

University of Texas Press
Society for Cinema & Media Studies

Darkening Ethan: John Ford's "The Searchers" (1956) from Novel to Screenplay to Screen

Author(s): Arthur M. Eckstein

Source: *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 3-24

Published by: [University of Texas Press](#) on behalf of the [Society for Cinema & Media Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225733>

Accessed: 25/07/2011 09:31

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=texas>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Texas Press and Society for Cinema & Media Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinema Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Darkening Ethan: John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) from Novel to Screenplay to Screen

by Arthur M. Eckstein

*Some film scholars charge that director John Ford was complicit in the savage racism of *The Searchers*' central character, Ethan Edwards. This essay demonstrates that Ford viewed Ethan as a negative, psychologically damaged, and tragic figure. By comparing the changes made from the source novel to the shooting script to the final film, a constant darkening of Ethan's personality is revealed—most of it directly attributable to director John Ford.*

When *The Searchers* was first released in May 1956, some reviewers thought it was just another John Ford western.¹ That, of course, is not the dominant view today: according to the *Sight and Sound* worldwide poll of film critics, *The Searchers* is ranked fifth among the all-time greatest films ever made.² Critics universally acknowledge *The Searchers* to be visually magnificent. The movie also is often viewed as socially profound: as an insightful, pioneering attack on racism.³ Moreover, it is viewed as psychologically profound. Commentators allege that it locates the psychological roots of racism in the projection of one's own unacceptable impulses and desires onto the Other, followed by the ferocious punishment of that Other. Most specifically (to take a famous formulation), the Comanche war chief named Scar (Henry Brandon) is seen as the dark alter ego of the central figure, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne). Scar does what Ethan Edwards wants to do but cannot do and cannot even admit to wanting: he annihilates Ethan's brother's family and seizes the women for himself (or else destroys them). Scar is thus Ethan's scar. No wonder Ethan hates Indians: from the very first scenes of the movie, they symbolize his own unacceptable and barely controlled emotions.⁴

Is this reading too much into the film? Despite early dismissal by some reviewers and John Ford's tendency to downplay those who took his films seriously,⁵ new evidence urges us to do just that: to take *The Searchers* seriously. This article examines Frank S. Nugent's revised final screenplay (manuscripts of which exist both at the University of Southern California and at Indiana University) and compares Nugent's screenplay both to Alan LeMay's original novel *The Searchers* and to the finished film. Although Nugent's script has never before been used to analyze *The Searchers*, it is clear it should be: there are surprisingly sharp differences between what is in the screenplay and what we now see on the screen.⁶ Every production of a film is, of course, by necessity a collaborative act, and I am not denying that.⁷ Nevertheless, John Ford's involvement in *The Searchers* project was very intense

Arthur M. Eckstein is professor of history at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has authored two books and thirty articles, including several on the cinema. He is the co-editor of "*The Searchers*": *John Ford's Classic Western after Forty Years* (forthcoming). © 1998 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

right from the beginning (including oversight of Frank Nugent's script), and the sharp differences between the script and the finished release print reveal just how much of the film was the result of Ford's personal vision and artistry.

What this study demonstrates is that as the process of transferal of plot and character from novel to script and then to screen occurred, the Ethan character and his actions became progressively darker and more disturbed. There is as great a difference in this direction between Nugent's screenplay and John Ford's finished film as there is between LeMay's novel and Nugent's screenplay. Ford can now be shown to have imposed his will on all this material—as he made last-minute changes and transformations while on location in Monument Valley, again back on the soundstage in Hollywood, and finally in the editing room. Crucial scenes not in Nugent's script were added on the spot, crucial scenes that *were* in the script were deleted by Ford, and the screenplay's ending (which Ford originally approved) was totally reversed. In other words, not only is the film we are familiar with not LeMay's novel but it is not even Nugent's final shooting script. Moreover, the fundamental changes Ford made, very late in the production process, all go in a single direction—to create the dark and truly disturbed Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers*, the Ethan Edwards who has become one of the most famous characters in all of American motion picture history.

These findings are all the more important because John Ford has recently been repeatedly charged with complicity in Ethan Edwards's racism.⁸ And admittedly, there are certain brutal facts about the film that need to be faced. Westerns have often been described as a "white triumphalist genre,"⁹ and there is a sense in which *The Searchers* seems to fit this traditionalist bill. After all, in the end the white female captive Debbie (Natalie Wood) is finally found among the Indians, is rescued from the traditional "fate worse than death," and returns voluntarily to white civilization. In addition, the Indian who dared to violate her sexual and racial purity—Scar—is killed. So, too, is the Comanche girl Look (Beulah Archuletta), who attempts to marry Martin Pauley (Jeffrey Hunter), one of the men searching for Debbie. Look ends up dead for her pains, thus realizing the traditional fate of the nonwhite partner in interracial relationships in films of the 1950s. Martin is now free to marry his 100 percent white girlfriend, Laurie Jorgensen (Vera Miles), who is herself a virulent racist. This is a "happy ending" fully in compliance with the overt antimiscegenation stance of the Motion Picture Production Code as it stood in the summer of 1955, when *The Searchers* was filmed.¹⁰

The fact that all-American icon John Wayne plays Ethan Edwards also needs to be emphasized. Wayne's sheer forcefulness on the screen, combined with his enduring stature as the hero of innumerable westerns, makes it extremely difficult for audiences even today to disengage totally from Ethan. They just do not expect John Wayne to be evil. There are many moments in the film when the image of Ethan/Wayne riding his great horse across the vast desert landscape evokes an almost instinctively positive cultural response—and there is no doubt that John Ford filmed Wayne that way.¹¹ The same is true of certain images of the Texas Rangers, notably, a low-angle "heroic" shot of them mounting their horses, filmed against the night sky, just before their final violent assault on

Scar's camp. These scenes show that Ford, one of the most visually oriented and least verbal of directors, found it hard to resist the call of traditionally heroic visual images.¹²

None of this means, however, that we should view Ford or the movie he made as fundamentally complicit with Ethan and his racist attitudes. Here we may begin with Ford's own statement that *The Searchers* was intended to be "a psychological epic."¹³ That is not the statement of a Hollywood hack, which of course Ford was not—though it sometimes pleased him to pose as one. The director of almost 140 films, the winner of six Academy Awards (more than any other director in history) in a film career that stretched back to 1914, Ford was also the key figure (with *Stagecoach* in 1939) in the creation of the "serious" western genre. His words about *The Searchers* as a "psychological epic" point us directly to the personality of Ethan Edwards. So, too, does the film's melancholy theme song, which foregrounds Ethan as a problem from the movie's first moments ("What makes a man to wander? . . . What makes a man ride away from home?") and whose lyrics Ford personally supervised.¹⁴

Indeed, it should be obvious to anyone who has seen the finished movie that Ethan Edwards is *not* a traditional western hero. He shoots people in the back (and then robs them), disrupts funerals (and weddings), and views all religion with bitter cynicism. Furthermore, he desecrates the bodies of the dead (gleefully shooting out the eyes of dead Comanches or scalping them). Toward Indians he is motivated only by brutal racism; toward whites outside his immediate family he is cold, suspicious, and often gratuitously insulting. It is implied that before the film begins he was a successful outlaw. And within his immediate family he constitutes an especially terrible danger, for he is secretly in love with Martha (Dorothy Jordan), his brother's wife (and she with him), and he is far more powerful than his brother. Above all, he spends the movie searching for his young niece Debbie (Martha's daughter) not to rescue her from the Comanches but to kill her. In short, Ethan is a grim, solitary, and forbidding figure for whom social constraints mean nothing. As Harry Carey, Jr., says of the first scene he played with John Wayne in the film, "When I looked up at him in rehearsal it was into the meanest, coldest eyes I had ever seen. . . . Eyes like an angry snake." Carey, who had known Wayne for many years, was shocked.¹⁵

Very little of this antisocial behavior was in Alan LeMay's novel. Much more was in screenwriter Frank Nugent's final shooting script, which Ford supervised. But the full version of the fearsome, vicious, driven Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers* was created only during the filming of the movie itself as the result of crucial ad hoc decisions made by Ford.

