

## John Ford's Monument Valley Revisited:

A New Perspective on the Quintessential American  
Landscape in *The Searchers*

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"I'll take you home again, Kathleen  
Across the ocean wild and wide."<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Whether amidst the dust of the location or in a crowded theatre, the undulating landscape of Monument Valley,<sup>2</sup> stretching between northern Arizona and southern Utah, always infuses the viewer with awe and excitement. It was only about seventy years ago, however, that this unique geographical configuration formed by millions of years of erosion gained worldwide, even nationwide, recognition. In 1939, when John Ford released his classic Western *Stagecoach*, the valley eventually rose to the status of the quintessential American landscape. But what social and cultural conditions motivated this achievement? What place, first of all, does it hold in the history of landscape representation in America? This essay charts the process by which Monument Valley lifted itself from obscurity to the status of an American icon, tracing its history back to the emergence of landscape painting in nineteenth-century America.

This does not end the inquiry, however. The overview of the valley's history in American culture is followed by a closer reading of its representation in cinematic texts, an investigation that has not yet been conducted in a satisfactory fashion. This essay treats in particular *The Searchers* (1956), one of the masterpieces of Ford's oeuvre, intending not to reaffirm the cultural sig-

nificance of the landscape identified above, but rather to renew it. *The Searchers* has been both praised and criticized for its representations of race, but what are the relationships between these and the methods of landscape representation with which they are inevitably intertwined? This question is considered in detail, which in turn necessitates a description of the characteristics of Ford's representation of the valley from a new perspective, using a metaphor concerning the neglected side of the director's life and imagination. The combination of multi-aspectual inquiry and metaphorical description will help distinguish our analysis from the previous literature on this subject.

The following chapters do not attempt to cover the entire representation of Monument Valley in film, but rather present an interpretation of one aspect of the valley that still merits social and aesthetic reevaluation today. Hopefully, it will generate prolonged study of this most celebrated American landscape.

## I. The Advent of Monument Valley<sup>3</sup>

Landscape assumed a significant role in promoting the cultural independence of America. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, when the country had already achieved political and economic independence, but was still part of the European cultural sphere, the untamed nature believed lost in those already-modernized countries attracted much attention from painters and, later, photographers as a marker of differentiation between the New World and the Old World.<sup>4</sup> As the westward movement progressed, their interest likewise shifted from the wilderness of the East to that of the West, and the Rocky Mountains in particular gained wide popularity.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, an aesthetic concept that had swept eighteenth-century English society was given new life in the society of nineteenth-century America: the sublime.<sup>6</sup> To recall Edmund Burke's classical argument, the sublime is an aesthetic category for analyzing the experience we have when confronting something vast, fearful, and incomprehensible that causes in us a delightful

awakening from our indolence in spite of — or because of — the resultant disturbing awareness of human insignificance. This paradoxical exaltation at the core of the concept rendered it highly appealing to the American society increasing in political, economic, and cultural power, which explains its import from Europe in the nineteenth century. American cultural figures of the day declared the prosperity and unity of the country by asserting that American — not European — landscapes were the ones worthy of being called sublime, providing a common source of pride for the citizens without a common cultural background.

American landscapes known at the time were not, however, necessarily all that distinct from their European counterparts. The Rockies, for instance, had similar mountain scenery to the Alps, though they were quite different in scale. But the late nineteenth century witnessed the discovery of an evidently uniquely American landscape: the Grand Canyon. Nowhere in Europe was a counterpart to this immense gorge to be found, with its many colorful strata carved by the Colorado River over millions of years. It is also worth stressing that, as David E. Nye points out, the landscape of the Grand Canyon contained “virtually all of the elements Burke associated with the sublime in natural landscapes, including power, vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence, vastness, infinity, magnificence, and color” (10).

