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The Searchers: An American Dilemma

By Brian Henderson

Dedicated to the Memory of
James Blue, 1930–1980
In a 1979 article in *New York Magazine*, Stuart Byron assesses the influence of John Ford's film *The Searchers* (1956) on several New Hollywood directors and screenwriters. "In one way or another," he concludes, the film relates to Paul Schrader, John Milius, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Michael Cimino; to *Hardcore*, *Taxi Driver*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Dillinger*, *Mean Streets*, *Big Wednesday*, *The Deer Hunter*, *The Wind and the Lion*, *Ulzana's Raid*, and *Star Wars*.

"When one film obsesses so much talent, it won't do just to call it a cult movie. *The Searchers* is the Super-Cult movie of the New Hollywood." Citing Hemingway's remark that all modern American literature comes from *Huckleberry Finn*, Byron says, "I think that in the same broad sense it can be said that all recent American cinema derives from John Ford's *The Searchers*."

The directors Byron discusses do not hesitate to confirm his argument. Milius: "The best American movie—and its protagonist, Ethan Edwards, is the one classic character in films. I've named my own son Ethan after him. I've seen it 60 times." Schrader: "I make sure I see *The Searchers* at least once a year." "Scorsese and I agree that *The Searchers* is the best American film, a fact that must have influenced *Taxi Driver*." Scorsese: "The dialogue is like poetry! And the changes of expressions are so subtle, so magnificent! I see it once or twice a year." Spielberg: "*The Searchers* has so many superlatives going for it. It's John Wayne's best performance to date. It's a study in dramatic framing and composition. It contains the single most harrowing moment in any film I've ever seen. It is high on my twenty-favorite-films list." Spielberg says he has seen the film a dozen times, including twice on location with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. 
Byron argues that four recent films in particular have a basic story structure identical to and inspired by The Searchers: Taxi Driver, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, The Deer Hunter, and Hard Core. In each, "an obsessed man searches for someone—a woman, a child, a best friend—who has fallen into the clutches of an alien people. But when found, the sought one doesn't want to be rescued."

There is a good deal of critical writing on The Searchers, as film criticism goes (by any other standard not so much). In his useful article "Critics and The Searchers", Edward Buscombe summarizes the work of Ford critics John Baxter, J. A. Place, Andrew Sarris, Michael Wilmington and Joseph McBride.

(D)espite their sense that the film is concerned with questions of history the critics do not in practice pay much attention to this. What is ultimately of concern [to them] is the artistry with which the film organizes the audience's responses to the characters. ...(T)he actual way in which the critics deal with questions of character in the film, even if not exclusively concerned in any simple way with how we feel about the characters, does lead us all the time towards articulating what it is the characters are like, what motivates them, how they understand each other and how they are to be understood by us. ...(A)ll these critics, then, to some extent treat the film as though it were a psychological novel!

What Buscombe does not say, perhaps because it is obvious, is that the critics he mentions (and others) are focussed on one character in particular, Ethan Edwards. Indeed, preoccupation with Ethan and his motives has been a constant of commentary on The Searchers since it first appeared. For example, Lindsay Anderson, who did not like the film, was as centered on the character of Ethan as those later critics who esteem it supremely.

The Searchers is a long and complicated story, spread
over eight or nine years. Moreover its hero, Ethan Edwards, is an unmistakable neurotic, devoured by an irrational hatred of Indians and half breeds, shadowed by some mysterious crime. His search for his little niece...abducted by Comanches seems...inspired less by love or honour than by an obsessive desire to do her to death as a contaminated creature. Now what is Ford, of all directors, to do with a hero like this?

Even before the film's release, a trade magazine spoke of a problem of motivation.

The box office appeal of John Wayne combined with the imprint of John Ford makes The Searchers a contender for the big money stakes. It's a Western in the grand manner—handsomely mounted and in the tradition of Shane. Yet The Searchers is somewhat disappointing. Wayne, the uncle of the kidnapped girl, is a complex character. His motivations, from the time he appears out of the southwest plains at his brother's ranch to his similar exit after he accomplishes his mission, are unclear. Wayne is a bitter, taciturn individual throughout and the reasons for his attitude are left to the imagination of the viewer. (Variety, March 14, 1956)

The Searchers itself foregrounds the problem of Ethan and his motivations through the song, written by Stan Jones, sung by the Sons of the Pioneers, that begins and ends the film. The first part of the song is played over the titles, its last words overlapping the solitary figure of Ethan approaching his brother's house: "What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam? What makes a man to leave bed and board and turn his back on home? Ride away, ride away, ride away." The second part of the song is played at the end of the film over images of the settlers entering the house and Ethan turning away. "A man will search in heart and soul, go searching way out there. His peace of mind he knows he'll find, but where, O Lord, O where? Ride away, ride away, ride away." The first part of the song poses a question that we expect the film to answer. The second part of the song also poses a question, but this
time we know that the film will answer neither one. The second question is rhetorical; it suggests that Ethan will not find peace of mind and that his response to this is to ride away. The second part of the song has another function: it tells us that Ethan is riding away, not just going back to feed his horse before going in the house.

