The Berkhofer Duality Revealed in the Western Films of John Ford and John Wayne

John T. Nelson
University of Toledo

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol4/iss1/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Publications at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Madison Historical Review by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
The Berkhofer Duality Revealed in the Western Films of John Ford
and John Wayne

John T. Nelson
University of Toledo
Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. argues that the United States has categorized Native Americans in polarized stereotypes of noble savage or vicious heathen. He contends that scholarly interest in Indian culture has risen and subsided in tandem with its emphasis in popular culture. Since motion pictures represent a significant component of popular culture, this paper proposes to examine the representation of Native Americans in Western film. The research focuses on the major works of John Ford and John Wayne, dominant contributors to the genre in direction and acting, respectively. The investigation assesses the portrayal of aboriginal peoples as a means of studying American perceptions of their culture.

These secondary sources inform the study. Berkhofer notes the legacy and depth of the Western genre for Americans.¹ In Six Guns and Society, Will Wright examines its popularity stating:

For the Western, like any myth, stands between individual human consciousness and society. If a myth is popular, it must somehow appeal to or reinforce the individuals who view it by communicating a symbolic meaning to them. This meaning must, in turn, reflect the particular social institutions and attitudes that have created and continue to nourish the myth. Thus, a myth must tell its viewers about themselves and their society.²

Cultural historian Russel Nye describes the popular arts as works of humanistic form reflecting the tastes and values of the public in the preface to his study.³ The monograph by Ralph Brauer researches the television format of Western imagery.⁴

John G. Cawelti’s brief but insightful work studies the Western’s cultural impact on the United States and includes an excellent

---

compilation of major works in the genre. Philip French asserts that the Indian in motion pictures can be an allegorical interpretation for African Americans.

My thesis argues that a series of Westerns from 1939 to 1964 mirrors the Berkhofer duality and reflects a growing Civil Rights movement in American society. Since most critics consider director John Ford and the actor John Wayne as the prime auteurs in the Western film genre, their collaboration on major “A” films will inform this research. These works include *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Grande* (1950), and *The Searchers* (1956). Additionally, I will examine *McLintock!* (1963), starring Wayne with another director and Ford’s *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) sans John Wayne. These films appear in the citations and bibliography as primary sources as defined by cultural historian Vivian C. Sobchack. For each motion picture, the research presents first background on the film, then a synopsis of the plot, and finally an assessment of the portrayal of Native Americans within Berkhofer’s dualistic framework and polarity paradigm.

*Stagecoach* represents the first pairing of director John Ford and actor John Wayne in a major Western motion picture. The film’s screenplay traces its ancestry from a short story, “Stage to Lordsburg” by Ernest Haycox. This accomplished Western writer may have borrowed story elements from another brief work, “Boule de Suif,” penned by French radical and author Guy de Maupassant. The plot revolves around the “ship of fools” literary device where various characters, thrust together under

---

7Vivian C. Sobchack, “Beyond Visual Aids: American Film as American Culture,” *American Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1980): 288. According to Sobchack, the term *auteur* designates the director or performer who informs a film with personal vision to the degree that the work, however initially derivative or collaborative, becomes imprinted with a recognizable personal style.
8Sobchack, 284.
9*Stagecoach*, dir. John Ford, United Artists, 1939.
stress, represent societal elements and reveal both personality flaws and development. In the story, a stagecoach must complete a perilous journey through Indian Territory. The analysis by Garry Wills of their roles asserts that the players’ status and rank become inverted. The respectable banker embezzles from his own institution, while the pregnant Army wife depends on unsavory criminal elements for protection. The Southern gentleman in fact is a professional gambler and killer and the ineffectual whisky salesman is both chivalrous and honest. The drunken doctor and prostitute redeem themselves delivering the wife’s child. Outlaw and fugitive Ringo Kid (John Wayne) defends this society in microcosm against Geronimo-led Apaches. At the film’s conclusion, Wayne’s character kills three outlaws, thus avenging his family and purifying the town of Lordsburg. Hence, the former escapee becomes an agent of societal defense against both lawless elements and savage Indians. Berkhofer concludes, “In the negative image the Indian was the usual bloodthirsty savage, often crazed, seeking vengeance or just malicious fun at the expense of innocent Whites, especially women.”