What needs to be emphasized is that with Nugent's screenplay in hand we can now actually *see* Ford continually darkening the Ethan character from the beginning of the production process right through to its end. At first Ford worked on this with Nugent, but then later (and here our information is new) he worked on changing Ethan in a very major way by himself. The issue of authorial intent can thus be laid to rest: commentators on *The Searchers* have not been reading anything dark into Ethan and the film that John Ford did not wish them to see.

The first phase in the process of converting Ethan into a near-villain involved the construction of a screenplay out of Alan LeMay's novel. Ford normally worked closely with his screenwriter, and that was the case here.¹⁶ In the winter of 1954–55, Ford and Frank Nugent carefully read LeMay's *The Searchers* together, and out of this reading they produced a script.¹⁷ Some of the dialogue in the revised final screenplay comes—perhaps not surprisingly—right out of the pages of LeMay.¹⁸ But there are also striking differences. Concentrating just on those areas in which Ford's finished film completely follows Nugent's script, it immediately becomes clear that the Ethan of the film is already a much more disturbed and sinister figure than the novel's Amos Edwards. This was obviously the result of conscious artistic decisions on Ford and Nugent's part. A detailed discussion is necessary here, especially because Garry Wills, in his important new book on John Wayne, has asserted that Ford labored to create in Ethan a character *more* sympathetic than Amos. This is a fundamental misreading of the situation.¹⁹ In what follows, I will proceed in rough chronological order through the plot.

- Unlike the movie, the novel does not suggest even slightly that Ethan was a law-breaker and an outlaw.²⁰
- In part, this is because in the novel, unlike the movie, Ethan does not mysteriously disappear for three years from the family ranch after the Civil War; the script and then the film suggest that during this time Ethan was first a mercenary for Emperor Maximilian in Mexico and then an outlaw. But in the novel, the Ethan figure returns to the family ranch in Texas immediately after the South's surrender.²¹
- In the novel, there is no *need* for the Ethan character to stay far away, because there is no dangerous, suppressed love affair between him and Martha. True, in the novel Amos is in love with Martha, but the simpler and nobler man of the novel has never let slip any sign of this, and the simpler Martha of the novel neither knows nor reciprocates.²² Thus, Ethan does not constitute a serious threat to the family, as he does in the script Nugent and Ford wrote and as he does in the final film.
- In LeMay's novel, Amos gives the optimistic and idealistic speech about the eventual coming of civilization to the frontier ("Some day this land will be a good place to live . . .") that the motherly Mrs. Jorgensen (Olive Carey) gives in the film.²³ This speech, taken almost verbatim from the novel, is in fact so optimistic and idealistic that Ford felt compelled to gently satirize it even when it was left to Mrs. Jorgensen ("She used to be a schoolteacher, you know"). How different Ford's *The Searchers* would be, how different our impression of *Ethan* would be, if—as in the novel—he gave that speech! It would completely change the film. But the cynical, embittered, and displaced Ethan of Ford's *The Searchers* is not in the least concerned with the advance of civilization. The frontier, with its violence and revenge and wandering, is his only home.
- In LeMay's novel, not only is Amos an idealist and an optimist, but he never has any conscious desire or intent to kill Debbie: he just wants to rescue her. The problem is that the sight of Comanches drives Amos so wild with hatred that he is likely to attack them (as Brad Jorgensen does in the film), in which

case the *Comanches* will kill Debbie.²⁴ One of the most famous and most disturbing aspects of the film, of course, is that Ethan intends to kill Debbie. The audience is told this shocking fact repeatedly, and at Scar's camp in the desert we even see him try to do it. But this is all the invention of Ford and Nugent.²⁵

- A similar change has been made concerning Ethan's last will and testament. In the novel (as in the film), Amos/Ethan gives Martin Pauley his will, leaving him all his property "because I have no known blood kin." But in the novel this happens because Amos sincerely believes Debbie has been killed by the Comanches, and Marty accepts the gift; only later do the searchers enter Scar's camp and find out that the white girl there is Debbie.²⁶ In the film, by contrast, Ethan gives his last will and testament to Marty "because I have no blood kin" *after* he has seen that the captive Debbie is alive but Scar's wife. Ethan's conduct thus constitutes a terrible act against Debbie—and Marty responds with horror, rejecting the will, throwing it in Ethan's face, and exclaiming, "I hope you die!" One could hardly have a better example of how Ford and Nugent took an element in LeMay's novel and modified it until it became an outright attack on a more hostile Ethan.²⁷
- It is easy to link the above two changes to another major (indeed central) change: in the novel, Debbie is not married to Scar. She is merely his adopted daughter, and she truly views him as her father. They never have sexual relations.²⁸ The sexual relationship between Debbie and Scar, then, was another powerful motif Ford and Nugent invented for the movie.

This raises the question of why Ethan wants to kill Debbie. Some commentators explain it as simply the most vicious expression of Ethan's racism: as Debbie has grown into adolescence, she has begun sleeping with the Indians and has therefore destroyed her sexual and racial purity, so she must be destroyed. Amos in LeMay's novel certainly has a strong component of racial animus in his character; his tendency to go crazy whenever he sees Comanches is a crucial antecedent for Ethan's racism in the film. But Amos also sincerely loves Debbie and wishes to rescue her. Clearly, Ford and Nugent have greatly expanded Amos's racism until it assumes overpowering dimensions in Ethan's character. Moreover, in that Debbie turns into the intelligent, sensitive, and luminously beautiful Natalie Wood, Ethan's desire to kill her is bound to strike viewers as not just horrifying but downright insane.²⁹ This latter fact would suggest that *The Searchers* represents not John Ford's complicity in white racism but rather the opposite: his first thoroughgoing attack on it, a theme to which he would return—more and more explicitly—during his last decade of filmmaking.³⁰

Some critics argue that (in tandem with the race issue) Debbie stands for Ethan's own polluted wishes toward his family and so must be destroyed for *that* reason. If Scar is Ethan's evil twin, the symbol of his unacceptable desires, then it becomes particularly significant that Debbie is—in contrast to the novel—married to Scar. Furthermore, in the screenplay Nugent and Ford originally wrote, she is said to look exactly like Martha, and there seem to be all sorts of psychological implications in that.³¹ The sexual relationship between Debbie and Scar, invented for the film, thus has a profound impact on the nature of the story, in that

Debbie's ongoing sexual relationship with Scar not only foregrounds Ethan's obsession with miscegenation but also keeps before the audience the entire issue of his sexual jealousy (a sexual jealousy that has been present from the very first scenes, when its target had been his own brother Aaron, who is married to Martha).

John Wayne unintentionally revealed this fundamental aspect of the film in a classic Freudian slip during an interview in 1974. In discussing Ethan, Wayne declared: "He did what he had to do. The Indians fucked his wife."³² What could Wayne have been thinking? In the film, the central problem within the family is—precisely—that Martha is *not* Ethan's wife. Or was Wayne thinking perhaps of Debbie, who looks exactly like Martha? In another interview, Wayne actually presented a fantasy of Ethan and Debbie living together on the Edwards ranch in a loving relationship after the end of the film. No doubt Wayne meant this innocently; even so, what he was fantasizing was Ethan living in satisfaction for the rest of his life with Martha-like Debbie, his mission (and his desires) finally accomplished.³³

This entire sexual subtext involving Debbie/Martha, Scar, and Ethan is missing from the novel. But this does not mean that there is no incestuous element in LeMay's book. Indeed there is: at the end of LeMay's *The Searchers*, Debbie openly declares her love for her rescuer (not her uncle, but her stepbrother Martin), and they immediately go to bed together.³⁴ Similarly, in the novel, Amos never gives young Debbie a gold medal, symbolizing his love for Martha (as Ethan does in the film); rather, *Martin* gives Debbie a gold locket.³⁵ In fact, LeMay's novel tells Martin's story from his point of view; it is not Ethan's story.³⁶ What Ford and Nugent obviously did was to transfer these psychosexual tensions from Debbie and Martin to Debbie/Martha and *Ethan* (as one can see in John Wayne's later statements), who then became the central figure. But this very process made the Ethan of John Ford's *The Searchers* a far more complex and disturbing personality than the Amos of Alan LeMay's book.