The opening and closing song of The Searchers apparently parallels the poem that opens Young Mr. Lincoln, also a series of questions. According to Cahiers du cinéma, the main function of the poem is the pretense that its questions haven't been answered yet, whereas the film presumes the spectator's knowledge of Lincoln's historical character. Through this "feigned indecisiveness" the film effects a naturalization of the Lincoln myth. In truth this is opposite to the function of the song in The Searchers. In Young Mr. Lincoln the audience knows the answers to the questions before the film begins; in The Searchers the audience does not know the answers to the questions even after the film is over.

Buscombe sketches a mode of criticism general enough to include all the critics he mentions, including Anderson. He calls it "psychological" but perhaps "moral-psychological" is better; of course it is "author-centered". What this article proposes is simply that other critical methods should be brought to bear on The Searchers and on the dilemma that it poses. That dilemma is the extraordinary power of this film-myth on a number of filmmakers, critics, and other viewers, a power that might also be defined by the number of intelligent viewers that the film intensely repels. The "moral-psychological" critics tend to assume this power in a way that precludes raising it as a problem. Of course they attribute the film, and therefore its impact on audiences, to the artistry of the director; they even reason backwards from
its power to rate this the greatest film by a great, perhaps the greatest American director. To a view of myth as a collective phenomenon, the power of a myth is explainable only by reference to the community that receives it. Reasoning from textual effects to a personalized source both implies and is already theology.

This analysis of The Searchers seeks to discover and explore certain patterns of signification of the film that have not been discussed before. Of course this is a "reading" of the film, but it does not have the closed or completed quality that the notion of "reading" suggests. If this analysis displaces discussion of the film into new areas and modes of criticism, it will be enough. In the vein of exploration, we will borrow principles from several methodological positions, notably Levi-Straussian myth analysis, with its pervasive Freudian undertext, and Marxian ideological analysis. From Levi-Strauss we take the notion that public narratives have an unconscious component, similar to the Freudian latent content of dreams except that they have to do with public conflicts rather than private ones. Levi-Strauss in one place calls these conflicts contradictions either in social life or in knowledge. This explains why listeners are stirred by myths and also why they are told again and again. When these contradictions attenuate in social life, the power of the myth is lessened until it "dies" (whether by spatial or temporal elaboration). The myth operates by transposing the terms of the actual conflict into various other sets of terms, usually in the form of binary oppositions.* It is the resolution of the

*Levi-Strauss' binarism, his postulate that all myths (and kinship and totemistic structures) are built out of sets of binary oppositions, which he seems to ground in the structure of the brain itself, has been much attacked. The consensus now seems to be that binarism fits some situations well but as a universal principle of the formation of culture it is untenable.
transposed oppositions, substituted for the real one, that gives the myth a palliative effect. That this effect is a kind of deception accounts for the pejorative sense of the word "mythical", even in Levi-Strauss. He refuses to budge in calling myth "inauthentic" because it operates to deflect humans from identifying their actual problems. Finally, the operation of a myth--both its construction from actual conflicts and its impact on audiences--always has to do with the time in which the myth is told, not with the time that it tells of. Thus The Searchers has to do with 1956, not with the 1968-1873 period in which it is set.

The Searchers is explicitly concerned with a number of anthropological issues. On its very surface it treats questions of kinship, of race, of marriage, of relations between tribes. These questions in turn have to do with the identity, status, and responsibilities of individuals: Who is responsible for the retrieval and burial of the dead, for the search and recovery of captives, for vengeance? Who can marry whom? Which marriages are binding? Which are not?

The wealth of anthropological material in The Searchers is itself a problem: how to proceed? Let us begin with two sets of relationships, arranged in parallel, that appear to structure the film. With ethnographic accuracy, the film designates Martin Pawley as one-eighth Cherokee and seven-eighths white by descent. As a child Martin was rescued (by Ethan) from an Indian raid that killed his parents; Martha and Aaron Edwards adopted him and raised him as a member of their family. Martin's parents were white settlers like the Edwards but, as our analysis will show, he functions as an Indian in the symbolics of the film, more precisely as an Indian who has become an adopted white. Martin marries Laurie Jorgenson, who is white.
Debbie Edwards is captured by Scar and his band when she is ten. She is raised as a Comanche until she reaches puberty, then becomes Scar's wife. The parallelism is evident. White woman is adopted and raised by red society, marries a red man; (part) red man is adopted and raised by white society, marries a white woman. This textual parallel poses an exchange between tribes. This is at best a de facto exchange since there is no alliance between the tribes. And, indeed, both intertribal transfers take place in violence or as a result of violence. Each tribe subjects the outsider to total reconditioning, designed to obliterate the effects of previous tribal affiliation, as part of its adoption process.* This is an "exchange" between warring tribes, between which there can be no lawful exchange and therefore no lawful marriage. (Levi-Strauss shows that it is at the level of relations between tribes that questions of kinship and intermarriage are determined.)

The film's parallel adoptions and marriages pose a de facto exchange, which implies a contract (or reciprocity) and the obligation to fulfill it; but the film poses this symmetrical relationship only to collapse it.

Indian law and adoption, intermarriage on Indian terms are not recognized by the white settlers or by the film; only white law and adoption and intermarriage on white terms are recognized. The film's surface progress is toward "recovery of Debbie", but at the same time, what this implies and what the film hardly disguises, its progress is toward the destruction of Indian law and of Indian society. This is accomplished in the final Ranger/

*But note that Debbie remembers her white childhood and language "from always", whereas Martin is a total amnesiac about his childhood, which, though among whites, stands in metaphorically for his Indian ancestry. Similarly, it is Ethan later who "speaks good Comanch"; Martin speaks it hardly at all despite five years' travelling among the tribes.
Cavalry charge that destroys the Indian military force and, metonymically, Indian society itself. There can be only one law, one definition of persons and relationships. The Searchers presents the violent triumph of that law, annihilating everything that opposes it or that it defines as "other".

