



Analyzing the aesthetic and symbolical derivations of «land» in *The Searchers*

A film by John Ford, 1956

Type d'activité : Questionnaire de visionnage

Durée : 3 h

Introduction

The Searchers, directed by John Ford in 1956, is considered as a landmark in the Western movie genre, and was even acknowledged as the Greatest Western Movie of all times by the American Film Institute in 2008. *The Searchers* is asserting John Ford's status as a master of Western movies. Indeed, through this film, the director shapes and anchors the aestheticism and the values of the genre. John Ford manages to capture the very essence of the American land; he depicts the progress of a nation through a territory yet to conquer and tame, the complex interaction between humans and nature, the contrasting values of a nation in the making; these themes have a particular resonance in the post-second world war and Cold War context in which the film was released.

John Ford makes the viewer visually aware of the many derivations of the term "land", deeply rooted in American culture. Therefore, the study of this film perfectly fits in the notion "Travels, territories, frontiers" of the LLCE program.

Dans les programmes

Discipline	Niveau	Objets d'étude	Compétences
Anglais	Terminale LLCE	Voyages, territoires, frontières	<ul style="list-style-type: none">► Compréhension orale► Expression orale► Expression écrite

The Searchers

Director: John Ford / **Genre:** western / **Year:**1956

Ethan Edwards, a former Confederate soldier during the Civil War, returns to his brother Aaron's farm after a long absence, and is welcomed by the whole family. This homely happiness is soon troubled by a Comanche raid, in which Aaron, his wife Martha, and his son Ben lose their lives. Ethan's pain and wrath are magnified by the kidnapping of his two nieces, Lucy and Debbie.



I/ BEFORE WATCHING THE SEARCHERS

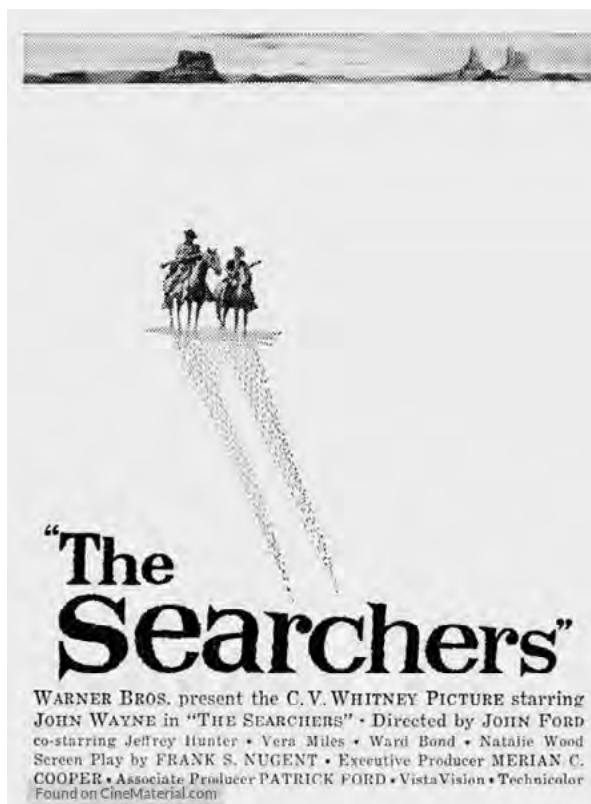
1 / a/ In pairs, define the characteristics of the Western genre. You can organize your ideas in a mind map.

b/ Quote three major western movies, according to your own cinema experience.

2 / In pairs, look for a brief definition and the dates of the following historical events:

Event	Date	Description
a/ The Gold Rush		
b/ The Civil War / Secession War		
d/ Manifest Destiny		
e/ The Trail of tears		
f/ The Lewis and Clark expedition		
g/ The Transcontinental railroad line		
h/ The Homestead Act		

3/ a/ Observe the following posters of the film *The Searchers* and fill in the board:



Colors	Characters	Landscape	Message

b/ Say which poster is the most appealing to the viewers. Justify your answer.

4/ The original title *The Searchers* was transformed into *La Prisonnière du Désert* in French.

a/ Give three grammatical differences between the two titles.

b/ Imagine the plot suggested by each title.

