white. Not any more. They're Comanch'": Race, Racism and the Fear of in The Searchers](#)). The only two strong female characters are Debbie and Mrs Jorgensen. Debbie, although captured, makes the conscious choice to stay ("These are my people. Go.") and Mrs Jorgensen takes charge in her relationship and reveals a better education and greater wisdom than her husband Lars Jorgensen. Are these depictions in any way accurate? Are such depictions of women acceptable and well rounded, or simply caricatures to aid the storytelling?

5. What is the significance of the film being made by John Ford and in particular the casting of John Wayne? Ford and Wayne had 14 collaborations, a legacy that included many staple westerns that helped create the myth of the West and emphasised the American belief in manifest destiny. Wayne was the all American actor, as well as conservative in many respects, both in life and in art. He famously had a disdain for High Noon as "the most un-American thing (he's) seen" (Parkinson, [Interview with John Wayne](#), 1974; Levy, [High Noon: Why John Wayne Hated the Film](#), 2007). In light of this, how revolutionary or revisionist is The Searchers? How revolutionary or revisionist should we expect it to be? Are we selling Ford and Wayne short by rejecting any progressive elements within the film?
6. Critical assessment of The Searchers has cooled somewhat in recent years. For many years it was highly regarded as the greatest western of all time, as well as being one of Martin Scorsese's favourite films, as well as influencing David Lean and Steven Spielberg, and with Jean-Luc Godard hailing it as "a Homeric odyssey". However, Brooks contends that the "critics and fans stepped in to complete the film for him (Ford)", believing that Wayne and Ford are unaware of these elements, failing to see the shift and conflict of Wayne's Ethan, and also pointing out the minor shift of position to Ford's other films, where the battle for America is a battle of civilization over barbarism. In short, Brooks believes Ford "is cooking the right kind of movie with the wrong set of ingredients" (Brooks, [The Searchers: my most overrated film](#), 2014). These sentiments are echoed by Metcalf, who views the overblown praise of the film due to its inclusion in academic curriculum, both for film critics and film makers (Metcalf, [The Worst Best Movie](#), 2006). Does what critics have said about it add up? Is it a revisionist western or simply a supremely shot film that has been over read and overdeveloped by critics? Are Brooks and Metcalf expecting too much of the film, especially considering when it was in fact made (1956)?
7. "In The Searchers I think Ford was trying, imperfectly, even nervously, to depict racism that justified genocide" (Ebert, [The Searchers \(Review\)](#), 2001). He also points out some unevenness in the films depictions, being, on the one hand, Ethan's "portrait of obsession" and on the other the "silly romantic subplot" that involves the "the comic relief (that) may be an unconscious attempt to soften the message". Is Ford searching for anything in the film? Has Ford or the film found what it was looking for? Does it know what it is looking for?