The undoing of Debbie's adoption and marriage and of the Indian law that sanctions them turns us back to Martin's adoption and marriage and to the white law that sanctions them and prescribes their terms. Martin's adoption and marriage are the "relation left over" when the originally posed symmetry collapses, hence they are of particular interest. Martin's adoption is treated on the surface of the film as a long-accomplished fact, but beneath its surface the nature, meaning, and consequences of that adoption are far from settled. Even on its surface, the film uses the character of Ethan to unsettle what has long been settled, notably the question of Martin's "Indian blood" and his kinship status as an adopted Edwards (white). (It is only one duplicity of a frequently duplicitous film that Ethan is punished for his disturbances by exclusion from the community, though this too is duplicitous in other ways.) As in Young Mr. Lincoln, the unconscious material lies partly on the surface of the film, but presented so as to be unreadable. This makes reading considerably more difficult than simply identifying unconscious structures. The surface of The Searchers is broken again and again by the edges of contradictions that lie at deeper levels. This implies, what is true, that the surface of the film is contradictory, even incoherent, in a different sense. It is Ford's skill as a filmmaker that covers over and disguises these breaks again and again, indeed that makes a flowing filmic texture out of them.
We first see Martin riding a horse bareback and sliding off in front of the Edwards' open side door; he is late for dinner. The wilderness outside the door, Max Steiner's exuberant theme, Martin's high spirits, the effortless transition from exterior to interior—these signify an ideal boyhood spent in oneness with nature. The film will shatter this idyll ruthlessly by taking away all of Martin's adopted family (except his hostile uncle), making him an orphan again. But it shatters the idyll immediately after posing it by initiating another signification set: Martin's skin is quite dark, he wears a loose, colored shirt with no buttons, all suggesting an Indian. Of course it is Indians who ride bareback and, in American mythology, it is only Indians who are completely at one with the environment. Martin steps tentatively into the room. The text's surface question: he is late for dinner, will he be scolded? covers the other question: he is an Indian, will he be welcome at the table? Much of the textual problematics centering on Martin is posed in this entry scene, though in disguised form. As it happens, Martin does have cause to worry on this particular evening, for his Uncle Ethan has returned. Martin is introduced and takes his seat sheepishly. Ethan looks at him suspiciously and says, "A fellow could mistake you for a 'breed." Martin says that he is one-eighth Cherokee, the rest English and Welsh. Martha recalls that it was Ethan who found Martin after Indians killed his parents; to which Ethan replies, "It just happened to be me. No need to make any more of it." Ethan just glares at Martin following this remark; Martha deflects his anger by saying, "More coffee, Ethan?" Then the dinner scene simply ends, in the way that Ford sometimes ends a scene, with no dramatic rounding out, no ellipsis marks. There is a cut to Martin sitting on the steps of the porch with
the family dog, half turned toward those inside, as though Ethan's
hostility has expelled him from the family group. After a scene with the
adults inside, Aaron joins Martha in the bedroom and closes the door in a
shot showing Ethan on the porch with the dog, taken from the same angle as
the earlier shot of Martin.

In the morning, they ride after Jorgenson's cattle. When Martin calls
Ethan "Uncle", Ethan says that he is not his uncle, and not to call him
grandpa or Methuselah either, since he can whip him to a frazzle. What
should Martin call him? Name is Ethan. The game of names between Ethan and
Martin is another textual duplicity. "I am not your uncle" means that
Martin is not kin to the Edwards children, to whom Ethan is uncle, but the
rest of Ethan's discourse turns this into a point of personal bravado and
frontier democracy.

The events following Scar's raid on the Edwards reveal Ethan's deep
knowledge of Comanche ways, of horses, of the wilderness. He rests his
horse before riding to the rescue, so he rides by Martin who has ridden his
horse to death.* This and other incidents show that, despite Ethan's hostility,
Martin has a great deal to learn from him. Others show that Ethan is a good
guide and teacher during Martin's five-year apprenticeship. He lets Martin
see and know only what he can handle—he does not let him see Martha's body

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*We might pause at this figure with a cowboy hat lugging a saddle across the
plains as two riders hurry by. Is this the same Martin who yesterday rode
bareback and dressed and looked like an Indian boy? A day later he is grown
up and looks like a white cowboy. This is a prime instance of the text's
duplicity, gaining all the associations of boyhood, Indian and nature boy in
one scene, and of young manhood and white cowboy in the next. Moreover, the
character has grown up in a day; we have now seen him, or we think we have,
as a boy in the warmth of home and then a grown man on his own on the trail
the next afternoon.
or, later, Lucy's, does not mention that he found Lucy dead, etc. Ethan also holds Martin back, hoisting him by the collar like a schoolboy, to keep him from following Brad's charge into the Comanche camp.

Ethan's hostility to Martin began at the Edwards dinner table but was restrained there. On the trail it bursts forth in a string of insults and epithets. "Come on, blankethead." (twice). "What does a quarter-blood (sic) Cherokee know about the Comanche trick of sleepin' with his best pony by his side?" When Martin says he thinks they're being followed (he's right), Ethan says, "That's just the injun in you."