- In terms of the race issue, one should also note that in LeMay's novel, Martin Pauley is 100 percent white. But the Martin of Nugent's script and Ford's finished film—who sincerely loves Debbie in a brotherly way and is not devastatingly concerned about her miscegenation with Scar—is himself part Indian. He is one eighth Cherokee, and perhaps more, and visually he is quite dark. Indeed, for just this racial reason, Ethan rejects Martin throughout the first part of the movie.³⁷ Yet Martin grows morally ever stronger as the film progresses, and in the end he is far more attractive and dependable (although the product of miscegenation) than Ethan can ever be. But the idea of a highly sympathetic "half-breed" Marty (who in the end, with the film's approval, will marry 100 percent white Laurie) is an element in the story consciously added by Ford and Nugent, intended to contrast sharply with Ethan's driven, bitter racism and hatred.³⁸
- Finally, in LeMay's novel, the Ethan figure dies, and he dies a martyr to the traditional heroic code. During the final attack on Scar's camp, Amos refuses to shoot a Comanche woman in the back who might or might not be Debbie—and she then turns and shoots *him*. The sinister, semipsychotic Ethan, who

does not hesitate to shoot either Indians or whites in the back, of course exhibits no such signs of chivalry.³⁹

But *was* the Ethan of the movie originally so unlikely to display such signs of chivalry? It is time now to begin focusing discussion directly on the new evidence provided by Nugent's revised final screenplay. We start with a major sequence that once existed in the script: what no commentary on *The Searchers* has previously noted is that in Frank Nugent's screenplay for the movie, and apparently even in the filmed rough cut, there was a sequence in which Ethan does speak out on behalf of defenseless women—indeed, on behalf of defenseless *Comanche* women. The reason previous commentaries on *The Searchers* say nothing about this sequence is that Ford cut it from the finished film.

The sequence appears on pages 90–92 of Nugent's revised final screenplay, and Ford probably filmed it, since a publicity photograph (with John Wayne) still exists depicting the central scene involved.⁴⁰ The sequence centered on a confrontation between Ethan and a U.S. Cavalry commander whom the script calls simply "The General" but who is clearly supposed to be General George Armstrong Custer. This is obvious from the publicity photograph, in which Peter Ortiz looks exactly like Custer and wears Custer's famous fancy uniform, as well as from the John Ford papers relating to *The Searchers* at Indiana University, in which there is a discussion of Custer's personality as it connects to this scene.⁴¹ The confrontation between Ethan and Custer was placed after the scene in which Ethan and Marty find a Comanche winter encampment where everyone—men, women, and children—has been slaughtered by the army and immediately following a scene in which the miserable survivors are shown being herded along with whips by the cavalry into a fort to the strains of "Garry Owen," the famous song of Custer's Seventh Cavalry Regiment.⁴² These latter two scenes did, of course, remain in the release print—and they are still shocking today.

The sequence that was cut takes place inside the fort in an office. The General holds forth pompously to newspaper correspondents from the East about the great bravery displayed by his regiment—with himself naturally in the lead—during the "battle" that has just taken place, in which his men were outnumbered four to one and the Indians had all the advantages. Ethan enters and sourly interrupts him, remarking that the next time he might try attacking where the *men* were, instead of the women and children—the headlines look better that way. Ethan goes on to suggest that if any female white captives have been killed during the fighting (which turns out to be the case), they were probably killed by the panicky soldiers, not by the Indians, because the soldiers have been shooting totally indiscriminately into the camp. The General, furious at being humiliated before the eastern correspondents, orders Ethan from the room. What follows is the famous scene between a very grim Ethan and the pitiful white female captives who have somehow survived the attack.

The origin of the scene between Ethan and Custer lies in a short sequence in LeMay's novel in which the searchers discover the massacred Comanche village. LeMay underlined the cavalry's indiscriminate killing, but in the novel the commander is explicitly *not* Custer, there are no Indian prisoners being herded along with whips, the white captives *are* killed by the Comanches (not, as in the film, by

the cavalry), and—above all—there is no direct, dramatic confrontation between Amos and the cavalry commander. Ford and Nugent invented all this for the script.⁴³

Ford was clearly attracted to a confrontation between Ethan and Custer. First, it was inherently dramatic and, especially, visually dramatic: Ethan Edwards meets Custer! Such a confrontation would have enriched the film and historically anchored it, which was something Ford was interested in (cf. the opening of *The Searchers*, “Texas 1868”).⁴⁴ Second, the sequence would have been a sharp slap at Custer, a man Ford despised. Indeed, Ford’s film *Fort Apache* (1948), with the pompous, treacherous, and self-indulgent General Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda), was the first Hollywood motion picture ever to attack Custer’s public image.⁴⁵ Similarly, Ford’s production notes for *The Searchers* not only contain a discussion of Custer but this discussion is a total attack on his personality.⁴⁶ Third, the scene between Ethan and Custer was, in itself, a reference to the famous ending of *Fort Apache* (the kind of self-referential moment in which Ford delighted). In the earlier film, the commander of a cavalry regiment (John Wayne) misleads eastern press correspondents about a previous battle and turns a sordid reality into a glorious myth; here, we would have had John Wayne (now as Ethan) directly criticizing and sourly lampooning this sort of propaganda. We know that Ford would return again to this issue of the making of “history” six years after *The Searchers* in the cynical scenes with the press in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962); now we can add that Ford seriously thought about inserting a similar consideration of “history” (with General Custer himself as the propagandist) into *The Searchers*.

But, of course, the “Custer Cut” is not in *The Searchers*; the sequence was eliminated. This could not have been a decision Warner Bros. made, because the whole reason Ford formed Argosy Pictures with Merian C. Cooper, his own production company that made *The Searchers*, was to ensure that he always had complete artistic control over his films (Warner Bros. merely provided postproduction facilities and acted as the distributor of Ford’s finished product, in return for a large share of the profits).⁴⁷ Thus it was Ford himself, during the process of postproduction, who eliminated the Custer sequence from the movie. This would have occurred during the editing of the rough cut into the release print, a procedure in which every director is intimately involved, and this was especially true of Ford. Barbara Ford, who became a professional film editor, says that her father was one of the two best film editors she ever saw at work.⁴⁸

Why, then, did the director cut out the confrontation between Ethan and Custer from *The Searchers*? The answer cannot be, for instance, that in 1956 it was still politically impossible to depict Custer directly in a negative light. *Sitting Bull* (1954), a large-scale production directed by Sidney Salkow, had already presented Custer as a repulsive, savage racist—right at the height of McCarthyism.⁴⁹ Nor can the answer lie in the sheer length of *The Searchers*: at 119 minutes, the movie is longer than most 1950s westerns, but the Custer sequence would have added only two minutes or so to the finished film.

The answer should be quite obvious by now. If the scene with Ethan lecturing Custer on proper manly conduct had remained in the movie, Ethan would have suddenly appeared to be an adherent of the traditional heroic code. The Ethan of

the “Custer Cut” is still a sour and embittered person, but one of the most fundamental conventions in westerns is that the hero should attempt (in the tradition of chivalry) to protect and defend women and children. This is why the Ethan of the finished film, obsessed with murdering a young girl who is a member of his own family and who has done nothing to him, is such a disturbing and subversive antithesis to the code of heroic ethics and behavior. Yet, in the scene with Custer, Ethan specifically expresses the traditional ideology that it is the proper role of a man to attack armed men, never women. If this scene had been left in the film, the audience would have had a strong clue that Ethan—whatever his internal demons—could never kill Debbie, because that would be a terrible violation of his heroic code. And Ethan’s internal demons would in turn look much less important to the film as a whole.