The portrayal of Native Americans in Stagecoach reflects the Berkhofer thesis of a white construct for the evil Indian. Ralph E. and Natasha A. Friar cite author and film technical advisor David Humphreys Miller. He notes the need for a menace to oppose the American progress myth in motion pictures. As civilization spread across the continent, Indians provide a constant and subliminal source of conflict beyond the immediate drama revealed among the stage’s travelers. Personalizing the Apache never occurs; instead, the film portrays them as savage raiders. Lacking believability as characters, the Indians continue to chase the stagecoach rather than shooting the team of horses, effectively and prematurely ending the drama.

---

Stagecoach relies heavily on both racial stereotyping and the fear of miscegenation. Since he is married to a Mexican woman, the team’s driver, Buck, is cast as ineffectual, timid, and a source of comic relief. A major white player would not wed outside his race or class. Moreover, the Hispanic operator of the way station reveals a character even more subservient to American interests. Chris submissively caters to those in authority. When his Apache wife absconds with his horse and rifle, the Mexican husband readily concurs with the United States Marshal who opines that it will be easy to obtain another spouse. Chris experiences far more chagrin concerning the loss of his weapon and well-trained, hard working mount, noting repeatedly that an Apache woman constitutes a malevolent and dishonest wife.

The height of revulsion to miscegenation between Caucasian females and the Apache warriors finds expression in Ford’s stagecoach chase scene, a benchmark in motion picture development. Previously, the banker notes that the Indians “strike like rattlesnakes” just before the stage’s arrival at a burned out ferry crossing. The gambler Hatfield doffs his greatcoat in a display of Southern gallantry to cover the ravaged corpse of a white woman, whose body lies just beneath the camera’s view. Following the fording of the river, Geronimo’s band attacks the travelers in a dramatic chase scene. As the warriors continue the pursuit, the White men run out of ammunition. Faced with imminent capture, the director cuts to a close up of Hatfield’s revolver with a single remaining cartridge. As the Army officer’s wife prays, the weapon’s barrel draws close to her temple in an obvious choice between death and dishonor. An Apache warrior kills the gambler before he can execute Mrs. Mallory, fortunately for her since the cavalry

---

13 Tuska, 50-1.
subsequently rides to the rescue and saves the passengers from the howling savages. Berkhofer asserts:

What the captivity narrative started the Western novel and movie continued to finish long past the actual events of conquest—as if the American conscience still needed to be reassured about the rightness of past actions and the resulting present times.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Fort Apache} represents the first film in John Ford’s “cavalry trilogy.” (\textit{She Wore a Yellow Ribbon} and \textit{Rio Grande} complete the series).\textsuperscript{16} Released in 1948, it ranks as the top-grossing Western for that year.\textsuperscript{17} In addition to critics, film and cultural historians have reviewed extensively this popular work. When compared to other motion pictures in its genre, \textit{Fort Apache} stands tied for twenty-third in adjusted gross income.\textsuperscript{18} Based on the short story, “Massacre,” by James Warner Bellah, the adapted screenplay mirrors General George Armstrong Custer’s defeat by Native Americans at the Little Bighorn. Henry Fonda stars in the cavalry role that is obviously a thinly veiled characterization of the defeated general’s legend.\textsuperscript{19}

The Fonda character, Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday, has been a successful combat leader in the East during the Civil War. Demoted in rank due to post-war downsizing, the embittered officer comes to the lonely outpost of Fort Apache in the Southwest. The new commander immediately alienates both his officers and the enlisted men in the regiment. He enforces a strict military discipline that is inappropriate for the frontier. Making it clear that he considers the assignment beneath his stature, he displays the arrogance of a martinet. The presence of Thursday’s daughter at the post further

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15}Anobile, 162-72, 200-5.; Tuska, 51.; \textit{Stagecoach}, 1939.; Berkhofer, 104.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Will Wright, 30-1.
\end{itemize}
complicates the situation since she soon develops a romantic interest in a young lieutenant. Because the junior officer is the son of Irish Sergeant-Major O’Rourke, Thursday discourages the relationship noting that the young man is beneath his daughter’s station since the senior O’Rourke is not only a noncommissioned officer but also has Gaelic heritage. Fonda’s character repeatedly mispronounces the names of his predominantly Irish subordinates, displaying a lack of basic respect for them and even less understanding concerning the Apache.20