Monument Valley, then, can be seen in this light. Edward Buscombe, in his seminal essay, “Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photography and the Western Film,” has already suggested this viewpoint: distinguishing relatively American landscapes (e.g. the Rocky Mountains) from absolutely American landscapes (e.g. the Grand Canyon), he classifies Monument Valley in the latter category (121-27). With its bleak yet stunning rocky hill landscape, Monument Valley, too, could certainly serve as a sign of American uniqueness and greatness. Quite interestingly, however, it took another half-century for this peculiar landscape to burst into the spotlight of American culture, although, as I shall explain later, the timing was more than simple coincidence.

The reason for such a long delay of the advent of Monument Valley in the

American mind was simply that, as Buscombe notes, "It was then, when John Ford first went there [in 1938], the furthest point in the continental United States from a railroad — 180 miles" (125). Most Americans at that time had never visited or even heard of the place; when *Stagecoach* was released in 1939, there were only two advertisements that overtly featured the landscape (Poague 91). Its present worldwide recognition owes much to the film's critical and commercial success,<sup>7</sup> which then encouraged at least three other directors to use it as a backdrop in their films within a space of several years: *Kit Carson* (George B. Seitz, 1940), *Billy the Kid* (David Miller, 1941), and *The Harvey Girls* (George Sidney, 1946).

It was not, however, with *Stagecoach* that Ford's use of the valley and its iconic status in American culture were fully established. Joseph McBride writes: "Compared with Ford's later Western classics shot in Monument Valley, *Stagecoach* contains a relatively small number of scenes actually shot there and none featuring John Wayne or the other principals. . . . Only the first seven days of that schedule [forty-seven days of shooting] were spent in Monument Valley" (290). Even the famous, or rather infamous, "Indian attack" scene in the film was shot in Lucerne Dry Lake in California's Mojave Desert, not in Monument Valley.

But after the war, the valley gradually and steadily strengthened its presence, as Ford shot a series of Westerns there, such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Fort Apache* (1948) and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). The frequency of its appearance on the screen increased, as did Ford's choices of camera placement in the area. Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, in carefully tracing the development of Ford's shooting in Monument Valley, regard *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* as a turning point (166): Ford shot an entire film there for the first time, and, more importantly, inserted self-referential outdoor shots. Leutrat and Liandrat-Guigues write: "*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* is . . . characterized by at least five panoramic shots which refer back to the previous films. . . . The audience is invited to evoke the films which have gone before" (166). Indeed, one can argue that Ford here demonstrated to the viewer his mastery of shooting on the location; subse-

quently, he added three more Westerns to his Monument Valley canon — *The Searchers* (1956), *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), and finally *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964),<sup>8</sup> one of which I will discuss later in detail.

The valley's increasing presence after 1939 and especially in the postwar period was also conditioned by the social situations of the time. After its initial hesitation, America suddenly shifted onto a war footing, triggered by the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and brought victory to the Allies with minimal damage on the mainland, gaining a new political, economic, and cultural hegemony in the postwar world on the momentum it had established during the war. It is not hard to imagine what role Monument Valley played with its rocky hill landscape in this at least seemingly glorious period. As mentioned above, in nineteenth-century America, the sublime landscape functioned as a shared symbol of the uniqueness and superiority of this multicultural nation; Monument Valley was then newly “discovered” and distributed throughout the world just as such an ideologically laden landscape as the Grand Canyon had been in the previous century.<sup>9</sup> (Most of the later appearances of the valley in media, though often clichéd as in Marlboro ads, could also be understood in this respect.)

Ford's representation of the valley is, in fact, most prominently characterized by the stunning size contrast between the rocks and the characters that inspires a feeling of the sublime in the viewer. Film critics have enthusiastically praised these soul-stirring images of contrast. For instance, let us refer to figures 1 and 2 (*Stagecoach*; *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*). Their ideological effect aside, these extreme long shots of tiny human figures against massive buttes are undeniably overwhelming — this is all the more true since the viewer is identified with these miniscule figures throughout the course of the narrative. Of course, such images can be found in other directors' Westerns as well — *The Last of the Mohicans* (Clarence Brown and Maurice Tourneur, 1920) and *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, 1947), to name but a few. Western films, though with a number of exceptions, have preferred deserts and canyons as their settings to mountains, trees, and lakes since the early stages of the genre's history (Buscombe 118-19). It was nevertheless John



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Ford who presented these images in the most dramatic fashion, engraving them most deeply in the minds of Americans and people all over the world.