But with Ethan’s assertion of the traditional heroic code eliminated, and with his contempt for those men who do not follow that code (such as Custer) eliminated, the meanness in Ethan’s heart remains at the center of the film. The Ethan of the finished version of *The Searchers* does not ever assert or follow the heroic code. Ford knew, either intellectually or instinctively, that the Custer scene, whatever its attractions, was wrong for *The Searchers*, and however much he had enjoyed filming the scene, he decided very late in the production process to eliminate it. The result was that Ethan was a significantly darker character in the finished film than he was in the final shooting script. He was, in fact, a character perfectly capable of killing his niece.

As it stands, the sequence within the fort ends with the famous dolly-in to a close-up of Ethan’s deeply shadowed, unshaven, and embittered face as he stares with open hatred at the pitiful white women who have been “rescued” from the Comanches. The iconography here, as Martin Winkler has pointed out, is that of a traditional western villain—not a hero.⁵⁰ A close perusal of the screenplay strengthens this point: in Frank Nugent’s final script, there is not the slightest suggestion of such a camera shot. This extraordinary image of Ethan is thus John Ford’s alone.⁵¹

In fact, the whole sequence at the fort ended quite differently in Nugent’s shooting script. After Ethan’s racist declaration about the rescued captives, “They ain’t white—not anymore” (which is not in the novel), a conversation follows with the General’s adjutant in which Ethan seems to express sincere concern about Debbie: the destruction of the Comanche camp has left the searchers with no idea where to look, time is running out, and they are desperate to find her. The adjutant then gives Ethan what turns out to be a crucial clue: trinkets found among the dead Comanches that point to traders in New Mexico, the Comancheros. Ethan sincerely thanks the army officer, and Ethan and Marty immediately set off in pursuit.⁵²

This material in Nugent’s script, in which the army officer gives the searchers crucial information about where to find Debbie, is based on elements in LeMay’s novel.⁵³ It was all cut from the finished film, despite the resulting narrative incoherence: Ethan and Marty now appear to wander into New Mexico for no reason, by accident, and thus find Debbie by sheer luck. Why, then, did Ford cut this scene—and why did he instead add the close-up of Ethan’s angry face? For one thing, he hated expository dialogue such as the conversation between Ethan and

Figure 1. Ethan emerging from the tent holding Scar's scalp. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



the adjutant: movies were images and action, not words.⁵⁴ Further, ending the sequence with the close-up of Ethan's deeply shadowed, hate-filled face not only reinforces "They ain't white . . ." but it also is a powerful stroke of visual drama. But it is drama with a specific point. Nugent's screenplay implies that Ethan somehow still cares about Debbie. Ending the sequence with the dolly-in to Ethan's terrifying, villainous face—as Ford decided to do—implies the opposite to the audience: that when Ethan finds Debbie he is going to kill her.⁵⁵

But the elimination of the confrontation between Ethan and Custer and the elimination of Ethan's conversation with the adjutant and the ending of that scene with the dolly-in to Ethan's hate-filled face are not the only major changes Ford made late in the production process to emphasize Ethan's dark side. Near the end of *The Searchers*, the Texas Rangers (including Ethan and Martin) make the final assault on Scar's camp. Marty sneaks down into the camp just before the attack in a last attempt to get Debbie (who is sleeping in Scar's teepee) out alive; in the course of this effort, he manages to kill Scar in a gunfight. Then the Rangers attack, and during the ensuing chaos Ethan charges his great black horse right into Scar's teepee (in itself a rather startling act!); dismounting inside, he finds Scar dead, and—in a series of close-ups—Ethan lifts up Scar's head, pulls out a knife, and begins to scalp him. The camera cuts away only at the very last moment. A second later we see Ethan, his eyes glazed, remounted on his great black horse, holding the bloody scalp of Scar in one hand. Debbie sees him too and, filled with terror, runs away. Ethan charges after her, his horse knocking down Martin, who is desperate to stop him.

Ethan's scalping of Scar is one of the most shocking scenes in *The Searchers* and has caused much comment. It is simply unheard of in westerns for a white heroic figure to engage in scalping, because mutilations like this completely contradict the heroic code of behavior. Instead, scalping in westerns is associated with the most primitive and brutal savagery—white or Indian. As Martin Winkler has pointed out, the only whites ever shown scalping Indians are repulsive “white trash”: for instance, Telly Savalas and Shelley Winters in Sidney Pollack's *The Scalphunters* (1968). In Budd Boetticher's *Comanche Station* (1960), a movie whose themes are very close to those of *The Searchers*, a brutal U.S. Cavalry sergeant is responsible for the massacre of an entire village of Comanches (men, women, and children) but is nevertheless sincerely insulted by the accusation that he engaged in their scalping. As for John Ford, his own attitude toward whites who engaged in scalping is made plain in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964): when two repulsive white thugs come into a Dodge City saloon carrying Cheyenne scalps they have taken, even Wyatt Earp—who is portrayed in this film as a total cynic—is so appalled that he orders the thugs thrown out of the saloon as men unfit for anyone's company.⁵⁶

Ethan's scalping of Scar can therefore be seen as his final descent into madness. His fanatic racial hatred has been clear all along (combined with a repressed and jealous sexuality), and the film condemns it. But although Ethan seems insane in the scene in which he condemns the female white captives at the fort, with the scalping of Scar he clearly reaches the nadir of barbarism.⁵⁷ Some writers, while accepting this harsh assessment of Ethan, go further, suggesting that the very extremity and insanity of the act bring him to a kind of catharsis: with his villainous alter ego finally punished, Ethan becomes free to accept Debbie, for he does not have to kill her as a scapegoat for his own unacceptable feelings. Thus, Ethan's scalping of Scar is integrally linked to the most climactic moment of the film—Ethan's decision, at the very last moment, to spare Debbie.⁵⁸

Clearly, Ethan's horrible act of mutilating a corpse has become a crucial element in the prevailing analyses of *The Searchers*. It is all the more important, then, to realize that in Frank Nugent's shooting script (i.e., the script John Ford took with him to Monument Valley) Ethan does *not* scalp Scar. The idea never even occurs to him. Rather, he comes up to Scar's teepee and swings off his horse; he looks inside, pushes away one of Scar's wives, and sees Scar's dead body; he then frowns in frustration and remounts, riding off after Debbie.⁵⁹

Thus, Ford personally, and spontaneously, added the horrific scene of Ethan scalping Scar to the film while on location in Arizona.⁶⁰ Given that it was a terrible violation of the code of the Western hero, and given Ford's own contemptuous depiction of whites who engage in it, the director's decision to add this horrendous act shows that Ford intended to portray Ethan's madness even more prominently. The insanity the act implies is strengthened, of course, by the audience's “knowledge” that Ethan is determined to follow up this horror with an even greater one—the murder of Debbie. Conversely, once Ethan scalps Scar and shows exactly what he is capable of, the audience's suspense and anxiety over Debbie's fate are even more intensified.

Ethan's decision ultimately to spare Debbie is never explained in the movie. It *was* explained in Nugent's script, in which Ethan puts up his gun at the last moment and says softly to Debbie, "You sure favor your mother." That is, Ethan cannot kill Debbie because she looks too much like Martha.⁶¹ In the finished film, however, Ford removed this crucial line of dialogue. He may still have been following the script's explanation for Ethan's action even in the release print, since the background music chosen for the moment when Ethan spares Debbie is "Martha's Theme."⁶² But given Ford's cavalier attitude toward Nugent's script, we can no longer be sure that the scene reflects Nugent's ideas, and thus there remains much room for speculation.⁶³ What we can say with certainty, however, is that Ford shot the film in a way that makes Ethan's ultimate act of mercy far more mysterious than it was originally. Ford did this not only by cutting Nugent's explanatory line of dialogue but also by cutting those scenes in which Ethan appeared relatively mild and noble, by adding (at the fort) the chilling close-up of Ethan's hate-filled face when he sees the white captives, and finally by spontaneously creating and including a new twist in the plot (the scalping) that shows Ethan in the worst possible light just before his act of mercy.