Ford’s portrayal of Indians follows the “noble Redman” concept posited by Berkhofer. John Wayne plays the executive officer, Captain Kirby York, who exhibits a far better knowledge of Native Americans than the new commander does. Realizing that the Apache chief, Cochise, has valid grievances concerning the corrupt Indian agent, York initiates a meeting under a flag of truce and attempts to negotiate the tribe’s return to the reservation. The film defines the Southwestern tribe as honorable warriors doomed before the advance of civilization. An honest and trusting Cochise brings his tribe back from Mexico based on York’s word that Thursday will negotiate in good faith. Although Fonda’s West Point trained character can appreciate the historical success of Genghis Khan, he is devoid of any respect for the military capabilities of the Apache. The commander derisively comments that Cochise lacks the training of a Sandhurst or West Point graduate. York cautions not to underestimate the Indians merely because they are illiterate. The irony that these desert inhabitants descend from the same lineage as Asia’s most successful cavalry is lost on the arrogant commander.21

Breaching Cochise’s trust and diplomatic protocol, Thursday arrives at the negotiations with an armed force of cavalry. York

---

protests that he had given his word to the Apache leader. With typical Caucasian arrogance the commander replies, “Your word, Mister, means nothing to a savage.” Wayne’s character retorts, “It does to me,” and challenges Fonda to a duel. The commander places York under arrest in the rear with the baggage train. The wily Apache leader lures Thursday’s unit into an ambush in a narrow canyon, subsequently massacring most of the American force. Not only does an honorable and noble Native American leader exterminate a deceitful commander, but also the surviving executive officer must cover up Thursday’s military incompetence for the good of the service. In this post-war film, the noble Native American is a victim of civilization who achieves just an isolated victory. Nevertheless, *Fort Apache* reveals the beginning of racial understanding, however minute, that develops in the post-World War II period. It is significant that the motion picture’s release followed President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, in 1941, establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which initiated a limited desegregation of defense industries during World War II.22

The second motion picture in the John Ford/John Wayne trilogy is *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*.23 Derived from James Warner Bellah’s short story, “War Party,” Frank S. Nugent adapted the work that first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* for the screen. When interviewed later in his career, Wayne noted that the lead character, Captain Nathan Brittles, an older officer retiring from the cavalry, constituted his favorite film role.24 Ford shot the motion picture in Technicolor as opposed to filming the other two in black and white. In Peter Bogdanovich’s biography of Ford, the director stated that he sought to imitate the color and movement style of Western artist Frederick Remington. This strategy was so successful that the motion

---

23*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, 1949.
24Wills, 177-81.; Ricci, Zmijewsky, and Zmijewsky, 110-12.
picture earned an Academy Award for its Technicolor cinematography.\textsuperscript{25}