Another important feature of Ford's representation of the valley is its omnipresence. In his Westerns, Monument Valley could be transferred to any late nineteenth-century American frontier. Though it is actually located on the Utah/Arizona border, Ford used the valley as a stand-in for southern Arizona in *My Darling Clementine*; Texas in *The Searchers*; even Oklahoma in *Cheyenne Autumn*. (Don Graham half-jokingly writes: “[In *The Searchers*,] Monument Valley is transported to the Panhandle [of Texas]. One can drive forever in the Panhandle and never find those gorgeous red buttes” [73].) This, curiously enough, homogenized the diverse landscapes of the American West – making it seem as though the peculiar rock formations existed everywhere – and thereby privileged the valley as an American symbol. In other words, the transposition of landscape from one place onto another qualified this local scenery as a representative of the entire West. Here lies another key to the valley's wide popularity; and this feature, too, is less clearly recognizable in the films of other directors – most of them rendered the valley faithfully to actual geography, except for Stanley Kubrick, who used it as the surface of an alien planet in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

The discussion I have presented above, however, offers only a static reading of the quintessential American landscape, an understanding that is pictorial and photographic but not cinematic at all. Film is a medium that de-

picts, to borrow Samuel Fuller's famous remark, "love, hate, action, violence death — in one word, emotion"<sup>10</sup> in the flow of time and space in the narrative. Landscape in film therefore cannot be considered separately from the narrative and the characters inhabiting it. Indeed, Buscombe notes the necessity of analyzing Ford's use of Monument Valley in relation to the narrative (127), but leaves the detailed research untouched. The following chapters will carry it on as far as possible.

## II. Circular Narrative and Racial Representation in *The Searchers*

As mentioned earlier, each of Ford's Westerns portrays Monument Valley from a different real-life location. This omnipresence, however, can also be recognized within a single text; *The Searchers* is representative of this phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> In this film, one of the most critically acclaimed Westerns ever made, the buttes and mesas are almost constantly present on the screen while two men track down an abducted girl over five years. The landscape, as a result, seems to cover a much wider spread than it actually does. This peculiarity becomes immediately clear upon a comparison of the film to *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), two of the later American films that include a sequence filmed on the same location, where Monument Valley comprises only a part of the landscape during the protagonists' journeys (19:41-26:46; 1:51:19-1:58:45). If the differences in the objectives of their traveling are considered, one can still hardly deny that there is something unusual, even unnatural, in the representations of landscape in *The Searchers*.

How, then, can we interpret this in relation to the narrative as the film unfolds? Joan Dagle's "Linear Patterns and Ethnic Encounters in the Ford Western" is highly suggestive in this regard.<sup>12</sup> Skillfully blending narratology and post-colonial theory, Dagle points out: "In the Ford Western, [the] movement away from linearity [of story and narration] in the postwar period is coincident with an increasingly complex investigation of the racial implications of the Western's meta-narrative" (102). That is, the more interracial interac-

tion and the subsequent merging of racial identities progress, the more the spatiotemporal complexity and vagueness of the narrative increase. As usual, Dagle treats *The Searchers* as the most conspicuous example of this (119-28). Since landscape in film is essentially constructed in — and therefore bound up with — the flow of time and space of the narrative, her argument seems to logically overlap with — or at least can be applied to — our argument on landscape representation, as I will explore later in detail.