II/ WATCHING THE SEARCHERS: THE DERIVATIONS OF “LAND”

For the following activities, the class can be separated into four groups; each group will focus on one derivation of “land” (A, B, C and D).

A/ The landscape

1/ Observe the opening shot of the film and explain the use of black contrasting with colors in the background.



2/ Analyze the goal of the camera movement following the character from inside to outside (0:00:00 to 00:01:56). *NB: this movement of camera is called a dolly-in.*



3/ John Ford uses many extreme long shots in *The Searchers*. Observe the following examples:



a/ Account for the visual effect of the lines created by the landscape.

b/ Study the contrast of scale between the natural setting and the characters.

4/ Explain the impression created by the use of pans in the film.



A **pan** is a shot where the fixed camera follows the movement of characters across the screen, from left to right or right to left.

5/ Say why the change of weather and scenery is relevant to the plot of the film.



6/ Explain the following quotes in the light of American history:

a/ Jorgensen: “Oh Ethan, this country...” (00:43:00); “This country killed my boy” (00:45:00)

b/ Mrs. Jorgensen: “Some day this country will be a good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come.” (00:45:58).

7/ Watch the following shots and say how the characters use the landscape to their benefit.



8/ a/ Pick out three examples where the landscape helps the main characters in the plot of the movie.

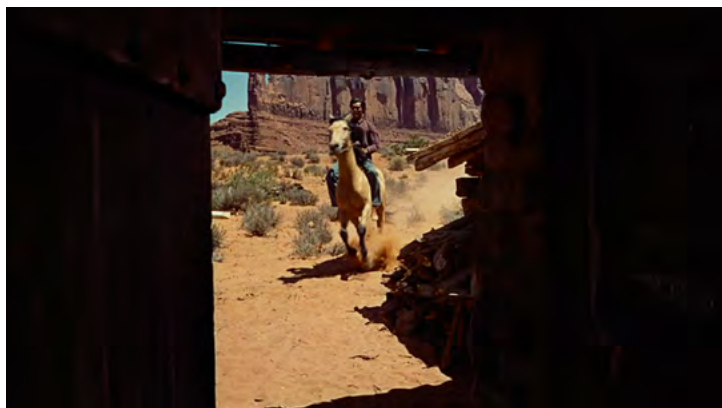
b/ What do these examples suggest about the relation between men and landscape?

B/ The homeland

1/ Analyze the lines created by the house on the following shot.



2/ Explain the recurring images of door frames all through the film: what do they symbolize?



3/ Account for the possible meaning of the characters holding a lamp.



4/ Watch the attack of the Edwards' house (00:16:12 to 00:19:25)
Analyze the symbolism of colors in that scene.



5/ Comment on the quote by Mose Harper (1:15:25): “Don’t want no money, Ethan. Don’t want no money, Marty. Just a roof over my head... and a rocking chair by the fire.”

6/ Watch the wedding scene at the Jorgensens' (1:29:25 to 1:38:30).

a/ Explain how this scene contrasts with the rest of the film.

b/ Explain why the fight between Martin and Charlie must take place outside.

7/ Compare Martha’s sentence “Welcome home, Ethan” at the beginning of the film (00:02:51) to Ethan’s line at the end: “Let’s go home, Debbie” (1:51:18).

8/ The movie starts with a door opening and ends with a door shutting. Say what this suggests about the structure and the message of the film.

B/ The motherland

1/ Observe the following shot and comment on the structure of the Edwards' family at the beginning of the movie.



2/ a/ Analyze the lines of stares between Ethan and Martha: what does it suggest about their relation?



3/ Explain the symbolism of women holding pillars and door frames.



4/ Mr. Jorgensen says several times about his wife: “She was a schoolteacher”. Explain what this phrase implies about the role of Mrs. Jorgensen.

5/ Focus on the character of Debbie.

a/ Analyze the scene of Debbie’s escape through the window (00:18:17 to 00:19:26).

b/ Explain the symbolism of Debbie’s doll found by Ethan (00:21:25 to 00:21:42).

c/ Comment on Debbie’s use of both English and Comanche (1:23:35 to 1:24:50).

d/ Observe the way Ethan holds Debbie at the beginning and at the end of the film: what does it suggest about their relation?