In this work’s plot, the aging Brittles is just days from retirement, but he must lead one last mission. His dual goal is to rendezvous with intelligence patrols and escort the post commander’s wife and visiting niece to a way station where they can travel by stagecoach to a more secure fort in the East. Because the civilian women and their baggage wagon will hinder his scouting mission, Wayne’s character files a written protest to his commander. Nevertheless, he proceeds on the patrol and attempts to accomplish mutually conflicting objectives. From the beginning, his unit experiences setbacks. When the cavalry sights an Arapaho tribe, led by the war chief Red Shirt, the troop changes course and loses over one-half of a day taking a circuitous route. This sets in motion a negative chain of events. First, the delay of the main force leaves the smaller scouting party vulnerable to an Indian ambush resulting in casualties. Second, their late arrival at the way station is disastrous. An Indian attack kills an elderly trooper and the civilian couple operating the station, thus orphaning their children. Finally, after missing the stagecoach and needing to cover his retreat, Brittles must leave two squads to defend a river crossing against superior hostile forces. At the fort, Wayne’s character shoulders full responsibility for the ill-conceived assignment, declaring that his last patrol resulted in failure. To add insult to injury, the fort’s commander assigns the duty of relieving the rear guard element to a junior officer, noting that Brittles’ retirement takes effect that evening. Later Wayne circumvents the order by rejoining and leading the relief column hours before his official retirement. Though barely legal, his actions prevent a major Indian war.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25}Parish and Pitts, 323-5.; Harlold McCracken, Frederick Remington Artist of the Old West (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1947); Peter Bogdanovich, John Ford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
\textsuperscript{26}Ricci, Zmijewsky, and Zmijewsky, 170-2.; Parish and Pitts, 323-5.
The Arapaho have left the reservation in part because a once absent major buffalo herd returned to the region, reinforcing the nomadic hunter stereotype. Moreover, the recent Custer massacre prompts a burgeoning alliance among many tribes (widely exaggerated for dramatic purposes). Calling the mounted aborigines the finest light cavalry in the world, the film’s narrator intones further that another Native American victory will halt Western development for a hundred years. This statement is a grotesque exaggeration considering that between 1870 and 1880 the United States population grew from thirty-eight to fifty million while a declining Indian population numbered less than two million. Furthermore, since many of the tribes are traditional enemies, a Native American confederation of Kiowa, Comanche, Arapaho, Cheyenne and Apache constitutes pure fantasy. Nevertheless, this motion picture encompasses the Berkhofer construct of the Noble Savage, “…master of the wilderness and possessor of physical prowess and/or crafty wisdom.”

As in Fort Apache, Wayne’s character displays a deep understanding and profound respect for his Native American counterparts in this film. Having earned the Congressional Medal of Honor, his nation’s highest award for valor in combat, it is significant that Brittles seeks a nonviolent resolution concerning American and aboriginal relations. She Wore a Yellow Ribbon reflects extreme efforts on the part of Wayne’s character to maintain peace and contain the Indians on the reservation. Even when the Indians wound members of a patrol, Brittles orders return fire over the warriors’ heads to avoid bloodshed. A corrupt sutler and profiteering gunrunners are the prime motivation for the Native Americans revolt against the whites. Although the young chief Red Shirt desires war, Wayne’s character negotiates with an aged tribal leader, Pony That Walks. Both men are former enemies but now respect each other. Each acknowledges the folly and destruction of war. The Arapaho leader urges the

---

27 Tuska, 54-5.; Berkhofer, 98.
28 Friar and Friar, 165.; McDonald, 120.
retiring cavalry commander to join him in Christian fellowship, buffalo hunting, and, of course, obligatory whiskey drinking. Following their meeting, Brittles stampedes the tribe’s pony herd that evening. Without their mounts and denied military mobility, the warriors retreat to the reservation. Although this cavalry picture reveals many of the stereotypical constructs found in the Berkhofer duality, Wayne’s role promotes a slightly more nuanced acceptance of the commonality between the races.29

The last of John Ford’s trilogy is *Rio Grande* and Garry Wills contends that it is the best-filmed work of the three, combining both stunning landscapes and emotional interior scenes between the major players.30 The first of five collaborations between Maureen O’Hara and John Wayne, it is also the only picture in the trilogy assigning Wayne’s character a major love interest. Lieutenant Colonel Kirby Yorke and his wife (O’Hara) are estranged after the Civil War when he followed the orders of General Philip Sheridan to burn and to sack his wife’s family plantation in the Shenandoah Valley. Although Wayne has not seen his infant son for fifteen years, the youngster joins the cavalry as an enlisted man to atone for failing his studies at West Point. Kathleen Yorke arrives at the fort to post a bond to buy out her son’s enlistment. However, both father and son refuse to acquiesce to her plan. When a combined force of allied Apache tribes attack a wagon train and kidnap the post’s children, Lieutenant Colonel Yorke leads an illegal rescue mission into Mexico where his son performs heroically. At the end of the film, a wounded father, decorated son, and mother are reunited.31

James Warner Bellah bases the motion picture *Rio Grande* on another short story, “Mission with No Record.” The writer drew his inspiration from an actual incident. Ironically, the American forces raided into Mexico to capture Native American