To clarify Dagle's point, the film's controversial and innovative racial representation needs explanation. The 1950s were the heyday of revisionist or "pro-Indian" Westerns, an aftereffect of wartime democratic propaganda that awakened awareness of social minorities.<sup>13</sup> A great number of Westerns in this period, such as *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950) and *Apache* (Robert Aldrich, 1954), put themselves at odds with the traditional depiction of the Native American-white relationship. *The Searchers* is arguably the most complex of these, so complex that it "cannot easily be slotted into the liberal, pro-Indian cycle" (Neale 9). Instead of simply inverting the "whites good, Indians bad" dichotomy, the film calls into question the very gesture of drawing a boundary between these two races. More interestingly, this is done not by casting a mixed race hero (as in *Flaming Star* [Don Siegel, 1960]) or an Indian heroine brought up by whites (as in *The Unforgiven* [John Huston, 1960]), but by casting a white hero and then establishing a mirror-like relationship between him and an Indian chief.<sup>14</sup>

Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), the white hero of the film, hates Indians. But this hatred does not derive from a racial difference; on the contrary, it derives from his sameness with them. Ethan is disgusted by Indians because he cannot help seeing in them his own hideous nature — insatiable sexual and destructive impulses. Ford scholars have often pointed out that the story of the film properly begins when the Comanche chief, Scar (Henry Brandon), acts out Ethan's repressed desire: Scar rapes the wife of Ethan's brother, whom he secretly loves, and even massacres his brother's family that he cannot be part of despite his desires to the contrary. (A claim to the film's racial stereotyping can thus hardly be dismissed; yet one should also not over-



look how Ford used it to demystify the white hero's persona, as I shall explain below.) The only survivors are their youngest daughter, Debbie (Lana Wood), and their adopted son, Martin (Jeffrey Hunter), who is one-eighth Cherokee with otherwise white heritage.<sup>15</sup> Scar takes Debbie into captivity; Ethan, accompanied by Martin, starts on a journey in search of the missing girl. The search for the white female captive by the white hero is, of course, one of the most basic Western plots, but *The Searchers* adds a new twist to it. As the journey drags on, and as Debbie moves from childhood to marriageable age in Comanche society, Ethan's motive shifts from rescuing Debbie to killing her. As Richard Slotkin aptly puts it, "search and rescue" transforms into "search and destroy" (467). Ethan's racist feelings are so deeply embedded in him that he thinks a "racially tainted" white woman, even if she is a blood relative, deserves only death.

But what strikes us most is that, as Ethan's hatred for Indians is disclosed, so also is his "Indianness," or his closeness to the despised racial other. No other whites know them better than he does. It is true that the hero of the Western film is by definition a mediator between civilization and the wilderness — the territory of whites and that of "the savages" — and is therefore usually represented as a man with considerable knowledge of Indian customs and ways of life. The radical nature of *The Searchers*, however, lies in that this knowledge not only proves the hero's skillfulness in mediating those contrasting worlds, but also "includes an intimate acquaintance, even an identification with stereotypically 'savage' qualities" (Slotkin 465). Surprisingly enough, Ethan massacres the Comanche as they do whites, and mutilates their dead bodies in ways based on their beliefs and customs. At one point in the story, he shoots the eyes of a buried Comanche, explaining that, in the beliefs of the Comanche, an eyeless body "can't enter the spirit land" and "has to wander forever between the winds" (25:09-27:16); near the end of the film, he even scalps a dead Comanche, this time Scar, who is said to have scalped Martin's birth mother (1:54:29-1:54:38).

Like many scholars, Dagle treats the sequence where Ethan and Scar meet (1:20:56-1:25:24) as a manifestation of their mirror-like relationship

(123-24). After years of wandering, Ethan and Martin finally locate and confront the Comanche chief. What characterizes this confrontation is, first of all, a well-formed shot/reverse shot cutting between the now long-time enemies, Ethan and Scar, literally and blatantly establishing them as mirror-images of each other (figures 3 and 4). The sequence likewise discloses their mirroring in various ways, but above all in



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

the verbal exchange that follows. As an accusation of marrying a white woman, Ethan says to Scar: “You speak good American for a Comanch’. Someone teach ya?” A few moments later, Scar responds to him: “You speak good Comanche. Someone teach you?” — a striking remark that alludes not only to their pairing but also, and more importantly, to the white hero’s intimate contact with a non-white woman. What is revealed here, in other words, are the traces of interracial interaction inextricably entangled with his command of the Comanche tongue.