A large figure of textual features has to do with Martin's kinship. Many of his wrangles with Ethan have to do with whether or not he is Debbie's "brother" or otherwise her kin such as to justify his searching for her year after year. Of course these discussions go beyond this point to Martin's status as an adopted white. The kinship question is treated by the text at several different levels and often those levels are mixed or fused.

When the Comanches attack the pursuit party, Martin almost faints after his first shot. Mose Harper takes his rifle, Martin revives and starts firing with his hand gun. This is "the young man's initiation in battle"—Anthony Perkins did this sh*tik in Friendly Persuasion the same year. Below the surface, the issue is Martin's firing on his blood kinsmen. The film is quite attentive to see where Martin's loyalties lie at this moment of decision. A parallel issue is involved when Martin inadvertently acquires a Comanche wife. He cannot send her back because Ethan says it will bring her tribe down on them; but Martin's misery at her being there, his kicking her away when she lies down beside him makes clear where his loyalties lie. Ethan's calling her Mrs. Pawley and baiting Martin about her link up with his other baits about Martin as an Indian.
The kinship issue is discussed explicitly when Ethan and Martin return to the Jorgenson ranch after about a year of searching. Ethan wants Martin to stay behind, apparently because he plans to shoot Debbie now that she is a woman and defiled by Comanches. The next morning Ethan rides off alone; with reluctant help from Laurie, Martin follows in order to stop Ethan from harming Debbie. In the bunkhouse the night before, Ethan and Martin have this discussion.

E: Jorgenson's been running my cattle with his own.
M: Your cattle? You mean Debbie's fettle.
E: He's agreed to take you on and split the increase in my herd while I'm gone. I'm pushing on tomorrow.
M: Well, I sure ain't gonna stay here. I started out looking for Debbie, I intend to keep on.
E: Why?
M: Why? Well, because she's my—
E: She's your nothin'. She's no kin to you at all.
M: Well, I always thought she was—the way her folks took me in, they raised me—
E: That don't make you no kin.
M: All right, maybe it don't, but I intend to keep on lookin' anyway.
E: How? You got any horses or money to buy them? You ain't even got money for cartridges. Jorgenson's offering you a good living here.
Martin, there's something I want you to know—
M: Ya, I know what you want me to know—that I got no kin, I got no money, no horses. All I got here is a bunch of dead man's clothes to wear. Well you told me that already so shut your mouth.

Later when they inspect recovered captives at the headquarters of a cavalry regiment, the officer asks them, "Who is this girl to you?" Martin says, "She's my—". Ethan cuts him off, "—niece". When they arrive at Scar's camp still later and are invited into his tent, Ethan tells Martin to wait outside. Partin pushes past him, saying, "Not likely". Ethan's remark may mean: I'll handle this business best without your or You're too young for this; but it also includes: This is a family matter and you're not part of the family.
When Martin confronts Debbie, he appeals to their shared childhood to break through to her; but he is also seeking validation from her as the sole survivor of the family to his own claims to kinship by adoption.

M: Debbie—
D: Un(t) mea.
M: Debbie, don't you remember? I'm Martin. I'm Martin, your brother. Remember? Debbie, remember back. Do you remember how I used to let you ride my horse and tell you stories? Don't you remember me, Debbie?
D: I remember—from always. At first, I prayed to you, come and get me, take me home. You didn't come.
M: But I've come now Debbie.
D: These are my people. Un(t) mea, Go. Go, Martin, please.
E: Stand aside, Martin.
M: No you don't, Ethan. Ethan, no you don't.
E: Stand aside.

What is going on in this scene is both obvious and subtle, overt and hidden. The adopted white and the adopted red confront each other and confess their kinship to each other. Martin seeks to return her to white society, but he does not regard her marriage to Scar as any sort of disgrace. As one who is himself adopted, he cannot fault her loyalty to her new tribe; but as an adopted white, indeed as her brother, he must try to bring her back by any persuasive means. It is interesting also that just following this scene affirming the kinship of Martin and Debbie, Ethan formally disowns his kinship to Debbie.

M: (reading) 'I, Ethan Edwards, being of a sound mind* and without any blood kin, do hereby—
E: Bequeath, it means leave.
M: bequeath all my property of any kind to Martin Pawley.'
E: What do you mean you don't have any blood kin? Debbie's your blood kin.
M: Well you can keep your will. (throws it back) I don't want any of your property. And don't think I've forgotten what you were fixin' to do to her. What kind of a man are you anyway—?

*Surely this is one of the film's little jokes.
E: She's been livin' with a buck! She's nothin but a—
M: Shut your dirty mouth.
E: I hope you die.
E: That'll be the day.

Martin persists in asserting and acting on his kinship bond to Debbie despite all obstacles. One of these obstacles is Laurie, the woman he will marry. She reluctantly helps him to continue the search when Ethan abandons him after their first return home. On their second return home, they interrupt her wedding to Charlie McCorry and then prepare to join the Rangers and the Cavalry in an attack upon Scar.