---

29 *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, 1949.; Ricci, Zmijewsky, and Zmijewsky, 170-2.; Parish and Pitts, 323-5.; Wills, 177-81.
31 Parish and Pitts, 304-6.; Ricci, Zmijewsky, and Zmijewsky, 177-9.
noncombatants when members of the Kickapoo tribe bolted from their reservation in the Indian Territory in 1873, and withdrew into Mexico. From there, they launched raids against white settlers and swiftly returned across the Rio Grande beyond the legal reach of United States military forces. Just as in the motion picture, General Sheridan verbally authorized Colonel Ranald Mackenzie at Fort Clark to neutralize the hostiles by any means necessary, thus implying a border violation. Fort Clarke’s commander used scouts to determine when the Kickapoo warriors were north on a raiding mission. Then Mackenzie personally led a foray into Mexico where in sixty-four hours he razed three Indian villages. After killing nineteen of the inhabitants, he took forty hostages and withdrew to United States territory incarcerating the prisoners on the reservation. By refusing to negotiate a return of their families, the colonel forced the remaining warriors to disarm and submit to American authorities on the reservation. In this instance, art imitated life, but in reverse for Native Americans.32

Of the three cavalry films, Rio Grande best illuminates Berkhofer’s assertion of the good Indian/savage heathen in American popular culture. Similarly, Friar cites both subtle and blatant examples of racism in the film.33 The Navaho scout symbolizes the properly assimilated noble Redman whose character, Sergeant Charlie Horse Blanket, possesses a non-threatening name. Serving as a guard for Apache prisoners, he helps defend the post when “wild Indians” attack it. Following the assault, he provides crucial intelligence for the American officers by discerning the tribal identities of slain warriors belonging to the Chiricahua, Mescalero, and White Mountain tribes. He warns that these normally independent tribes are uniting into a confederation. During the rescue of captured Caucasian children in Mexico, the scout leads a troop of loyal Navahos beside two units of white cavalry in the assault and earns a decoration just

32Wills, 181-5.
33Friar and Friar, 165.
like the American troopers. However, the sergeant’s language reflects the halting and blunt dialogue common to Hollywood scripts for Native Americans. Navaho Charlie Horse Blanket epitomizes the image of the good Indian. It is not a great leap to link his celluloid heroics to the actual exploits of World War II black units such as the 761st Tank Battalion and the Tuskegee Airmen.\textsuperscript{34}

Conversely, the Apaches are the embodiment of heathen savagery. Mimicking the howls of wild animals to coordinate an attack on the fort, they successfully raid the installation and free Apache prisoners of war. In one scene, a little white girl runs screaming into the arms of her Irish Sergeant Major for protection. Although Mrs. Yorke had stoically observed her husband destroying a plantation held in the family for generations, she swoons at the sight of Apaches during the assault. Throughout the motion picture, a musical score representing Hollywood’s version of threatening Indian drumming and chanting alerts the audience to imminent menace. Later the “red devils” attack a wagon train evacuating the fort’s same women and children. In front of a burned wagon, Commander Yorke restrains Corporal Bell from viewing the ravaged body of the enlisted man’s wife. Murder, rape and the fear of miscegenation comprise an integral part of the film’s plot. In the concluding battle scene, a trio of troopers infiltrates the Apache compound where the warriors have spent the night binging on tequila and performing the vengeance dance. The advance team defends the children from a ritual execution while the main force assaults the stronghold and wipes out the heathen menace. Of the three cavalry films in Ford’s collection, \textit{Rio Grande} expresses best the good/evil Indian construct in the Berkhofer duality.\textsuperscript{35}

Following the cavalry trilogy produced in 1948-1950, Ford and Wayne collaborated on the Western film, \textit{The Searchers}, and

\textsuperscript{34}Boydston, 601.
\textsuperscript{35}Ricci, Zmijewsky, and Zmijewsky, 177-9.; Parish and Pitts, 304-6.; Tuska, 55.; \textit{Rio Grande}, 1950.
this dark motion picture achieved the level of cult status among critics and filmmakers.36 In the volume Western Movies (1974), Walter C. Clapham labeled the work a “masterpiece.”37 Accomplished director and Academy Award winner Steven Spielberg notes that the film “contains the single most harrowing moment in any film I’ve ever seen.”38 Wayne’s character Ethan Edwards repeatedly employs a signature catch phrase to denote sarcasm, “That’ll be the day,” which popular singer Buddy Holly appropriated as the title for his classic rock song. Scholars continue to dissect this motion picture and apply to it strained symbolism, for instance, equating Wayne’s “Johnny Reb” coat to urban gang colors.39 The work’s impact carries over to Europeans such as French film critic Jean-Luc Godard who reportedly wept at the end of the film. In the 1988 issue of the British Film Institute Companion, which rates the ten best Westerns of all time, The Searchers ranks second only to High Noon. American critic Roger Ebert considers this Ford film one of the ten best movies in any genre while the American Film Institute places it in the top one hundred. When adjusted for inflation, The Searchers remains among the twenty-five top-grossing Westerns.40

