

THE SEARCHERS
(1956, 119 Minutes)

The brutal forty year struggle (1830s to 1870s) between Texans and Comanches was the most protracted conflict ever fought on American soil. It was a blood feud between two alien cultures in which neither side saw the other as fully human. Texans were invaders who destroyed hunting areas, occupied Comanche lands and violated every promise. Comanches were seen as merciless, sadistic predators. Their war at close range had no boundaries, rules or noncombatants. Each side sought to inflict maximum suffering and humiliation on the other.

John Ford's *The Searchers*, often described as the best western ever made, is set against the backdrop of the Comanche-Texan war. It also plays to the captivity narrative genre which was a staple of American literature during the colonial and frontier periods of American history. Based on Alan LeMay's powerful novel, the film loosely portrays the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, abducted from her East Texas home at the age of nine in 1836 and raised and kept by Comanches for twenty-four years until her "rescue" in 1861. Her son, Quanah Parker, later became an important Comanche figure in the Red River War of 1874-75 and was an effective leader and spokesman for the Comanche people in Oklahoma.

As portrayed in *The Searchers*, the taming of the frontier was not the morally straightforward undertaking shown in typical westerns. Rather, it portrays a dark, anti-heroic, and strikingly contemporary approach to ethnic conflict and terrorism. The main character Ethan Edwards is an embittered loner who is out to avenge his family's destruction at the hands of a sub-human enemy. The morally ambiguous Edwards is at once brave, loyal, caring and honest, but also vengeful, racist, hateful

and dangerous. To Edwards, the “honor” killing of his 9 year old captive niece is acceptable since she has been found to “living with a buck,” and thus racially polluted. The fact that charismatic John Wayne plays Edwards can draw us in and make the audience complicit in his vendetta. Edwards’ Native American protagonist, Chief Scar, also has suffered at the hands of whites and pursues a life of vengeance. They are two sides of the same coin – united in mutual hatred. In the end, Edwards as the heroic character has no place in the changing world. He is left to wander metaphorically as a lonely, aging man.

Emotions of sadness, grief, lost love, terror, and defiance resonate throughout the film. The visual images -- the grandeur of Monument Valley, the vast horizons, the brilliant color -- have been staples of many other films. Largely overlooked in 1956 (it received no Academy Awards), the film has captivated generations over the past 60 years as one of Hollywood’s most intriguing productions. *The Searchers* played a major influence on the careers of directors Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Martin Scorsese. They freely admit to using aspects of its plot, filming techniques, and technical construction in their later film work (i.e. *Star Wars*, *The War Horse*).