The final scene of *The Searchers*, which has become one of the most famous in the history of Hollywood, poses yet another mystery. Ethan returns Debbie to the Jorgensen homestead; she rides huddled against his chest, still in her Comanche clothes. In a sequence filmed from inside the dark house looking out through the doorway into the desert—a conscious echo of the film's opening moment two hours (and seven years) earlier—Debbie is taken from Ethan by Mr. and Mrs. Jorgensen and enters the house with them as everyone walks past the camera; then Laurie and Marty follow, their future together assured. But Ethan is left alone, standing in the doorway. He turns to face the camera directly, a dark silhouette now against the desert light behind him; he briefly grips his right arm, as if in pain. Then, instead of entering the house, he turns around and walks out into the desert dust and wind. The dark door closes on him, and Ford wipes quickly to total black.

Much discussion has been generated over the question of why Ford does not have Ethan enter the house (i.e., finally come home) with everyone else. Some scholars have argued that there is nothing sinister here: with his mission accomplished and Debbie safely returned to white society, Ethan—in the tradition of the western hero—is going on now to other adventures. A well-known parallel would be the consciously mythic ending of *Shane*, made just three years before (1953, dir. George Stevens), in which the godlike hero (Alan Ladd) rides off on his white horse into the mountains as a little boy calls out to him, begging him to stay.⁶⁴ But such an optimistic interpretation seems out of line with the deeply pessimistic tone of *The Searchers*. And while *Shane* has saved the settler community, the only person Ethan has saved Debbie from is himself. It is thus hardly surprising that when the silhouetted Ethan walks away at the end of *The Searchers*, no one tries to call him back.

Thus Ethan is excluded from community and family at both the beginning and the end of the finished film. Ford gives the last scene a melancholy edge; the refrain of the theme song, heard over the film's striking final images, indicates that Ethan is

still deeply disturbed: “A man may search his heart and soul, go searchin’ way out there, / His peace of mind he knows he’ll find, but where, O Lord, Lord, where?” These words indicate that John Ford intends for us to understand that Ethan’s “search” was at heart an interior one all along, for “searching way out there” turns out to refer not to searching the vast desert of Monument Valley but the vast desert of Ethan’s soul. And, the song says, he has not completely crossed that desert yet.⁶⁵

The question then becomes not so much why Ethan fails to enter the house with everyone else but, rather, and more specifically, why Ford intentionally *keeps* him from community and family. And this question becomes all the more central to the film once we take into account the *other* ending of *The Searchers*, that is, the ending in the shooting script Ford took with him to Monument Valley. In Frank Nugent’s revised final screenplay, Ethan *does* join everyone else in entering the house.

What the screenplay originally set forth as the film’s last moment is that we would see Laurie running up to Ethan from the Jorgensens’ porch (just as we still do in the release print); he is holding a sleeping Debbie in his arms. Ethan was to smile down at Laurie and put a finger to his lips, cautioning Laurie against waking the girl (a very protective, indeed motherly, gesture). Then he was to ride on to the house. The movie would end with Laurie climbing up onto Marty’s horse with Marty, and the camera would swing around to view them following Ethan (with Debbie in his protecting arms) to the house.⁶⁶

Given that the ending of the final script had a now-protective Ethan leading everyone home, we can conclude that at some point during the location shooting in Monument Valley Ford made the major decision to create the far more ambiguous and somber ending the film now has. “Our” ending, in other words, comes from Ford’s conscious last-minute decision to separate Ethan sharply from all the others. In addition, Ethan is no longer shown acting in any particularly motherly way toward Debbie in the finished film (she is not sleeping, and his finger is not on his lips), and she is quickly taken from him, instead of remaining in his protective arms. Ford’s decision to change all this emphasizes, and now brings to a culmination point, all his other decisions that darkened Ethan’s character and conduct. Here, in the very last moment of the movie, Ford did—with fully conscious intent—exclude Ethan from home.⁶⁷

Strictly speaking, we cannot know why Ford changed the original ending of *The Searchers* so radically. But one obvious reason Ethan is still presented as disturbed at the end of the film and is forbidden to enter the house and be reunited with community and family is that Ford is punishing him for his savage racism. After all, the Comanche-raised Debbie does enter the house (still wearing her Comanche clothes), as does the part-Indian Marty (with his white wife-to-be). Ford excludes only Ethan, the man obsessed with racial purity. His exclusion thus seems a striking example of Ford’s social criticism—an example sharply relevant in 1955–56, when the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had just brought race relations back to the forefront of American national consciousness.⁶⁸

Some commentators seek to shift the focus deeper. They see Ethan as punished not merely for his obsessive racism but, just as important, for the terrifying

threat he has been to his family (in one form or another) throughout the movie: first through the possibility that he would commit adulterous relations with Martha, his sister-in-law, and then through his threat to kill Debbie, her daughter.⁶⁹ An examination of Nugent's script provides one final revelation here. Nugent's script indeed pointed to the existence of powerful incestuous-adulterous feelings between Ethan and Martha, but the indications were scattered haphazardly throughout the first few scenes.⁷⁰ Ford, by contrast, foregrounded this incestuous relationship far more forcefully in the finished print.

Ford did this first by creating what has become one of the most famous scenes in the film: the "good-bye" of Ethan and Martha, witnessed disapprovingly by Samuel Clayton (Ward Bond), the reverend who is also the captain of the local Texas Rangers (i.e., the head of the white community). Within the Edwards cabin, Clayton—and the audience—sees Martha secretly and lovingly caressing Ethan's Confederate cloak; then Ethan enters the scene, and he and Martha almost kiss and then helplessly pull away. Ethan leaves. In the background we hear the melancholy song "Lorena" ("Martha's Theme"), an authentic Civil War ballad whose subject is adultery. Clayton looks down into his coffee cup and disapprovingly swirls the coffee around; then he, too, leaves, stepping silently past Martha. But *none* of this famous scene was ever in Nugent's shooting script. It was all completely new, and it bears all the hallmarks of Ford's personal style, for it is a scene with no dialogue, only action underlined by music.⁷¹

Ford filmed the good-bye of Ethan and Martha once he was back on the soundstage from Monument Valley (August 1955). As he said in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich in which he expressed satisfaction with the scene, it retained a certain subtlety, yet made the existence of adulterous-incestuous feelings clear in a way that only a fool could miss.⁷² For our purposes, though, the point is that via this scene Ford made Ethan's incestuous threat to Aaron's family far more obvious to the audience than it ever was in Nugent's screenplay.

A similar process, for a similar purpose, occurs in another crucial scene a little later. In the release print, when Ethan discovers the burning Edwards cabin, destroyed by Scar's Comanches, Ethan runs through the ruins shouting, "Martha! Martha!" That is, he is concerned for *her alone* (not for his brother, Aaron, or his nephew, Ben, or for Lucy and Debbie, his nieces). It is another example of Ford's foregrounding of the incestuous relationship that lies at the heart of the film—emphasized as well by Ethan's terrible grief (transformed into violent anger) when he finds Martha's blood-soaked, ripped-open blue dress. And once again, none of *this* was in Nugent's shooting script. On the contrary, the script had Ethan calling out Lucy's and Debbie's names, never Martha's, and there was no scene in which Ethan finds Martha's ripped-open bloody clothes.⁷³ Ethan's shouting "Martha! Martha!" and the terrible scene that follows were thus additions shot by Ford on location in Monument Valley (in July 1955), as we can see because they take place outdoors. In fact, these shots prepared the way for the theme and tone of the famous good-bye of Ethan and Martha, which was filmed on a soundstage a month later. Ford told Peter Bogdanovich the truth about his desire to make the highly problematic relationship between Ethan and Martha

clear to all, though he wanted to do so subtly. He changed Nugent's script consistently—in one direction—to bring this about.