6/ Focus on the character of Look, Martin’s Indian wife. Pick out elements showing she becomes a homemaker/housewife.

3/ Focus on the character of Laurie.

a/ Compare the outfit, attitude and role of Laurie in the following shots.



b/ To what extent does Laurie embody the modern American woman? Justify your answer with elements from the movie.

D/ The landowners

1/ a/ Pick out the origin of Martin Pawley.

b/ Pick out the term used by Ethan to refer to Martin's descent: what does it reveal about Ethan's opinion on Indians?

2/ Observe the following shot:

a/ Compare the lines formed by the Indian riders and the White riders.



b/ Explain how this shot can be a metaphor of the American West.

3/ Ethan says about the Natives: “Seems like he never learns there’s such a thing as a critter (= a creature) who’ll just keep coming on”. Explain how this quote can be a form of historical dramatic irony.

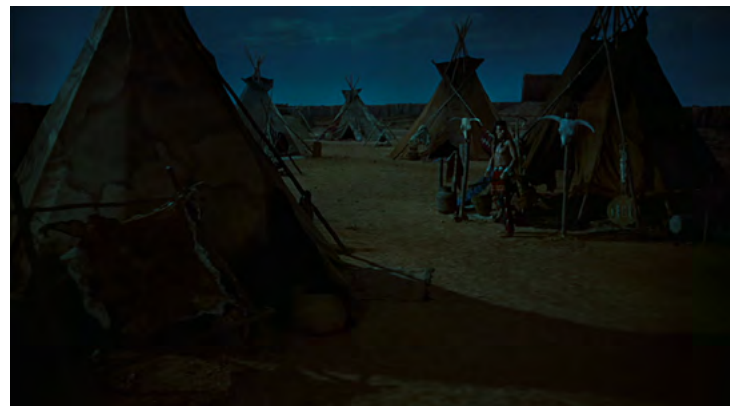
4/ Watch the scene where Martin trades with the Natives (00:58:50 to 1:00:00). Account for the effect of the absence of dialogue.

5/ Compare the stories of Debbie and Look: what are the common points and differences? How do their two storylines echo each other?

6/ Analyze the structure and the movement of the following shot.



7/ With the help of the pictures below, analyze the mirror effect between the story lines of the White characters and the Native characters. Why is this mirror effect emblematic of the Conquest of the West?





8/ Explain the symbolism of Ethan entering Scar's tent on his horse.



III/ TO CONCLUDE ON *THE SEARCHERS*

The whole class can work on the following activities.

A/ The landscape

1/ The movie begins and ends with the song *The Searchers* by Stan Jones and Max Steiner (you can listen to the song following this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20jAtWu4CxM>).

*What makes a man to wonder
What makes a man to roam?
What makes a man leave bed and board,
And turn his back on home?
Ride away, ride away, ride away*

a/ Explain the use of interrogative forms in the lyrics.

b/ Pick out the verbs related to the notion of wandering and explain the symbolism of this lexical field.

c/ Analyze the use of imperative forms in the phrase “Ride away”, and the effect of the repetition.

2/ The last scene of the film represents different sets of characters entering the house, before the door shuts (1:52:00 to 1:53:55).

a/ Explain what each set of characters symbolizes.

b/ Ethan is the only one who remains outside and leaves. What does it reveal about this character’s role in the whole movie?