The film’s daring representation of race had been widely studied even before Dagle. What distinguishes her essay from most of the previous works is the attention to the parallelism between the vagueness of racial representation and that of spatiotemporal representation in the same film, the latter of which she specifies as follows: the repetition of images and sounds that

remind us of the well-known opening sequence (121); the obscurity of temporal and spatial markers during the protagonists' journey (121); the insertion of a complex flashback sequence in the middle of the film that is rarely seen in Ford's Westerns (125-26). Dagle rightly relates these external complexities to the internal ones concerning racial identity described above

There is likely to be some dissatisfaction with Dagle's argument, however. First, she stops short of enumerating some of the contortions of spatiotemporal representation in *The Searchers*, and does not fully explore the idiosyncratic nature of the film's landscape representation that is interwoven with the space and time of the narrative. Dagle describes Monument Valley in the film as "the space of cultural confrontation" and "the landscape of a psychological journey" (122). While these are valid characterizations, she nevertheless fails to closely examine the innovation of Ford's representation of the valley, its intriguing impression on the viewer, and the director's peculiar imagination behind it. Second, she treats space/landscape and characters as two interrelated but separate entities and overlooks the significance of their interaction that the film carefully explores. Indeed, what seems to be lacking is a phenomenological perspective that regards characters as bodily beings living in, or rather with, space/landscape. The aims of the next (and final) chapter are, then, as follows: (1) to redescribe the film's landscape representation in a more vivid and evocative way suited to its uniqueness and originality, and (2) to reexamine the dynamic relations between the characters and the world that encompasses — even constitutes — their beings.

### III. Across the Ocean Wild and Wide

We have already seen that, due to its omnipresence, Monument Valley in *The Searchers* seems to extend almost endlessly in the flow of time and space of the narrative. Fully appreciating this unexpected spread, then, stimulates our metaphorical imagination and leads us to wonder whether Monument Valley is no longer a land with buttes and mesas but rather a vast sea with islands of various sizes. That is, it begins to appear not as a desert of sand and

rocks, but as an archipelago.<sup>16</sup> We should recall here that J. A. Place, in discussing *The Searchers* in her classic book, *The Western Films of John Ford*, states: "Ford uses it as Homer used the sea. It is rather like the sea in its changes, its colors, its moods" (171).

Although Place does not offer a detailed explanation, the analogy between *The Searchers* and the *Odyssey* is pertinent: Monument Valley in the Fordian text can rightly be compared to the Mediterranean Sea of the Homeric text in its imaginary size (vast enough for several years of wandering), its rolling scenery (undulating with rocky hills or islands), and its disorienting magnetism (preventing the travelers from proceeding immediately to their destination).<sup>17</sup> Ethan and Martin are then, as it were, the drifting sailors of the American West.

John Ford was a man of the sea. His well-known statement at a Director's Guild meeting in 1950 ("My name is John Ford. I make Westerns.") often associates him with the dry land of the Southwest, but a further review of his biography reveals the importance of the ocean in his life. Born in Cape Elizabeth and brought up in Portland, both coastal towns in southern Maine, he sailed for his father's homeland, Ireland, in his twenties. He took two long voyages to the Far East in his thirties, and bought a ketch that he was going to use as an alternate home in his early forties. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, he made war documentaries for the Navy Department in the Pacific with his own photographic unit, part of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). There is no doubt of the deep influence these maritime experiences exerted on his sea films, such as *The Long Voyage Home* (1940) and *They Were Expendable* (1945). Is it, then, an unreasonable assumption that the same holds true for his Westerns? That is, is it not the same rhythm of U.S. Marines sailing through the Philippine Islands in *They Were Expendable* that reverberates in *The Searchers*, where Ethan and Martin thread their ways through a series of buttes and mesas?