And of course the threat of incestuous adultery on Ethan's part is soon replaced in the film by the even more frightful threat of his murder of a child—his niece, the Martha-like Debbie. By the end of *The Searchers*, one can therefore well understand why Ethan is excluded from community and family. And even though Ethan ultimately does not kill Debbie (an unspeakable act that would have plunged him completely into the abyss), civilization still needs to shut Ethan out, for it would be too simple to believe that his last-minute decision to spare Debbie has suddenly “cleansed” him of all his previous sinister impulses. That would be a happy ending indeed—and it *was* the original ending, in Nugent's screenplay. But John Ford turned out to be too sophisticated an artist, or too pessimistic, for that.

Ethan's loneliness, exclusion, and sense of loss at the end of *The Searchers* are dramatized in the sad gesture he makes as he is left by himself at the open door of the Jorgensens'. This gesture—Ethan's sudden gripping of his right arm as if in pain—has become a very famous image. It originated as a spontaneous physical act by John Wayne during the filming of the (revised) ending; it was done to honor the actor Harry Carey, Sr., who had often used the gesture in his silent films, and acknowledged Olive Carey, his widow, who—as Mrs. Jorgensen—had just come through the doorway and past the camera.⁷⁴ But of course it was John Ford who decided to keep the gesture in the film. Harry Carey had been one of Ford's own chief mentors during the early part of the director's career,⁷⁵ but more is involved here than mere sentimentality. At a crucial moment earlier in the movie (although actually filmed after the final scene), Ethan makes exactly the same gesture. It occurs when he comments to Martin that he is hoping that Debbie will be killed by the Comanches when the Rangers launch their final raid into Scar's camp (“That's what I'm counting on,” he says grimly; “I know you are,” Martin answers with great bitterness), and Ethan then attempts to veto Martin's attempt to go into the camp in secret to get her out alive: “I say NO!” decrees Ethan, holding his right arm as if in pain. Luckily, he is overruled. Of course, visual images in movies (and especially in complex movies such as *The Searchers*) are notoriously overdetermined. But it should now be clear that whatever the origins of Ethan's gesture in the last scene, Ford's decision to *reuse* that gesture at an earlier dramatic moment has transformed it into a symbol of Ethan's desire to see Debbie destroyed.

Two important conclusions follow from the above discussion. First, the new information concerning Nugent's final revised screenplay for *The Searchers* demonstrates that the charges recently leveled against Ford—that in this film he is complicit in the attitudes of the central character, Ethan Edwards—are fundamentally misguided. Rather, this article has shown, for the first time, the exact character of Ford's attitude toward Ethan. It was negative: Ethan has great power and frontier expertise, but Ford intended him to be a psychologically damaged, tragic figure. Ford worked consistently—first with his screenwriter Frank Nugent but then, later in the production process, by himself—to darken Ethan's personality. The Ethan of

Nugent's script was a far more psychologically disturbed figure than his model, Amos Edwards, in Alan LeMay's novel; but the Ethan of John Ford's final release print is darker still. As Ford told Peter Bogdanovich, *The Searchers* is "the tragedy of a loner, of a man who could never really be part of a family."⁷⁶

The near-psychotic Ethan we now see came about through a variety of decisions by the director. Ford cut out those scripted scenes at the fort in which Ethan appears relatively noble compared to Custer and seems sincerely concerned about Debbie and added instead the famous dolly-in to a close-up of Ethan's sinister face. The director also added the shocking scene in which Ethan scalps Scar (another scene filmed in close-up), as well as the good-bye scene between Ethan and Martha, in which the danger of incestuous adultery is made very clear. In addition, Ford created the scene in the burning ranch house in which Ethan's concern is only for Martha, not for anyone else in the family. He also reversed Nugent's original ending, in which Ethan (protective and even motherly toward Debbie) is reunited with community and family. Ford's new ending, which excluded the harsher final Ethan of the film, is symbolic of the entire process involved—and is its culmination. Much of the transformation of Nugent's shooting script must actually have occurred on location in Monument Valley; this perhaps gives us a clearer idea of how the director really worked. But what needs emphasis here, first, is the definite trend in the depiction of Ethan as a person: the later we go in the production process of *The Searchers*, the more disturbed and disturbing Ethan's personality becomes.

Second, our employment of Nugent's screenplay in analyzing *The Searchers* reveals just how much the film we see on the screen is John Ford's own dark vision. He did major script cutting and rearranging, was responsible for the final film editing, added crucial material and filmed it on the spot, and reversed the happy ending he had taken with him out on location. Most important, all the most famous and moving scenes in the film are not in the script. Moreover, it is striking how many of those scenes are in fact "silent" cinema: images and action with only music to accompany them. John Ford started in Hollywood, after all, in 1914.

Clearly, Ford did not make *The Searchers* all by himself. The film was the product of many talents, including novelist Alan LeMay, the cast and crew, and even the men who performed the dangerous riding stunts. Further, the script Ford and Nugent wrote certainly formed an outline for much of the film.⁷⁷ One might especially note the contribution of Patrick Ford, the director's son: as associate producer he organized a complex but highly efficient shooting schedule that made the main work in the summer of 1955 go extremely smoothly. Indeed, early on he may have helped point to the direction Ethan's depiction would take, for a memo from him (in early 1955) envisioning the film's white protagonists notes that "they [Ethan and Marty] are only a shade less barbaric than the savages they follow."⁷⁸ Yet John Ford's relationship with his son was also beginning to deteriorate badly right at this time, so it is very unlikely that Ford took any detailed artistic advice from him once the film was being shot.⁷⁹ Frank Nugent himself was perfectly well aware of how much Ford personally controlled the artistic process; he liked to tell the story of how Ford came back from location work on *Wagon Master* (1950) and told him, "I liked your script; in fact, I actually shot a few pages of it." Nugent added a general rule: the finished

film “is always Ford’s, never the writer’s.”⁸⁰ Nugent would not have been surprised at the way his shooting script for *The Searchers* was transformed by John Ford. The director described himself as the architect of all his films.⁸¹

There have always been stories about how Ford savagely refused to take any advice while on the set; even as great a star as Henry Fonda found that out while attempting to talk to Ford about a role he had performed six hundred times on Broadway.⁸² Such stories must be given serious weight. We are not dealing here with mere eccentricity, we are dealing with Ford’s fierce confidence, or obstinacy, in his view of how a film had to unfold. By 1956 that was backed by more than forty years of experience in the industry, mostly as a director. Ford thus sought total control of the product that went out under his name, which is why his actors knew that he viewed them as mere puppets, and talented screenwriters accepted his dominant presence.⁸³ The previously unknown alternative version of John Ford’s currently most honored film—the version of *The Searchers* that is found in the final revised screenplay—decisively proves the director’s dominance in a new way.

Notes

1. See the review in *Time*, June 25, 1956, 58–59, or in *Sight and Sound* 26 (Autumn 1956): 94–95 (by Lindsay Anderson, who judges the film as hollow and mechanical).
2. The list of the choices of the *Sight and Sound* worldwide poll of film critics is most conveniently found in Roger Ebert, *Ebert’s Video Companion* (Kansas City: Andrews-McMeel, 1996), 927.
3. See especially Brian Henderson, “*The Searchers*: An American Dilemma,” *Film Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Winter 1980–81): 9–23.
4. See, e.g., J. A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel, 1974), 164, 170, 173; Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *John Ford* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 152, cf. 159; Peter Stowell, *John Ford* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 136–37; Richard Maltby, “A Better Sense of History: John Ford and the Indians,” in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds., *The Book of Westerns* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 42, cf. 44.
5. See Andrew Sinclair, *John Ford: A Biography* (New York: Lorrimer, 1979), 214–15.
6. The manuscripts of Nugent’s shooting script—entitled “‘The Searchers,’ Revised Final Screenplay by Frank Nugent” (March 1956)—can be found in the Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California, and in the John Ford Archives, Indiana University, Bloomington. Brendan Nagle of the University of Southern California and Jane Armstrong of Indiana University have been invaluable in helping me access the copies of the screenplay.
7. On filmmaking as inevitably involving the contributions of many talents and technicians, even in the films of great directors, see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
8. See Marty Roth, “‘Yes, My Darling Daughter’: Gender, Miscegenation, and Generation in John Ford’s *The Searchers*,” *New Orleans Review* 18 (1991): 67–68; Douglas Pye, “Double Vision: Miscegenation and Point of View in *The Searchers*,” in Cameron and Pye, eds., *Book of Westerns*, 229; and Kristen Whissel, “Racialized Spectacle, Exchange Relations, and the Western in *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*,” *Screen* 37 (1996): 53–58. See also Michael Dempsey, “John Ford: A Reassessment,” *Film Quarterly* 38 (1975): 9–10.