L: Marty, you're not going, not this time.
M: Are you crazy?
L: It's too late. She's a woman grown now.
M: I've got to fetch her home.
L: Fetch what home? The leavings of a Comanche buck, sold time and again to the highest bidder? With savages...
M: Laurie, shut your mouth.
L: You know what Ethan will do if he has a chance—he'll put a bullet in her brain and I tell you Martha would want it.
M: Only if I'm dead.

In front of Scar's camp, Clayton gives the order to go in at sun-up. Martin says, "Just a minute, Reverend, we go chargin' in they'll kill her and you know it." Ethan: "That's what I'm counting on." Martin: "I know you are." Clayton: "Son, there's more at stake here than your sister."

Ethan agrees and tells Martin that a scalp on Scar's lance belonged to his mother. Martin is given pause, then says, "But that doesn't change anything. That changes nothing!" He proposes to sneak into the village to save Debbie before the attack and does so, disguising himself as an Indian—with blanket and no shirt, but with white man's gun and holster under his blanket. Ethan opposes this but Clayton agrees. He finds Debbie and wakes her, saying, "Debbie, it's your brother, Marty. I'm going to get you out of here." She
is disoriented a moment then says, "Yes, Marty. Oh yes, Marty." He kills Scar, who has been alerted by Debbie's scream, and the Ranger attack begins. Ethan enters the village, scalp Scar, then rides after Debbie, separating her from Martin. Martin tries to pull Ethan from his horse but cannot. As Ethan rides after Debbie, Martin chases on foot, his hand on his gun, saying "No, Ethan, no!" Ethan of course does not shoot Debbie but picks her up and takes her home.

The running argument of Ethan and Martin treats explicitly the anthropological issue of kinship by blood versus kinship by adoption; to be precise: kinship reckoned by blood only versus kinship reckoned by blood and by adoption also. Martin asserts kinship by adoption by acting in all respects as though Debbie were his blood kin. He takes his adoption and therefore his brother's relation to Debbie literally. He insists on participating in every stage of the search for her and, finally, on risking his life to save her. His devotion to Debbie transcends all other obligations and affiliations; he defends her against Indians (Scar) and whites (Ethan and the attacking Cavalry) and leaves Laurie (twice) to secure her safety. Ethan asserts Martin's lack of kinship to Debbie (and to himself) both as a point of general principle (the interview with the Cavalry officer) and as a means of dissuading him from continuing the search (the bunkhouse talk at the end of the first search).

Martin in effect wins the argument—by saving Debbie and by returning home to marry Laurie and to settle in the community. Ethan returns home only to move on again; he is self-excluded from the community but, as Vladimir Propp argues, this is functionally similar to forcible exclusion, just as self-dispatch and dispatch by another are equivalent functions. The film's
ending enacts Martin's position; the adopted one marries and enters the
community as an adult male—he enjoys the full rights of kinship.

The Laurie–Martin relation deserves a note. Whether or not Martin is
a kin to the Edwards family has no bearing on his marrying Laurie; but the
unconscious of the kinship point, that he is a red man adopted by white
society, does bear upon it. Even on the surface of the text, if Martin is
a 'breed, a blankethead, if Ethan is discomfited by sitting at the family
table with him, then a fortiori he should not be allowed to marry a white
woman. Yet neither Ethan nor anyone else in the film so much as even hints
at this. In the bunkhouse scene Ethan notices Laurie's attraction to Martin
with amusement as she kisses Martin goodnight. Also, in urging Martin to
stay on at the Jorgenson ranch, he apparently accepts the inevitable match
between Laurie and Martin. When they return the second time and Laurie
appears in a wedding dress he says to Martin with a smile, "It looks like
you two have a lot to talk about." He looks on the fight between Martin
and Charlie McCorry with good-natured neutrality.

Martin is the evident favorite of Laurie from the beginning and, it
seems, of her mother also. Her father seems not to care, with perhaps a
preference for Charlie, for whatever reason. The film is well under way
before we see Laurie at all. She is seen in long shot at the funeral, barely
coming into medium shot in a frame with several other things happening also.
She says a silent good-bye to Martin, who seems awkward until he turns from
her and mounts his horse.

When Martin returns for one day a year later, Laurie calls his name
irritably and kisses him, to both of which he responds as though barely awake.
Laurie's mother asks if he knows her name, he says "Sure I do, her name's
Laurie, but I darned near forgot just how pretty she was." The next morning, after more kissing, he suggests that they go steady; she replies that they've been going steady since they was three and it's about time he found out about it. Her claim to an early closeness could not be proved by Martin's behavior. Upon the second return, Martin offers to go away so that Laurie can marry Charlie; she replies that if he does, she'll die. (Never was a wedding break-up done so inertly.) Laurie tries hard to prevent Martin from going to the final attack on Scar but he goes anyway. Despite her threats not to wait for him, Laurie does wait each time and joins him in the final tableau as they walk into the house.