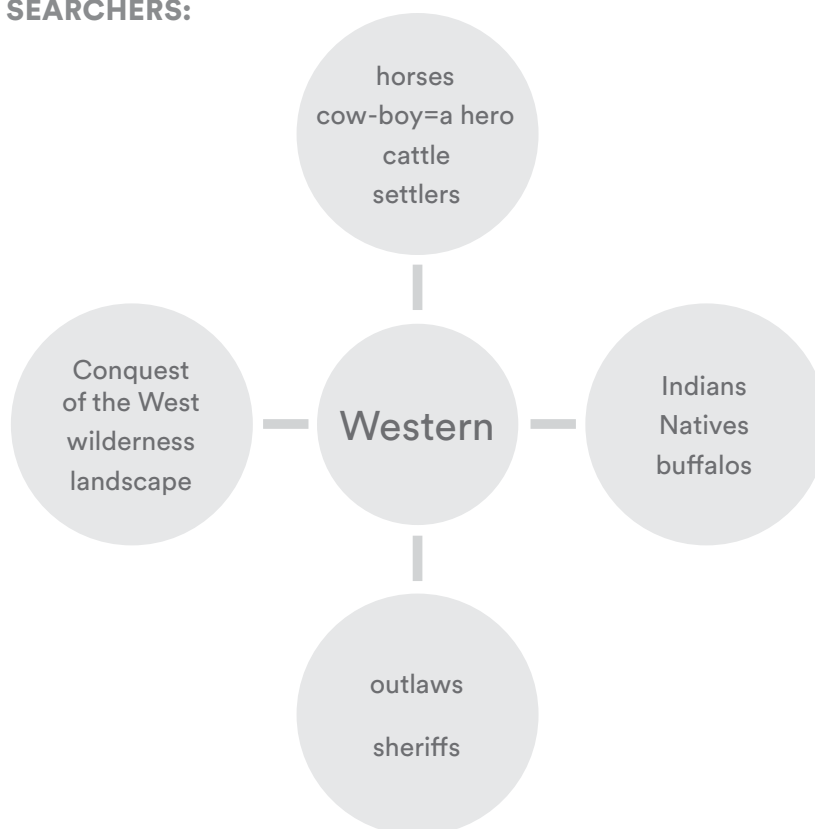
3/ To what extent does Ethan Edwards embody the myth of the American hero? Justify your answer with elements from the film and write about 140 words.



Éléments de correction

I/ BEFORE WATCHING THE SEARCHERS:

1/a/



b/ Classic western movies: *Rio Bravo* / *The Magnificent Seven* / *Broken Arrow* / *Rio Grande*...

Modern western movies: *The Revenant* / *Unforgiven* / *Dances with Wolves* / *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*...

2/

Event	Date	Description
a/ The Gold Rush	1848-1855	A movement of population to the West of the USA, especially California, after the discovery of gold.
b/ The Civil War / Secession War	1861-1865	A war opposing Northern states to Southern states, which had formed a confederation. The war was triggered by the issue of slavery.
c/ The Republic of Texas	1836-1845	A sovereign state, independent from the USA and Mexico.
d/ Manifest Destiny	1845	Belief according to which American settlers were destined to expand across North America. The term was first used by John L.
e/ The Trail of tears	1838	The route along which the American government forced Native tribes to migrate to reservations in the West.
f/ The Lewis and Clark expedition	1803-1806	An expedition to explore the North Western territories of the USA.
g/ The Transcontinental railroad line	1869	A railway line crossing the American territory from East to West.
h/ The Homestead Act	1862	An American law by President Abraham Lincoln allowing a family occupying a land for 5 years to claim property.



Éléments de correction

3/b/ Poster 1: the colors catch the attention of the viewers, the hero is identified and obvious. The landscape conveys greatness, splendor. The genre of the movie is easy to identify. The name of the main actor is mentioned, which can attract people.

Poster 2: it conveys more mystery, the poster gives less answers and lets the viewer imagine a possible plot. It suggests tension, danger, difficulty.

4/a/ we go from the use of plural in English to the use of singular in French / we move from a neutral form in English (no indication of gender) to a feminine form in French / in English, there is an article with a noun only whereas in French there is a noun complement.

b/ The English title adopts the viewpoint of the two characters looking for the kidnapped girl. They have to search for her, it is their task, their duty.

The French title focuses on the woman who is held prisoner in the desert, suggesting desert and isolation from her home. This woman needs to be rescued, by any possible means.

II/WATCHING *THE SEARCHERS*: THE DERIVATIONS OF “LAND”

A- The landscape

1/ The use of black in this shot suggests the inside of the house, a private space kept secret, thus giving a sense of intimacy. Moreover, this color channels the viewer's stare towards the background, where vivid colors are used. That way, the landscape in the background stands out, as it is quite bright.