From such a point of view, we can shed new light on the often forgotten but beautiful scene in *The Searchers* (1:25:24-1:29:30) that Shigehiko Hasumi has praised as a "magic moment" in his thought-provoking discussion on the

gestures of throwing in Ford's films. After a brief reunion with the now-grown Debbie (Natalie Wood), Ethan and Martin, knowing that she has already been absorbed into the alien society, pitch a tent by the creek near the Comanche camp for the next day's negotiation with Scar. Irritated and disappointed, Ethan picks up a small rock at his feet and throws it into the creek, which gently ripples the surface of



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

the water; then, as if responding to the spreading waves, Debbie suddenly appears on the top of a sand hill across the creek and comes down from it (figure 5). It is indeed a “magic moment” in which it seems as if the ripple Ethan caused surged over the land and brought Debbie back to him on its reactive waves; it is even reminiscent of the breathtaking scene in D. W. Griffith's *The Unchanging Sea* (1910), in which the sea waves crashing against the shore take the long-missing husband back to his wife (10:30-13:30) (figure 6). Ford's unique directing here imbues the land of the American West with the semantics of the sea.

Also noteworthy is the film's frequent use of dissolves. According to Peter Stowell, *The Searchers* has 41 dissolves within 675 shots, whereas *Stagecoach* has only 18 dissolves within 636 shots (133). In narrative cinema, the dissolve is often a vehicle for indicating the passage of time; since *The*

*Searchers* tells a story that covers five years, Ford's decision to link a considerable number of shots with dissolves seems perfectly reasonable. It should be added, however, that, as Peter Lehman



Fig. 7

writes: "At times he [Ford] uses dissolves within scenes which do not in any sense require their continuity broken" (Luhr and Lehman 111). This encourages us to put forth a more flexible and productive interpretation: those dissolves can be construed as an artistic device providing a sea-like seamlessness and mobility for the landscape that unfolds in the film, which would otherwise be segmented and immutable, rather than merely as an index of the passage of time (figure 7). Monument Valley in *The Searchers* is thus like the sea in montage as well as in mise-en-scène ("its changes, its colors, its moods" [Place 171]).

In this amorphous landscape — a space not only complex, vague, and twisted, but also changing, fluctuating, and even intertwining with another space — live the unsettled and unsettling travelers who ceaselessly merge their identity with the cultural other. But this statement by itself is not enough to fully grasp the dynamics between landscape and characters. We should say, rather, that it is this landscape that prompts and makes possible the cross-cultural negotiations between the self and the other and the constant transformations of their identities. Landscape is, as Mikiro Kato defines it, "a mobile place, or an emotional device, in which human beings have varied experience ranging from stupidity to revelation" (129); and, as Kato asserts, in spite of their physical constraints, some filmmakers have succeeded in scrutinizing that complex interaction between landscape and characters (123-33). He cites Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni as examples; we should add John Ford to the list — at least as far as *The Searchers* is con-

cerned. The film's innovative racial representation would be much less vivid, persuasive, and compelling if Ford did not allow us to experience the ever-shifting landscape through the eyes and bodies of the leading characters.

But here we might ask: do cross-cultural encounters between the self and the other in the amorphous landscape only cause hatred, jealousy, and revenge, as in Ethan's case? Is it impossible to escape from the vicious cycle of mutual hatred and violence? At first, it may seem so; yet later Ford suggests an alternative answer. While traveling through the landscape, Ethan himself has, though somewhat in spite of himself, effected a gradual transformation in his racist attitude. After the bitter reunion with Debbie, Ethan tells Martin that he has decided to leave all his property to him (1:29:30-1:32:08); on the one hand, this signifies Ethan's abandonment of Debbie, but it also signals his acceptance of Martin, whom he had despised for his part-Cherokee lineage. Significantly, Ford helps us to apprehend this transformation less through the dialogue than through the shifting and changing landscape that encompasses and embraces the white hero.

Ethan is not an observer of the landscape; rather, he is a resident — even a participant — of it. In the aforementioned rock-throwing scene, it was Ethan who mobilized the landscape, drawing Debbie back to him across the sand hill. It can be said, then, that this act anticipates Ethan's acceptance of Debbie in the climax scene, although at this moment he mercilessly brandishes his gun at her — in other words, the attractive force Ethan caused in the landscape foretells the later disappearance of his repulsion toward Debbie. There is, in fact, a correspondence between the rock-throwing scene and the climax scene, where Ford once again makes Debbie run down a sand hill, this time pursued by Ethan (figure 8); when she stumbles at the entrance of a cave under the hill, at the very moment the viewer expects him to kill her, Ethan reaches for her and lifts her up in his arms, saying: "Let's go home, Debbie." (1:55:16-1:56:17) (figure 9). The correspondence is, then, as follows: in the rock-throwing scene, Ethan picking up a rock is followed by Debbie's descent from the hill (figure 5); whereas in the climax scene, Debbie and Ethan descend from the hill, and then he holds her up — a beautiful