In the sexual relationship with Laurie, Martin is almost totally passive. The idea of the relationship is hers as is each step that furthers or reinforces it. Of course, this reversal of traditional roles is one of the running gags of the film. It is carried even to a bathtub scene in which the male is the object of voyeurism and horseplay and comically asserts his outraged modesty. Martin at no time displays physical desire for Laurie or a desire to marry her, nor does he at any time hurry to get back to her. Martin is the love object whom Laurie chooses and seeks out. She conspicuously desires him, a desire that is presented as physical, indeed as violent, with hard kisses, pushes that knock down furniture, and a constantly agitated voice, alternating between a quaver and a screech.
Let us look at the Martin complex. Surely as a statement about a one-eighth Cherokee in white society, it is puzzling. This was hardly an issue in 1868 and no issue whatever in 1956. There were very few anti-miscegenation statutes regarding Indians at any time, and even these did not consider one-eighth Indian ancestry an impediment. Winthrop D. Jordan says in White Against Black,

Of the various laws which penalized illicit miscegenation, none applied to Indians, and only North Carolina's (and Virginia's for a very brief period) prohibited intermarriage. On the contrary, several colonists were willing to allow, even advocate, intermarriage with the Indians—an unheard of proposition concerning Negroes. Patrick Henry pushed a bill through two readings in the Virginia House which offered bounties for children of Indian-white marriages. It is suggestive, too, that Virginia's statutory definition of mulattoes extended the taint of Negro ancestry through three generations and of Indian ancestry through only one. (Page 163)

Jordan devotes a chapter to Thomas Jefferson's views of Indians and blacks. He argues that Jefferson's praise for the Indian and his denigration and hatred of blacks, while extreme, were emblematic of the tendency of American views generally.

Jefferson rescued the Indian from his detractors by appealing to the "circumstances" of their life and, wherever possible, by outright denial of difference from the white man. In appropriately altered circumstances Indians would become white men...It was precisely this transformation which Jefferson thought the Negro could never accomplish. By constantly referring to environment for one group and to nature for the other he effectively widened the gap which Americans had always placed between the two...In defending the Indian Jefferson was vindicating the American environment...Nowhere was Jefferson's effort to Americanize the Indian more apparent than in his reiterated hope for cultural and physical amalgamation of Indians with white Americans. Together they formed one nation: "We, like you," he once addressed an Indian chief, "are Americans, born in the same land, and having the same interests." His purchase of Louisiana raised the possibility of encouraging the Indians to remove beyond
the Mississippi, but he preferred that they be encouraged to give up hunting for farming and cede the resultant surplus of land to the United States. "In truth," he wrote, "the ultimate point of rest and happiness for them is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people." This would "best promote the interests of the Indians and ourselves, and finally consolidate our whole country to one nation only." ...Amalgamation and identification, welcomed with the Indian, were precisely what Jefferson most abhorred with the Negro.

If we look to 1955-1956, the time of the making of The Searchers, we find many instances of favorable attitudes toward Indians generally, or at least to the idea of the Indian, and also pride and fascination with specific Indian ancestry among individuals. Will Rogers, one of the most beloved of Americans, and who made three films with John Ford in the thirties, had more Indian blood than the Martin character in The Searchers. Rogers wrote

My ancestors didn't come over on the Mayflower, but they met the boat...My father was one-eighth Cherokee Indian, and my mother was a quarter-blood Cherokee. I never got far enough in arithmetic to figure out just how much "Injun" that makes me, but there's nothing of which I am more proud than my Cherokee blood. (Page 11)

The Searchers' full, emotional treatment of this issue—the kinship status and marriageability of a one-eighth Cherokee in white society in 1956—is highly puzzling. It can hardly be the locus of that unconscious conflict in knowledge or social life that activates every myth and fixes the attention of its listeners, according to Levi-Strauss. It becomes explicable only if we substitute black for red and read a film about red-white relations in 1868-1873 as a film about black-white relations in 1956.
In what sense does the opposition "kinship by blood versus kinship by adoption" apply to the social situation of blacks in the United States? Of course, blacks were detribalized with utmost violence by the acts which took them into chattel slavery. As servants of plantations and the white families who owned them, their own social organization was forcibly structured in relation to white society. The questions we have considered under the rubric of "adoption" could arise only with the first "freed" slaves and runaways. As late as 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in Dred Scott v. Sanford that Scott, hence all Negro slaves and their descendants, was not a citizen of the United States or of the state of Missouri, hence he could not sue in the federal courts. The Court also held the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional in that by prohibiting slavery in certain areas, here the Wisconsin Territory, it deprived persons of their property without due process of law under the Fifth amendment. In 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves in areas still in rebellion against the US as a war measure. In 1865, Article XIII to the Constitution abolished slavery in all the United States and the territories. In 1868, Article XIV provided:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (Section 1)

Article XV, ratified in 1870, guaranteed the right to vote regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its most important decision of modern times, some say the most important of its history, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.
The Court held that in the area of public education, the doctrine of separate but equal was inherently unequal and therefore violated the black students' right to "equal protection of the laws" guaranteed by the Fourteenth amendment. The Court foresaw significant difficulties in desegregating schools segregated for many years and, though of course it did not say so, anticipated strong resistance to its decision. For both reasons the Court postponed handing down an implementation decree for a full year, during which time it accepted briefs and listened to oral arguments on implementation from interested parties.

This year, May 17, 1954 – May 31, 1955, was one of the most heated, public debate of the Brown decision. There were statements in favor of the decision and many statements against it, especially by white Southern officials and spokesmen. These culminated in the "Southern Manifesto" of March 12, 1956, presented to Congress by senators and representatives from eleven southern states. It dismissed the legal basis for the decision and the Court's use of "naked judicial power" to exercise a legislative function; it concluded,

We pledge ourselves to use all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision which is contrary to the Constitution and to prevent the use of force in its implementation.

Other statements openly defied the law.

"I shall use every legal means at my command to continue segregated schools in Virginia."