2/ The camera movement allows the viewer to enter the story, the plot of the film, but also the very setting, as we follow the character through the door. We are led inside the story and inside the American West. This movement strongly underlines the landscape which was just suggested in the opening shot. It reveals a vast and majestic landscape, so much so that we are literally blinded, not just by the brightness but also by the scope.

3/a/ The landscape is made of many vertical lines, creating an effect of height and emphasizing the majesty of the natural setting. The rocks also form several horizontal lines, creating a visual gradation to suggest depth, an idea of never-ending nature.

b/ The elements of the landscape appear as huge, enormous, gigantic. We especially notice rocks, boulders and mountains. The landscape is in keeping with the name of the location: Monument Valley. However, the characters appear very small in these surroundings. This contrast of scale shows the domination of the American wilderness over human presence. Humans become insignificant when compared to nature.

4/ The pans used by John Ford are a way to contrast the transient nature of men, moving along in the middle of deeply rooted natural elements. The landscape remains, in spite of time, and becomes a silent witness of men's turmoil and struggles.

5/ The two main characters go through a scorched, dry desert, where the dominating colors are orange and red; they get to snowy areas, with forests. These changes indicate the distance covered by the characters of Ethan and Martin through the diversity of American territory. It also suggests time passing by.

6/a/ Jorgensen's quotes illustrate the harshness of the land, the difficulty to accomplish Manifest Destiny, the dangers linked to the Conquest of the West. The USA were built on a dangerous, hostile territory.

b/ Jorgensen's wife hints at the future of the USA as a powerful, prosperous nation. Her quote is in keeping with the American Dream, the idea of a promised land which needs the sacrifice of the settlers to set the basis of the new nation. But her quote also echoes the difficulties the country was facing in 1956: the aftermaths of the second world war, the Cold War context, anticommunism and McCarthyism. Those were new ordeals the American citizens, like their pioneer ancestors, needed to deal with and overcome.

7/ Both the characters of Scar, the Indian chief, and Ethan manage to use the landscape to hide their intentions: it gives them cover, a safe point of observation to assess the forces of the enemy. It proves that humans adapt to their natural surroundings.

8/a/ The landscape helps the characters on several occasions: the characters cross the river and establish a point to face the enemy; the caves give shelter to Ethan and Martin, but also to Debbie at the end of the film; Martin manages to find water in a canyon, so the landscape provides help for survival.

b/ The territory is not only negative, it can be a source of help, a real homeland, provided you learn how to use it, tame it and live in it.



Éléments de correction

B- The homeland

1/ The lines created by the house are horizontal, which contrasts with the verticality and the height of the landscape. Therefore, the house becomes a sort of box, a safe place, a shelter from the hostile surroundings.

2/ The door frames symbolize the shelter of home. They represent an idea of protection for the whole family. The doors suggest intimacy, comfort, safety. The house thus becomes the guardian of the family, the haven of human relations.

3/ The lamp is a recurring image in the film, which stands for homely comfort, a form of domestic improvement and modernity. It also represents the heart of home, even more so since it is often associated to the hearth/ the fireplace that is the very chore of the household. However, lamps also symbolize the feelings between the characters: it suggests the deep love uniting Ethan to Martha, the relationship between Laurie and Martin. But when the light of the lamp is put out, the family is in great danger, the life of the characters is then in jeopardy.

4/ The scene of the attack is dominated by an orange glow, alluding to sunset, but conveying a very tense atmosphere to the whole scene. The arrival of night is symbolical of impending danger. The shades of orange suggest a threat, invading the house, disrupting the family's evening routine, lurking over their lives.

5/ Mose voices the need for comfort and safety given by a house; he longs for the coziness of domestic life, as opposed to a wandering life: that of the pioneers in the west. Mose proves that pioneers needed to build, to settle and lead a prosperous life, away from danger.

6/a/ The wedding scene is set almost entirely indoors, where everyone is safe; it depicts a gathering of people forming a community. This scene is very joyful, the use of music, dancing and singing indicates that life can be happy even in a hostile land. It suggests the need to carry on in spite of hardships, in order to build something reliable.

b/ The fight disrupts the right domestic order symbolized by the living room of the house. This display of violence cannot remain inside, but has to take place outside, where violence, temper, anger can be expressed. Moreover, the two men are covered in dust, which suggests they belong to the wild land.