Released in 1956 and based on Alan Lemay’s novel of the same title, Frank S. Nugent again adapted the screenplay. In this plot, Ethan Edwards returns to his family in Texas. Although a Confederate veteran, he has delayed his homecoming for three years after the Civil War. The film speculates that he has robbed a Union army payroll and has served as a mercenary in Mexico. It also suggests an unrequited love interest between Ethan and his sister-in-law Martha. Drawn away from the homestead by a Comanche ruse, Wayne returns to discover Martha

37 Parish and Pitts, 316-7.
40 Wills, 313, 351.; Corkin, 128.; John Nesbit, www.culturedose.net/review (1/19/02); www.rottentomatoes.com/m/searchers/ (12/14/04).
murdered and violated, the family slain, and his two nieces, Lucy and Debbie, kidnapped. Accompanied by Martin Pawley, an adopted ward of the family, the senior Edwards pursues his brothers’ daughters. After he finds Lucy’s tortured and raped body, the search for Debbie drags on for years. When she reaches adolescence, the rescue objective for Ethan evolves into killing the niece who is now a companion to the war chief, Scar. However, Martin still wishes to save the girl and challenges Edwards. At the end of the picture, Texas Rangers destroy the Comanche village, while Pawley kills Scar. At the last moment when Ethan confronts Debbie, he abandons his vengeful mission, embraces his sole heir, and returns her to the white settlements. This scene represents a significant act of redemption for Wayne’s dark character.41

The duality constructs for Native Americans in popular culture surface to the extreme in The Searchers while mirroring society’s burgeoning awareness for civil rights during the 1950-1960 decade. Film historian Janet Walker asserts that the picture illuminates not only Texas in 1868, but also America in 1956.42 Cultural scholar Scott Simmon also contends that the John Ford cavalry films mark the beginning of Hollywood’s focus on discrimination in the post-war period. The author describes the racism and fear of miscegenation presented in The Searchers as pathological.43 Other literary researchers argue that the captivity narrative genre reflects an Indian captivity psychosis in American society. This film’s racial tensions parallel the flashpoints of the Civil Rights movement evidenced in Brown v. Board of Education, in 1954, the rise of White Citizens’ Councils, the murder of Emmett Till, in 1955, and the struggle to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957.44

---

41The Searchers, 1956.; Wills, 251-61.
42Walker, 2.
43Simmon, 72.
Although the novel’s Martin Pawley is white, Ford presents him with a mixed heritage (one-eighth Cherokee) to reconcile his quest for a white woman raised in Native American culture. Ironically, Ethan saved the Edwards’ ward in infancy following a Comanche massacre of Martin’s birth parents. Nevertheless, the senior searcher derisively notes that his companion resembles a “half-breed.” When the army retrieves several white female captives from the Indians, the film depicts the victims as hopelessly delusional from their ordeal.45 Scar’s band of Comanche represents the darkest counterpart to white society, stealing children and gang raping women prior to their slaughter. When Lucy’s fiancé, Brad, inquires concerning the state of her corpse, Wayne’s character explodes, “What do you want me to do? Draw a picture? Spell it out? Don’t ever ask me. Long as you live, don’t ever ask me more.”46 Maddened with grief, the young man mounts a lone suicidal assault against an entire band of warriors. The Searchers also presents a curious view of white women’s racial attitudes in the film. One of Debbie’s childhood contemporaries matures and develops a romantic interest in Martin (only one-eighth Cherokee, remember), yet this girl, Laurie, urges Martin to abandon his quest to rescue Debbie the adult. When he argues that he must bring his foster sister home, Laurie retorts, “Fetch what home? The leavings of Comanche bucks sold time and time again to the highest bidder and with savage brats of her own?” She further asserts that Debbie’s own mother, Martha, would now want her child executed rather than returned to white society. At the film’s conclusion, Debbie obtains absolution for her involuntary miscegenation only through the extermination of the entire Comanche village, symbolized by Martin assassinating Scar and Ethan scalping the war chief’s body. This 1956 film presents Native American culture as