"(The South) will not abide by or obey this legislative decision by a political court."

The Court's decision reduced the Constitution to "a scrap of paper"; any effort to integrate the South will lead to "great strife and turmoil."
The Florida brief on enforcement cited a poll conducted by the State of Florida showing that three-fourths of the white leaders of the state disagreed in principle with the Brown decision, that 30% disagreed "violently" and that only 13% of the peace officers polled said they would enforce state attendance laws at racially mixed schools.

A detailed account of Southern and other opposition to Brown is contained in Simple Justice by Richard Kluger, who notes

Once mandated or approved by the Court, desegregation progressed at a relatively rapid rate in a relatively peaceful manner in most areas—from the restaurants of Washington to the buses of Montgomery to the ballparks of the Texas League. One area alone was excepted: the schools. Streetcars and eating places and amusement parks were, after all, settings for transients who shared proximity for a limited period of time; schools were something else. There the contact would last for six or eight hours daily; it was from interaction with one another as much as attention devoted to lesson books or lectures that schoolchildren derived the essence of their education. And so it was the schoolhouse that became the arena for the South's fiercest resistance to the desegregation order of the Supreme Court.

School desegregation threatened racial separation and hierarchy directly. Racism depends upon the unknown and that requires separation; nothing dispels prejudice like actual contact. Perhaps parents feared that they would appear narrow in their children's eyes and that desegregation would drive white generations apart.

Surely a fear of intermarriage between black and white was one of the important factors. Several Southern States mention this in their briefs and cross-examinations; the school litigation was one step toward the ultimate, miscegenation. One reason that intermarriage was not mentioned more often as a likely consequence of Brown is that in 1955 twenty-nine states had statutes making it illegal for a black and a white to marry.
These statutes were not declared unconstitutional until 1967 in *Loving v. Virginia*.

It was in the midst of the *Brown* upheaval that the writing of *The Searchers* and other preparations for filming took place. The novel by Alan LeMay was published in 1954, Merian C. Cooper bought it that year for filming by John Ford with John Wayne. C. V. Whitney had just formed a production company of which *The Searchers* was to be the first feature. According to *Motion Picture Herald*, the shooting of *The Searchers* took place between June 25 and August 27, 1955. (It was released on May 26, 1956.) I have not been able to determine exactly when Frank Nugent wrote the screenplay, but it had to be between mid-1954 and the first half of 1955, the period that coincides with the initial *Brown* uproar.

This is not the time for a detailed analysis of Nugent's adaptation of LeMay's novel, but we should note that several of the features of the film with which we have been most concerned were added by Nugent. In the novel Martin is one-hundred per cent white, hence there is no conflict between Martin and Ethan on the race point;* but Ethan does try twice to shoot Debbie and Martin attempts to stop him. Martin does not enter Scar's village first; he charges with the Rangers in the final battle and finds Debbie gone. Ethan is killed in the battle while running down an Indian girl he thinks is Debbie; she is not Debbie, she pulls a gun from a horse and shoots him. Debbie, who has not been Scar's (or anyone's) wife or mistress, but is described as a dusky Indian maiden, has escaped to the

*In addition to the meanings we have traced, this change is simply good screen-writing: it introduces a dramatic conflict between the two principals that heightens and transforms the significance of their external adventures.*
desert. Martin trails her there and starts to make love to her on the last page. Laurie has married Charlie McCorry much earlier.
A word is in order about Ethan and Brown. The Searchers' opposition between kinship by blood versus kinship by adoption may be read as a "savage thinking" of black-white relations in US society. Ethan's insistence on literal blood lines in determining kinship and all privileges and obligations based on kinship is historically the position of the segregationist and white supremacist. Ethan returns to his brother's ranch from the Civil War in which he fought on the Southern side—he still wears his Confederate coat and carries his sabre. He refuses to recognize the surrender of the South or to take any oath subsequent to his oath to defend the Confederacy. These features mark Ethan as a white Southerner, displaced out west.* This identification occurs partly on the surface of the film but is rendered unreadable in various ways. For one thing, Ethan lacks a Southern accent, which would give the game away every time Ethan spoke of race or looked at Martin askance. For another, John Wayne was identified by audiences with Westerners, Not Southerners; the references to the Civil War are taken as character points or preface. Also, there is no mention of the issues of the Civil War or, at any time, of blacks. Moreover, except for the dinner-table scene and the ride out after the lost cattle, Ethan's anti-Indian attitudes are motivated by the plot—"He is bitter about Martha"—hence there is no reason to see them as the film's displacement of anti-black attitudes. Like the gangster in Charles Eckert's analysis of Marked Woman, the White Southerner is a hugely overdetermined figure that spans innumerable texts. "He is still fighting the Civil War" is part of the complex.

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*In fact, the Central Texas region of The Searchers was settled mainly by Southerners before and after the Civil War. Aaron speaks of a neighbor's having gone back to chopping cotton.
There is another signification set clustered around Ethan: that of outlawism. His not accepting the surrender of his side in a war that is long over makes him at least a figurative outlaw. He boasts that he still has his sabre, didn't turn it into no ploughshare either. That sabre, through the mediation of a green lieutenant, is later plunged literally up the ass of the Reverend Captain Clayton, symbol of religious and civil authority in the film.