7/ The two sentences revolve around the term "home", proving the essential idea of domesticity in the movie. But the phrase is used with different perspectives: the first sentence conveys the idea of arrival and settling, which is intensified by Martha removing Ethan's coat, whereas the second underlines the idea of movement; home becomes the goal to reach.

8/ This indicates the cyclical structure of the film, reminding of the cycles of nature but also the cycles of life. It also means that the house is at the very chore of the plot. It points to the importance of the protection given by one's house. The house surrounds and shelters human cycles.

C- The motherland:

1/ The shot represents the Edwards' family outside their home. The father is outside, on the ground, he precedes the others, as a form of protection of the household. The women remain on the front porch, showing they belong to the domestic sphere, they still benefit from the protection of the house. The central element of this shot is Martha, the mother.

2/a/ The stares between Ethan and Martha express very strong and deep feelings between them. The director leads the viewer to understand they are much more than relatives, they are probably united by love. It may be why Ethan proves very protective of her and of her family.

b/ Martha is a source of motivation, inspiration. She seems to be the spark that gets the whole family going. It confirms her role as the center, the heart of the family.

3/ The image of women holding pillars symbolize the fact that women are at the chore of the family and domestic life. They are the ones holding the family together, they are reliable and contribute to building a home the men can go back to.

4/ Like Martha, Mrs. Jorgensen is the reliable mother, the pillar of the house as suggested in question 3/. The fact that she was a schoolteacher proves her seriousness, her ability to make the right decision. Moreover, it shows Jorgensen's respect for her status.

5/a/ Debbie is sent away through the window by her mother, for her own protection. She does not use the normal way in and out of the house, showing a sense of danger and urgency.



Éléments de correction

Going through the window is like a transition from the protection of childhood to the dangers of adulthood. Debbie ends up alone, in the outside, without the protection of the mother.

b/ The lost doll suggests a tragic fate for Debbie, but it also echoes the loss the child. The doll is symbolical of the end of innocence, of endangered childhood.

c/ The way Debbie switches from Comanche to English represents her confused and conflicting identity. She does remember who she was, where she came from, but we understand her experience and the obstacles in her life have changed her. The two languages also symbolize the complex American identity.

d/ Ethan, at the beginning, is very tender and caring towards Debbie. He holds her in a sweet, admiring manner, which would perfectly suit a father figure. This gesture, repeated at the end, after Ethan wavered to kill Debbie, proves the hidden fatherly feelings are back. It reestablishes Debbie in her proper identity and indicates a form of respect and admiration at her survival.

6/ Look, Martin's Indian wife, has the characteristic of the housewife: she can cook and helps the man to food, she is the one taking care of the camp and their belongings, she lays next to Martin. Her behavior confirms the universality of women's domestic role. Look also symbolizes the heart of the house, echoing all the other female characters in the film. Indian or pioneers all need a woman to take care of the household.

7/a/ In the first picture, Laurie is wearing a dress and apron, and takes care of laundry. She appears very active, and in that way illustrates the homemaker, the mother. In the second picture, Laurie's outfit has evolved: she is wearing a shirt and pants, just like the men, she is leading a horse and even holds a gun/rifle. She has become the protector of the family, the equal to male characters. In the third picture, Laurie wears a wedding dress, she is staring at Martin. This picture indicates Laurie is ready to step in adult life, and to become the ruler of her own house.

b/ Laurie embodies the modern American woman, as she is perfectly at ease in different roles and tasks. She can make her own decisions, she has an opinion and is not shy in expressing it. She is also the one who takes the first step towards Martin, who appears quite clumsy in romantic matters. Laurie fits the evolution of women condition in 1950s America.

D- The landowners

1/a/ Martin explains he is 1/8 Cherokee, as well as Welsh and English.

b/ Ethan calls Martin a "half-breed", which is a pejorative term. We are led to understand Ethan has a low opinion about Indian tribes, especially Comanche. He doesn't consider them as worthy human beings.