45Tuska, 56-7.
46Turner and Higgs, 25.
completely alien to white society, worthy of assimilation in only small doses.\footnote{Turner and Higgs, 27-8.; The Searchers, 1956.}

In the motion picture \textit{McLintock!}, released in 1963, John Wayne portrays a character who offers a radically evolved interpretation of the Comanche culture.\footnote{\textit{McLintock!}, dir. Andrew V. McLaglen, United Artists, 1963.} Directed by Andrew V. McLaglen, this slapstick comedy features George Washington McLintock as the region’s dominant cattle baron who also owns the area’s mining and lumber interests. With an obvious reference to the “Father of our Country” icon, the town itself bears his name. He is the personification of Manifest Destiny and free market capitalism, as well as a vocal critic of the Federal government’s Indian policies. Wayne asserts sarcastically that the Indian Bureau and its agent cannot discern the difference between the issues of real Native Americans and a cigar store Indian. The film’s plot revolves around the comic estrangement between G.W. McLintock and his wife Katherine played by Maureen O’Hara. In the concluding scenes, Wayne pursues O’Hara through the streets of the town, restrains her, and publicly spanks her before the amused and approving citizens. This plot device later drew considerable criticism from various women’s groups. Although successful at the box office and a viewer favorite on television reruns, this motion picture is purely pedestrian and lacks the critical acclaim afforded the previously considered films.\footnote{Ricci, Zmijewsky, and Zmijewsky, 248-50.; Parish and Pitts, 106-7.}

\textit{McLintock!} presents the Berkhofer construct personified in Running Buffalo, a former warrior turned drunk for comic relief, and Puma, the noble chief vanquished yet dignified before an arrogant culture. However, Wayne’s role expresses a more sophisticated understanding for Native American culture that further reflects a growing societal appreciation for civil rights and a rejection of the pathological racism endemic in \textit{The Searchers}. G.W. the cattle baron cheerfully offers several steers to the impoverished Indians noting that starvation would
compel them to steal settlers’ livestock thus exacerbating racial tensions. Played by Edgar Buchanan, the town’s mixed-race character, Bunny Dull, represents failed assimilation each time he blatantly approaches McLintock for a handout; yet Wayne willingly proffers donations in a display of noblesse oblige. Conversely, Native American Davey Elk constitutes a struggling yet determined symbol of assimilation. Wearing a cropped haircut and a business suit, the college educated Comanche serves not only as the town’s telegrapher but also as a bookkeeper for Mr. Jake Birnbaum, a Jewish storeowner who is McLintock’s best friend. When the territorial governor insensitively decides to remove the aboriginal survivors to a distant reservation, Wayne represents Puma and other chiefs before the government commission. Failing to attain their legal release, McLintock in cooperation with Bunny Dull engineers an escape for the Comanche to dramatize their plight to the Federal government. In less than a decade, Ethan Edwards the xenophobe has evolved into George Washington the father and McLintock the civil rights activist. Just fifteen years removed from President Truman’s Executive Order 9981 to desegregate the armed forces and Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier in major league baseball, the Davey Elk character constitutes a major cultural shift in racial perceptions.50

Released in 1964, John Ford’s last epic Western, Cheyenne Autumn, is a feature that failed to compare to the director’s previous projects. Based on an historical incident, the work chronicles the forced removal of approximately one thousand members of the Cheyenne tribe from their ancestral home in Wyoming to an Oklahoma reservation in 1878. After a year of government neglect and incompetence, fewer than three hundred remain due to starvation and disease. Disregarding the United States military responsible for their incarceration, the

survivors bolt from the reservation in an attempt to return to
the Yellowstone country fifteen hundred miles away. The popular
press exploits their escape and evasion while wildly exaggerating
the Indian’s threat to white society. In actuality, the United
States government is an agent of genocide for the aboriginal
people, and cavalry forces pursue the Cheyenne refugees to the
brink of extinction. Moved by their plight, the Secretary of the
Interior, Edward G. Robinson, institutes a small reservation in
the Yellowstone area for the pathetic remnants of a defeated
nation. Cheyenne Autumn denotes a fundamental shift from the
heroic and progress myths reflected in the critically acclaimed
Westerns produced in the 1940 and 1950 decades. The major works
in the genre now reflect more complex and adult themes while
focusing on extreme realism and graphic violence.\textsuperscript{51}