alternation of downward and upward motion as if the imaginary waves Ethan caused in the former scene still continue. This is how Ford visualizes “search and destroy” once again turning into “search and rescue” (Slotkin 467).



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

For a further understanding of the interaction between the landscape and the characters, we should also take a look at the heroine of the film, Laurie (Vera Miles). Laurie is

Martin's lover who awaits his return at home throughout the story, and is hence less associated with the landscape. Ford scholars have recently devoted increasing attention to her because it is in Laurie that the white society's racism emerges most visibly in its most remarkable form. As Gaylyn Studlar observes, although “Westerns normally are expected to assert the good woman's role in bringing civilization to the frontier and maintaining it there,” the white heroine in *The Searchers* delivers a “bloodthirsty speech . . . while [quite ironically] she sits in her white wedding dress” (54). At one point in the story, Laurie insists to Martin that he should abandon his beloved sister, saying: “Fetch what home? The leavings of a Comanche buck . . . sold time and again to the highest bidder . . . with savage brats of her own?” (1:47:08-1:47:52).<sup>18</sup>

This is certainly a surprising remark; more important, however, is that



this “bloodthirsty speech” comes between the two occasions of Ethan’s acceptance of his “racially tainted” relatives, Martin and Debbie. In such a way, Ford encourages us to compare the reactions of Ethan and Laurie — the former a drifter, the latter a settler — against their racial others, only one of which shows a significant, if slight, possibility of changing one’s racist attitude. Consequently, a simple yet profound truth is revealed: although it can cause a chain of hatred, drifting in an amorphous landscape and subsequently merging with the racial other is also the only effective way to foster interracial understanding, solidarity, and tolerance. Landscape is indeed “a mobile place, or an emotional device, in which human beings have varied experience ranging *from stupidity to revelation*” (Kato 129, italics added).

*The Searchers* does leave many questions “unanswered and unanswerable” (Dalge 126), which could be taken as a virtue or a weakness. We are never told why and when Ethan decides to save Debbie instead of killing her; neither are we sure whether he completely abandoned his racist thinking, since Ethan, having taken Debbie home, leaves alone without saying a word at the film’s close. That said, we may still conclude that, in *The Searchers*, Ford carried out an extraordinary cinematic attempt — allowing the viewer to live the problem of racial heterogeneity and the difficulty/possibility of mutual understanding through the unprecedented rendering of the landscape, ever-changing and ever-shifting like the sea.

## Conclusion

Whether one stresses its vertical sublimity in a single image or its horizontal spread in an interracial narrative, Monument Valley assumes different, even contrasting, roles — it can serve as both a privileged sign of American unity, uniqueness, and superiority, as well as an evocative stage of racial merging in that country once assumed to be uniform. John Ford in *The Searchers* used the valley as a dynamic, archipelago-like space, where the self, like the waves of the sea, inevitably encounters, superimposes itself on, and passes into the racial other. This introduction of the aspect of race and

the metaphor of the sea aims to represent a new, more mature stage in the study of Monument Valley, though it is still one tentative reading of the quintessential American landscape in cinematic/cultural texts. When Ford died in 1973, Woody Strode, who collaborated with the director on four films (including *Sergeant Rutledge*), said at the funeral: "He should be buried in Monument Valley" (qtd. in Sinclair 212). Perhaps his soul rests there; yet the Monument Valley he and other artists represented should continue to live on in the vast, even endless field of our interpretations.