9. See Maltby, "Better Sense of History," 36.
10. On the usual fate of the nonwhite partner in miscegenetic romances in films of the 1950s, see Michael Walker, "The Westerns of Delmer Daves," in Cameron and Pye, eds., *Book of Westerns*, 127–28. On Laurie Jorgensen's vicious racism, revealed in her verbal attack on Debbie toward the end of *The Searchers*, see Peter Lehman, "'There's No Way of Knowing': Analysis of *The Searchers*," in William Luhr and Peter Lehman, eds., *Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema* (New York: Putnam, 1977), 134. On the strictures of the Motion Picture Production Code, see Walker, "Westerns of Delmer Daves," 127.
11. See Pye, "Double Vision," 229. On John Wayne's place in American culture, see Garry Wills, *John Wayne's America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); on Wayne's role in *The Searchers*, see *ibid.*, 251–61.
12. On Ford's love of the visual and disdain for dialogue, see especially Ronald L. Davis, *John Ford: Hollywood's Old Master* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 3–15. Note also the quotes from Ford in Sinclair, *Ford*, 17, 101.
13. On Ford's characterization of *The Searchers*, see Joseph McBride, "The Searchers," *Sight and Sound* 74 (Spring 1972): 212.
14. On this, see Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 331n.
15. Harry Carey, Jr., *Company of Heroes: My Life as an Actor in the John Ford Stock Company* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1994), 170–71.
16. On Ford's usual close supervision of the screenwriting for his films, see Gallagher, *Ford*, 464–66.
17. For the close collaboration of Ford and Nugent on *The Searchers* script, see Dan Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 271. About Ford's enthusiasm and intensity for the project, see his letter to Michael Killanin in March 1955, quoted in Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 271. For examples of Ford's direct intervention in the script, see Nugent, "The Searchers," 26, 32.
18. For instance, Debbie's conversation with Marty when she is found in Scar's camp or Laurie's later racist outburst against Debbie. See Alan LeMay, *The Searchers* (New York: Harper Bros., 1954), 234–35, 203.
19. Wills's position is found in his *Wayne's America*, 251, 253.
20. See Henderson, "American Dilemma," 22.
21. *Ibid.*
22. LeMay, *The Searchers*, 33; also see James Van Dyck Card, "The Searchers by Alan LeMay and John Ford," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 16 (1988): 7. (Card is the only previous commentator to offer a detailed and extensive comparison of LeMay's novel with Ford's film, but his main focus is on Ford's theme of family unity, rather than on Ethan's disturbed character.)
23. See LeMay, *The Searchers*, 52–53; noted in passing by Card, "LeMay and Ford," 4.
24. See LeMay, *The Searchers*, 81–83, 219; cf. Card, "LeMay and Ford," 6. Wills's contention that Amos Edwards intends to kill Debbie (*Wayne's America*, 253) has no support in the text.
25. Cf. Card, "LeMay and Ford," 6. Thus, in LeMay's scene in Scar's camp, Amos Edwards attempts to rescue Debbie (*The Searchers*, 239) in contrast to Nugent's and Ford's Ethan, who attempts to shoot her.
26. See LeMay, *The Searchers*, 219–20.
27. The difference here between the film and the novel is rightly noted (if only in passing) by Card, "LeMay and Ford," 7; it goes unnoticed by Wills, *Wayne's America*, 253.

28. See LeMay, *The Searchers*, 234–35; also see Card, “LeMay and Ford,” 7. Ford and Nugent knew this perfectly well, since both had read the novel while working on the screenplay, and some of the dialogue from precisely these pages of the novel (234–35) appears practically unchanged in the film.
29. When Debbie is found, she conforms completely to the traditional Hollywood stereotype of “the valuable woman”: see Maltby, “Better Sense of History,” 43 and 47.
30. Cf. *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), *Two Rode Together* (1961), *Donovan’s Reef* (1963), and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).
31. For Scar as Ethan’s double, see the references cited in note 4. For Debbie as Martha’s double, see Nugent, “The Searchers,” 140.
32. See Randy Roberts and James S. Olsen, *John Wayne, American* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 420.
33. Wayne’s amazing remark about Ethan’s “wife” receives no comment in *ibid.* For Wayne’s fantasy about Ethan and Debbie (“and that little girl would grow to love him”), see F. Anthony Macklin, “I Come Ready: An Interview with John Wayne,” *Film Heritage* 10 (1975): 30–31.
34. LeMay, *The Searchers*, 271–72.
35. *Ibid.*, 140; the substitution is noted by Card, “LeMay and Ford,” 5.
36. Card, “LeMay and Ford,” 4; see also Wills, *Wayne’s America*, 255.
37. Ethan to Marty: “Fella could mistake you for a half-breed!” When reminded that he himself found Marty when Marty’s family was massacred: “It just *happened* to be me; no need to make more of it”; “Don’t call me ‘Uncle Ethan!’ I ain’t your uncle!” “Come on, blanket-head!” Ethan’s hostility to Marty on racial grounds is emphasized in Henderson, “American Dilemma,” 15–16.
38. Cf. *ibid.*, 20. On Marty being part Indian, see Nugent, “The Searchers,” 5. Ford underlines Marty’s “Indianness” when he makes his first appearance—wearing Indian-like clothes and riding a horse bareback, then sliding gracefully off the horse to come in to dinner. This scene was not in the shooting script; cf. Nugent, “The Searchers,” 4–5.
39. Amos’s death is described in LeMay, *The Searchers*, 264–65. The scene is slightly ambiguous: perhaps Amos only puts up his pistol at the last moment because he believes the Comanche woman is Debbie. Wills, *Wayne’s America*, 300, cf. 286, asserts that Wayne *always* refused to be shown shooting people in the back—and not even shooting from ambush until *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Wills ignores the fact that Wayne shoots Indians in the back in *The Searchers* (at the end of the attack by the river) and whites, too (Jeremy Futterman and his men).
40. For the publicity photograph, see Paul A. Hutten, ed., *The Custer Reader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 558.
41. See the February 15, 1955, story notes for *The Searchers* in box 6, folder 21, in the Ford Archives at Indiana University.
42. Ford was an expert on nineteenth-century American popular music; see Nugent’s comments in Lindsay Anderson, *About John Ford* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 242–44. The director obviously knew what he was doing here. In addition, when seen on the wide screen (although not so clear on videotape), the number “7” is visible on the regimental flags.
43. See LeMay, *The Searchers*, 134–41, for comparison.
44. In fact, this whole sequence in *The Searchers*, as originally filmed, bears a very strong resemblance to Custer’s actual massacre of Black Kettle’s Cheyenne camp on the Washita River in western Oklahoma in November 1868—and “The General” even thinks he *has* attacked and destroyed a Cheyenne camp, until Ethan sets him straight (see