2/a/ The two lines of riders seem to echo one another. The Indians are higher than the White riders, thus dominating the scene. The two lines move at the same pace, in the same direction but on two different levels.

b/ The two lines symbolize two nations progressing on the same territory, evolving alongside, without really merging. The two groups of population are observing one another, distrusting one another and fighting for their right to own the land.

3/ The White settlers actually behave just like this creature described by Ethan, following the Natives, continuing to flow massively on the territory in spite of the threat and the violence of the tribes. Nothing will stop the waves of settlers and pioneers from arriving, proving the rivalry over the land is far from over.

4/ In this scene, dialogues are replaced by music, giving a sort of humorous tone. It also underlines the lack of understanding between the characters and the way it leads to *qui pro quo*. The tune is repeated with different instruments, conveying this misunderstanding. This scene illustrates the difficulty to communicate, the barriers between settlers and Natives.

5/ Debbie, the daughter of White settlers, is kidnapped and raised by Comanche, then rescued by her family. Look in a Comanche young woman, traded by her tribe to a White man, and killed by the US army. Both are away from their origins, both are the victims of violence between White and Natives. They both try to survive in a troubled land. These two characters prove the fate of people in the West is very similar and full of sadness, White or Indian alike.

6/ In this shot, the characters are in opposite directions, symbolizing two contradictory forces. The Natives seem to be stopped whereas the US army is on the move, showing the different outcome for the two nations. The Indians seem rooted to the land, refusing to abandon it, at the cost of their life. The soldiers are advancing, embodying the progress of the White settlers on the territory is impossible to stop.



Éléments de correction

7/ The two story lines are parallel and reverse. Each event of the “White story line” has an echo, a perfect equivalent in the “Indian story line”, as if the two nations were two sides of the same coin. The structure of the film illustrates the interconnection between the American nation and the Native nations: they are close, related, sometimes united but difficult to reconcile. The question of the ownership of the land is a real issue. The film underlines the fact that the vision and the depiction of the West is a matter of perspective.

8/ This scene shows a symbolical profanation of the Indian home. Ethan sets his domination over the Comanche chief by physically invading his private space. His high position underlines the victory of the settlers over the Natives.

III- TO CONCLUDE ON *THE SEARCHERS*

1/a/ The interrogative forms convey the idea of a destiny in the making, we understand that nothing is for certain, there is no way to make assertions in the west. The only thing possible in that land is the question about the right place of a man.

b/ The verbs of wandering are: to wander, to roam, to leave, to turn one’s back. These verbs imply the necessity of moving forward, of constantly pushing the frontier of the west to expand territory.

c/ The imperative form suggests a command, an order, possibly from a higher entity. It is a reminder of Manifest Destiny, encouraging the American settlers to fulfill God’s will to conquer the whole American land. The repetition insists on the necessity to accomplish this duty, both as an individual and as a nation.

a/ The Jorgensens and Debbie are a new family; Debbie has returned to her roots, to a new mother figure. / Mose Harper is finally fulfilling his longing for a roof, a safe home. / Laurie and Martin are the future of the American nation, the promise of a new home and a new family.

2/b/ Ethan Edwards, as the etymology of the name suggests, is the guardian of the land, a strong protector of the values of this nation in the making. His main quest is over, Debbie is safely back home. So, he needs to continue his surveillance, his watch is not over yet. The character of Ethan unites all the derivations of the term “land”: he knows and uses the landscape, he protects the motherland, he knows the habits of the other potential owners of the land. Ethan does not belong to the domestic realm, he needs to be on the watch.

3/ Here are a few possible ideas: Ethan is the American hero as he is always on the move and in charge of a quest / he is a former soldier, asserting his duty as a protector / he has an impossible love story with Martha / he succeeds in his quest / he corresponds to the traditional representation of the American hero, both visually and mentally.

Pour aller plus loin

- ▶ *The Searchers*, novel by Alan Le May (1954)
- ▶ *Dances with Wolves*, film by Kevin Costner (1990)
- ▶ *The Revenant*, film by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu (2015)
- ▶ *Mandalorian: The Modern Western*, article, 2020 : <http://www.jeawok.com/2020/02/02/mandalorian-the-modern-western/>