

I've never seen ... The Searchers

I've always imagined John Wayne as the epitome of gun-toting American racism. And I didn't expect this white-supremacy parable to change my mind ...

When people ask me what kind of films I like, I never know what to say. I like everything! Total trash, high art, comedy, horror, British realism, Czech surrealism, Hong Kong action, Hungarian inaction, you name it. But if there's one kind of film I've never really loved, it's westerns. Sure, I've seen some great ones, but as a genre it has never really appealed. I'm not American. I'm not into guns. And the demonisation and slaughter of indigenous peoples doesn't really grab me.

Most of all, I've never really liked John Wayne. I think of him as the personification of humourless, swaggering, macho Hollywood conservatism: a supporter of McCarthyite anti-communist witch hunts, gun rights, the Vietnam war, Ronald Reagan and white supremacism. (In a 1971 Playboy interview Wayne said, "I believe in white supremacy until the blacks are educated to a point of responsibility.") And I recall anecdotes about how he stole his whole drawling cowboy shtick off the veteran stuntman Yakima Canutt. He did have a great voice, though. All of this goes some way to explaining why I've never seen *The Searchers*, despite its reputation as the greatest western – if not one of the greatest movies – ever. I've never seen any of John Ford's movies, in fact. Maybe if I watch it I'll finally fall in love with the genre? As Wayne might put it, that'll be the day 5 (...) but oh my God, *The Searchers* is one of the most fantastically racist movies I've ever seen! Things start out well enough. The opening shot is a wonder to behold. Here's the silhouette of a woman in the doorway of her wooden cabin, emerging on to a dazzlingly sunlit porch and one of the most iconic views in cinema: Monument Valley. The landscape throughout the film is jaw-dropping. America is just stunningly beautiful; add in Technicolor and VistaVision and it looks hyperreally perfect: cornflower-blue skies like a touched-up vintage postcard, the deep, rich hues of rock and wood. Ford makes terrific use of the landscape, rhyming the isolated peaks with his rugged, isolated characters in the frame. The horsework (that's a technical term) is also amazing: orchestrated streams of riders surge across the screen, scaling precipices and plummeting down them. The action is epic and all the more exciting for the lack of fakery (although is it speeded up?). There probably aren't enough skilled stunt riders to do this kind of thing any more.

But then there's Wayne. Everyone is in high spirits when his character Ethan returns from the civil war (albeit under suspicious circumstances), until he reminds them what an unapologetic racist he is. When Ethan's adoptive nephew Martin – who is an eighth Cherokee – sits down at the dinner table, Ethan goes all surly. "A fella could mistake you for a half-breed," he sneers. Ethan hates the "Injuns" with a passion, even before they come and ransack the family homestead and make off with two young women. He knows a surprising amount about their culture, but has no respect for it. When he finds a dead Comanche, he shoots out his eyes so that he won't be able "to wander the spirit lands". He'd fit right in at Abu Ghraib. I'm not warming to him.

As well as a racist, Ethan is an asshole. Not just to Martin; to everyone. He's quick to punch people or chuck stuff at them. He gets sulky when he's not in charge. He's also utterly lacking in compassion. Look how he delivers the news to fellow searcher Brad that he has found the corpse of his fiancée, Lucy. When Brad asks for more details, Ethan flies into a rage: "What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture? Don't ever ask me!" Like *he's* the real victim.

It's not just Ethan, though, *The Searchers* as a whole seems to hate them Injuns. The plot contrives to demonise them from the outset by barely identifying them as individuals and having them kidnap innocent white girls, thus affording Wayne and co a patch of moral high ground they don't really deserve. Running through the film is a deep-seated paranoia about racial purity. Any dilution of whiteness is considered mortifying, from Martin's "half-breed" status to the traumatised captives Ethan helps liberate, but considers ruined by their exposure to the

Comanches. “It’s hard to believe they’re white,” a cavalryman says. “They ain’t any more,” snarls Ethan. The same applies to the missing Debbie; Ethan’s obsession is driven by a desire not to rescue her, but to kill her for going over to the other side.

There are only two significant Native American characters: Scar, the mysterious chief of the kidnapping Comanche tribe (intriguingly played by blue-eyed Jewish actor Henry Brandon) who at least gets to explain that he has lost sons to white enemies; and Look (Beulah Archuletta), the bride Martin mistakenly acquires during a bartering session. This is the only thing in the movie that makes

Wayne’s character laugh. Look inexplicably dotes on Martin, smiling coyly, batting her eyelashes at him and serving him coffee. He literally boots her out of his bed (which Ethan finds hilarious). Look is later killed in a raid, which is convenient for Martin’s marriage prospects. Martin’s whole romantic subplot is played as jaunty comedy, and doesn’t really sit with well the heavy central story.

In its defence, the film hardly portrays Ethan as a hero. He’s clearly a psycho as well as a racist haunted by past traumas, ultimately becoming the “savage” he views the Native Americans to be. So you could argue *The Searchers* is more a study of racism than a racist movie. But is that good enough? When the hero’s climactic moment of change is his decision not to kill his niece for not being white enough, that’s not really saying a lot, is it? It’s the old, “Isn’t it great how this objectionable racist has become slightly less racist?” – a device that’s still in use today (see *Green Book*). That might have made white America feel better about itself in 1956, with the second world war a recent memory and the civil rights struggle heating up, but it wasn’t enough to wash the sour taste out of my mouth today.

All the same, I have to admire Wayne for agreeing to play such an unappealing character. He commands the screen effortlessly, never overselling Ethan’s torment and obsession. Is my dislike of him driven by my own prejudices? If so, I’m no better than him. If not, then it’s down to the strength of his performance. Either way, I was wrong. Reading up afterwards, I discover that during the shoot, Wayne found Beulah Archuletta crying alone in a tent one day. It turned out she was going to miss her son’s wedding. Wayne promptly halted production and flew Archuletta back to California so she could attend. Perhaps there’s a soul beneath that leathery machismo after all.

The Searchers might not be the beginning of my love affair with westerns, but I’m not some saddle-sore old grouch who’s happy to plod on, stewing in my own resentment. No: like Ethan, I can change. Maybe there’s another western out there that will cement my appreciation for the genre. I’ll keep on searching. It may take some time.

Steve Rose, *The Guardian*, May 22 2020

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