Ethan was missing for three years between the end of the Civil War and 1868 when the film opens. There are several hints that he was an outlaw during this time. "You fit a lot of descriptions," says Clayton. He shows up on the Texas frontier with a bagful of fresh $20 pieces, about the origin of which he is vague. And Ethan does shoot Futterman and his two men in the back, making no attempt to take them alive. He also takes back his gold pieces, given in a valid trade for information. This episode gets Ethan and Martin in actual trouble with the law; Clayton takes Ethan's gun and orders him to come to Austin to answer questions. The Cavalry enters with news of Scar, Ethan's gun is returned, and the film drops the matter. Throughout the film, Ethan violates the religious and social law of his people by desecrating dead Indians, by scalping his enemies, by attempting to murder his kin for marrying a Comanche, etc.

Racism had always been immoral and undemocratic but Brown made certain of its fundamental manifestations illegal. This is reflected in The Searchers' specific conjunction of the figure of the White Southerner with the figure of the outlaw. To oppose the possibility of kinship by adoption places one outside the law. Thus Ethan's exclusion from the community at the end of the film is overdetermined by its unconscious structure.
What about Martin and Brown? We have identified him as the figure of the non-white who asserts the rights and obligations of kinship by adoption as equal to those of kinship by blood. Virtual kinship, what we have identified as kinship by adoption, is implied in the notion of children going to school together from early ages. In declaring unconstitutional "separate but equal" in public education, the Court in effect ruled that two tribes were to become one. The Searchers explores the implications of this new order, this new "law of the land", which is also the Law spoken of by Cahiers, under the category of "adoption". Of course the notion of "adoption" is not only a category of "savage thought" but of ideology. Both operate by reducing social and political relations to family ones, which necessarily distorts them. This distortion is ideological because it is done from a particular class perspective and for particular class interests. We study the labyrinthine coils of the ideological appropriations of savage thought because it is important to know how they work.

Note that the film does not deal with the adoption process itself—the finding of Martin by Ethan, etc.; nor with the growing up years—those matters in the forefront of discussion and awareness in the debate over Brown. Rather it looks to the other end of the adoption spectrum, that which is implied in adoption (and Brown) but not immediately palpable to the senses or to the imagination: What will happen when the adopted one grows up and enters white society as an adult? Thus in The Searchers Martin's adoption is a fait accompli, a long-settled and accepted fact. (True, re-orphaning the adopted one by killing off his foster family and by confronting him with an out-and-out racist are ways to re-raise settled issues.) The film focuses not on the adoption process but on the status, rights, duties, and responsibilities of the adopted one when grown. The Searchers may be understood as a manual for non-
whites adopted by white society, telling them what they may expect and what is expected of them. In our analysis of the Martin complex in the film, we saw that Martin exhibits unwavering loyalty to the white community. He kills Indian men, spurns Indian wives, even defends his "sister" from other whites. He devotes five years to finding his sister, then risks his life to kill the villain and save her. Martin's passivity in regard to Laurie is also exemplary. The non-white can show no aggressiveness toward a white love-object; if Martin is the example, can hardly show or feel any desire at all. Martin also postpones pleasure in the Freudian/Lacanian sense. Laurie offers herself and the pleasures of peaceful life at home again and again and he always refuses until his mission is done. This may be read diachronically that Martin cannot marry Laurie until he has proven himself as fully white, indeed as whiter than white, by the incredible number of performances that he accomplishes. But the better reading is synchronic a la Levi-Strauss and Lacan: Martin indeed enjoys full white citizenship and kinship immediately, but this creates a debt, according to this film an enormous debt, that he must discharge in exchange for this gift. This reading also accords best with American ideology, whereby everyone is granted full rights by birth and then (some) has to spend the rest of life struggling to give them content. Of course the debt for the non-white is incalculably greater than for natural whites. On the opposite end of the spectrum from Martin, the good Indian (nigger), there is Scar, the bad Indian (nigger). Scar precisely cannot postpone pleasure—he rapes, murders, dismembers, burns. The violence of that desire which Law represses is realized so luridly in Scar's acts that of course they cannot be shown, even indirectly. This violation of the law that dictates the postponement of pleasure is punished in the most brutal way, death, scalping, destruction of Indian society. Of course the film's arranging White-Indian relations along this psychoanalytic
spectrum is its way of defending genocidal actions against Indian tribes. This is a very effective conjunction: we identify (guiltily) with Scar's transgressions and then identify with his punishment also and the Law that sanctions it. But the annihilating punishment that Scar receives is also a warning to adopted non-whites of what awaits their transgressions. Of course Scar remains with the tribe, with his people, whereas Martin renounces any tribal tie, loyalty, or memory; but this is merely the condition of adoption itself, it is implied in its notion.

Our reading is non-reductive—the Indian-white ideological theme remains. There is in fact a kind of double displacement operating in the film at almost every moment, whereby literal events of the text may be read in the Indian-white register and then in the black-white register. But if our concern is the power of a myth, then it is the black-white discourse that most interests us. Power selects a myth; the myth does not create it. Black-white relations were such in 1956, and arguably now as well, that concerns such issues as The Searchers could not be treated directly. This hiddenness suggests conflicts of great power and the power of the film suggests audience contact with conflicts of great importance to itself but not understood by it. The Rev. Jess Jackson said recently, "Racism is the curse of the American soul." As long as this is true, The Searchers is likely to retain its power.