Ford’s motion picture re-examines the progress myth through
the theme of Native American exploitation. Although it was one
of the top-grossing Westerns for the year, film critics gave the
production unremarkable reviews.\textsuperscript{52} While the director considered
his epic an apologia to the Indian, Native Americans criticized
their portrayal in the film and even considered filing a lawsuit
for slander.\textsuperscript{53} Categorizing the motion picture as consensus
liberalism, film historian Scott Simmon contends the work fails
to entertain since it addresses an exterminationist policy and an
oppressed group’s demand for welfare and civil rights.\textsuperscript{54} However,
the genocidal theme in this release denotes a marked departure in
the Western genre. Philip French argues that Karl Malden’s
character, a German immigrant named Captain Wessels charged with
incarcerating the Cheyenne, suggests a comparison of Native
American persecution to Nazi concentration camps.\textsuperscript{55} In director

\textsuperscript{52}George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, The Western From Silents to the Seventies
Fact and on Film Hollywood’s Famous Lawmen and Outlaws (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 1998),
167.
\textsuperscript{53}Friar and Friar, 167-71.
\textsuperscript{54}Simmon, 283-6.; Corkin, 254.
\textsuperscript{55}French, 91.; Walker, 27-8.
John Ford’s conclusion, at least a few Cheyenne succeed in returning to their ancestral home. However, in United States Congress 46th, 2nd session, Senate Report 708, Secretary of the Interior Schurz states, “the Indians should be taken back to their reservation,” that is, the institution in Oklahoma’s Indian Territory from which the Native Americans fled. Although Berkhofer’s polarized construct remains dominant, popular culture in American society exhibits a softening of Indian stereotypes.

In summary, the film work of John Ford and John Wayne examined in this study reflect a growing societal appreciation of Native American cultures that has mirrored the Civil Rights movement as well. McLintock! (1963) and Cheyenne Autumn (1964) immediately presaged the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, watershed legislation, which prohibited discrimination and affirmed voting rights for all citizens. Although the public view is incomplete and retains many stereotypes by focusing on the post-Civil War Indian conflicts in the Great Plains and Southwest, American perception of aboriginal inhabitants gradually acknowledges the genocidal culture clash of the Columbian Exchange. A more nuanced portrayal of Native Americans in motion pictures during the post-war era constitutes a developing tolerance in significant portions of the public reflected in their reflexive relationships with mass media and popular culture. By their very nature as commercial products, evolving and controversial themes in motion pictures remain tempered by audience acceptance. The Berkhofer duality thesis for the white view of the evil Indian gels perfectly in the John Ford/John Wayne classic, Stagecoach. Moreover, Fort Apache, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon and Rio Grande express the noble Indian counterpart. Although The Searchers stands as an indictment against pathological racism practiced by both cultures, McLintock! and Cheyenne Autumn display an audience sophistication and understanding for Native American culture beyond Berkhofer’s

56 Tuska, 60-1.
57 Price, 153-71.
construct published in 1978. Honored with the Academy Award for Best Picture, Kevin Costner’s film *Dances With Wolves* (1990) expands this nuanced schema.\(^{58}\) Hopefully, a nation more accepting of multicultural values in the twenty-first century will embrace and consume a popular culture which more faithfully explores the heritage of Native Americans and other diverse peoples.

Bibliography

Movies


*Fort Apache*, RKO, 1948.


*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, RKO, 1949.

*Stagecoach*, United Artists, 1939.

Secondary Sources


**Websites**

Nesbit, John. [www.culturedose.net/review](http://www.culturedose.net/review) (1/19/02).

[www.rottentomatoes.com/m/searchers/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/searchers/) (12/14/04).