- Nugent, "The Searchers," 90–91). The incident on the Washita would later be filmed again in Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970)—but it is now clear that Ford got there first. He was extremely knowledgeable about the real history of the American West; see Nugent in Anderson, *About John Ford*, 242–44.
45. See Hutton, *The Custer Reader*, 504.
 46. "Inept . . . arrogant . . . a phony . . . a glory-hunter"; see box 6, folder 21, in the Ford Archives at Indiana University.
 47. On the founding of Argosy Pictures and its artistic purpose, see Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 194–96.
 48. The other was Darryl F. Zanuck, the head of Twentieth Century-Fox; see Gallagher, *Ford*, 464. Nugent describes Ford's total control over the rough cut in Anderson, *About John Ford*, 244.
 49. On Salkow's film, see Hutton, *Custer Reader*, 506.
 50. See Martin M. Winkler, "Homeric Epic and the Ending of *The Searchers*," in Arthur M. Eckstein and James F. Brooks, eds., *"The Searchers": John Ford's Classic Western after Forty Years* (forthcoming). Winkler has made a similar point in "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*," in Martin M. Winkler, ed., *Classics and the Cinema* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 195.
 51. Compare the finished film with Nugent, "The Searchers," 94. There are many places in the script where Nugent suggests camera shots (e.g., 1, 30, 32, 140, 142), but not here.
 52. Nugent, "The Searchers," 93–94.
 53. In LeMay's *The Searchers* (167, cf. 139–41), Amos and Marty realize that the trinkets found in the Comanche camp point to the Comancheros and New Mexico.
 54. Nugent discusses Ford's hatred of exposition (and especially expository dialogue) in Anderson, *About John Ford*, 244. On Ford's love of the visual, see Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 3–15.
 55. The scene with the white captives, and its chilling ending, was actually shot at the end of principal photography—back on a Hollywood soundstage. That is, it was filmed at a point when Ford's view of Ethan had become fully developed. On the chronology of the filming of *The Searchers*, see Ford, *Pappy*, 271–72.
 56. On scalping in western films, and on Ford's attitude toward it, see Winkler, "Ending of *The Searchers*."
 57. See Whissel, "Racialized Spectacle," 56.
 58. See Place, *Western Films of Ford*, 170, 173; Stowell, *Ford*, 136; Winkler, "Tragic Features," 201; and Wills, *Wayne's America*, 259.
 59. Nugent, "The Searchers," 139.
 60. This is clear because the scene of Ethan riding out of Scar's teepee holding the bloody scalp was filmed in Monument Valley. The actual scalping scene (an interior) was filmed later, on a Hollywood soundstage.
 61. Nugent, "The Searchers," 140. Danny Peary, *Cult Movies* (New York, 1981), 314, refers to Ethan's statement, but only from a Warner Bros. synopsis of the film; see also Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 277.
 62. For the suggestion that "Martha's Theme" indicates that Ethan cannot kill Debbie because she is too much like Martha, see Stowell, *Ford*, 136. Stowell seems unaware of Ethan's statement in Nugent's script.
 63. Instead of the line of dialogue, Ford has Ethan lift Debbie up with both arms, an echo of his loving gesture toward Debbie as a child that occurred at the very beginning of the movie; so perhaps Ethan's love of Martha is being combined with recognition of Debbie's fundamental innocence. (It should be emphasized that *neither* of these scenes

is in Nugent's shooting script; they come right from Ford.) For those commentators who believe that Scar is Ethan's double, note that at the end of the film, Ethan—amid general slaughter—spares Debbie, just as Scar—amid general slaughter—had spared Debbie at the film's beginning. (I owe this observation to Jeanne Rutenburg.)

64. See Peter Lehman, "Texas 1868/America 1956: *The Searchers*," in Peter Lehman, ed., *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), 395.
65. On the "search" in *The Searchers* really being an interior one, see Place, *The Western Films of John Ford*, 170, 173; Stowell, *Ford*, 136; Gallagher, *Ford*, 331; and Winkler, "Tragic Features," 201. Note also Richard Corliss, *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook, 1974), 331–32.
66. Nugent, "The Searchers," 142.
67. One may also note that in reversing the ending of *The Searchers* as found in the screenplay, Ford reversed the point of view from which the ending is seen. In Nugent's ending, the point of view is from Ethan's (and Marty's and Laurie's) direction, looking toward the Jorgensens' house ("The Searchers," 142). This actually would have paralleled the point of view in the first scene of the film as Nugent originally wrote it, which was from Ethan's direction looking toward the Edwards' homestead ("The Searchers," 1, in great detail). One of the most famous aspects of Ford's finished version of *The Searchers* is, of course, that the points of view of the opening and closing shots are indeed parallel, but from the direction of a door opening (and then closing) looking out from the house into the desert (first from the Edwards' homestead, then at the end from the Jorgensens'), "doorway" shots that are repeated at crucial points throughout the film (including at the point when Ethan spares Debbie, seen in part from a cave opening). We can now say that John Ford conceived this very famous visual motif alone, once he was out in Monument Valley; and he conceived it not only independently of the indications in Nugent's script but in direct violation of those indications. Once more, then, attention paid to Nugent's script reveals the scope and power of Ford's personal artistry.
68. See especially Henderson, "American Dilemma," 22; see also Peary, *Cult Films*, 313.
69. See especially Place, *Western Films of Ford*, 170, 173; Stowell, *Ford*, 136; and Winkler, "Tragic Features," 201.
70. Nugent's script has Martha holding Ethan's Confederate cloak tenderly as she steps aside in the first scene to allow Ethan to enter the Edwards' cabin upon his return ("The Searchers," 6). Later, after dinner, the script has Ethan tenderly examine Martha's hands, ruined by work, and he says softly, "You were always hurting your hands" (10–11).
71. For Ford's emphasis on the visual and disdain for expository dialogue, see Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 3–15. Clearly what Ford did was to gather up and then modify the scattered indications of Ethan and Martha's relationship in the script and present them to the audience all at one time, tied together with "Lorena" (i.e., "Martha's Theme"). Ford, as an expert on nineteenth-century American popular music (see Nugent in Anderson, *About John Ford*, 242–44), surely knew that the subject of "Lorena" was a true love that was impossible to consummate because it would be adultery:

We loved each other then, Lorena,
More than we ever dared to tell . . .
"If we *try*, we may forget."
Were words of thine long years ago . . .
Twas not thy woman's heart that spoke;

Thy heart was always true to me;
A duty, stern and pressing, broke
The tie which linked my soul to thee.

The song originated in a true-life unconsummated adulterous affair by its author, Rev. H. D. L. Webster.

72. See Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 91.
73. Compare the finished film with Nugent, "The Searchers," 32–33.
74. For a more detailed discussion, see Roberts and Olsen, *Wayne*, 420–21, and Carey, Jr., *Company of Heroes*, 173–74.
75. See Gallagher, *Ford*, 17–25, and Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 38–44.
76. Quoted in Bogdanovich, *Ford*, 91–92.
77. The film in a *general* way clearly follows the narrative outline of the script, which is hardly surprising. (Ford's habit of independence is nevertheless underlined by the fact that he consistently refused to use storyboards, carrying his entire movie instead in his head. See Gallagher, *Ford*, 464.) On the dangerous riding stunts required in *The Searchers*, see the memoir of Chuck Roberson, *The Fall Guy* (N. Vancouver, B.C.: Hancock, 1980), 156–72.
78. Patrick Ford's organizing of the complex shooting schedule is noted in Ford, *Pappy*, 271. His memo on the characters of Ethan and Marty (February 1, 1955) can be found in box 6, folder 21, in the Ford Archives at Indiana University. The memo was sent to Ford, Merian Cooper, and Nugent.
79. On the deteriorating relations between Ford and his son at this time, see Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 275, 288–89. Ford certainly did not take Patrick's view of Martin Pauley (see above, 11).
80. Regarding the *Wagon Master* story, see Gallagher, *Ford*, 465; regarding Nugent's general rule, see his comments in Anderson, *About John Ford*, 244.
81. For a detailed discussion of Ford's working methods, emphasizing his desire to impose his personal control and vision, see Gallagher, *Ford*, 457–75. The self-description is found on 457.
82. A description of the disastrous interactions between Ford and Fonda on the set of *Mister Roberts* (summer and autumn 1954), which ended their long friendship, is found in Ford, *Pappy*, 265–69.
83. Regarding screenwriters, see in general Gallagher, *Ford*, 464–66. For more on Ford's relationships with performers, see the interviews with Shirley Jones and Linda Crystal in Davis, *Hollywood's Old Master*, 304–5. Crystal believes that Ford would have greatly preferred to play every part himself (305).