### Notes

- 1 These are from the lyrics of "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen," a song written by Thomas P. Westendorf in 1875 and sung by Ken Curtis and The Sons of the Pioneers in John Ford's *Rio Grande* (1950).
- 2 For a concise survey of the valley's history and the life of the Navajo there, see *Monument Valley: Navajo Homeland* (DVD).
- 3 Due to space considerations, this chapter provides only a minimal context in favor of a closer examination of cinematic texts in the following chapters. For a broader investigation of the place and function of nature in American culture, see, for instance, Engel.
- 4 For a detailed study of landscape painting in the nineteenth century and its cultural context, see Novak.
- 5 After the Civil War, the relationships between American landscapes and national identity were further strengthened by the creation of the national park system and the development of domestic tourism that continued into the twentieth century. For a thorough discussion of this subject, see Shaffer.
- 6 Although an extended discussion cannot be carried out here, the sublime, loaded with more meanings than in Burke's argument, has been widely employed to analyze key aspects of the modern world. Maurizia Natali, for instance, uses the notion to discuss shock-and-awe spectacles in American visual culture, their ideological and psychoanalytical impact on the viewer, and their contribution to the reenactment of the country's imperial fantasies.
- 7 Monument Valley appeared in a few cultural texts even before *Stagecoach*. George Herriman, for instance, used the distinctive rock formations for backgrounds of his comic strip, *Krazy Kat*, since the 1910s (see Drabelle). In fact, *Stagecoach* was not

- even the first film featuring the valley; it was *The Vanishing American* (George B. Seitz, 1925), an early successful example of a “pro-Indian” Western, although the film was not influential enough to raise the landscape to an iconic status. Likewise, in spite of his well-known claim, Ford did not know the place before 1938. In reality, Harry Goulding, the owner of the trading post in the valley, attracted Ford to shoot a Western there. For further reading, see McCarthy.
- 8 *Wagon Master* (1950) and *Rio Grande* are often considered to have been filmed in Monument Valley, but McBride notes that they were actually filmed 120 miles north of there, around Moab, Utah (288).
  - 9 Significantly, the postwar period also saw a reappraisal of the sublime – a new aspiration to immensity and grandeur — in the American art world, which is most prominently recognizable in Barnett Newman’s well-known essay, “The Sublime is Now.” For a good survey of this tendency, see Alloway 31-41. Some scholars observe in this revival of the sublime a belief in American exceptionalism and superiority similar to those found in eighteenth-century discourse of the sublime, although one should not forget to respect the uniqueness of each artist’s works in addition to the tendencies they have in common. See, for instance, Balfe.
  - 10 This remark is addressed in *Pierrot le fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965).
  - 11 Another notable example is *Cheyenne Autumn*, where the buttes and mesas never disappear from the screen while the Cheyenne migrate from an Oklahoma reservation to their Wyoming homelands. I have a detailed discussion of this film for future study.
  - 12 For another interesting reading of the valley in the film, see, for instance, Hutson. Hutson here points out the parallelism between “the vast holes or laconism in the landscape” and “the inexplicable holes in the story” (103).
  - 13 For a further discussion of the cycle, see Slotkin 366-78; Neale.
  - 14 In this essay, I use the term “Indian” as far as Western films are concerned, although “Native American,” too, is a problematic term.
  - 15 Debbie’s elder sister, Lucy (Pippa Scott), is also taken away alive, but soon found to have been killed.
  - 16 In his recent work, *Treatise on the Archipelago-World* (Guntō-sekai ron), cultural anthropologist Ryuta Imafuku illuminates the transboundary cultural imagination of some of the world’s greatest artists from a new epistemological standpoint — a standpoint that understands the world not as isolated continents but as an archipelago. (This is a remarkable practice of Édouard Glissant’s “archipelagic thinking.”) The following section is partly indebted to his work.
  - 17 Day presents a detailed comparison between *The Searchers* and the *Odyssey* in terms

of character formation and narrative structure.

- 18 While delivering a “bloodthirsty” speech against Debbie, Laurie does not seem to mind Martin’s part-Cherokee lineage, which indirectly endorses the white society’s deeply rooted discrimination against “Indianized” white female captives. For a concise discussion on this subject, see Slotkin 461-73.

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## John Ford's Monument Valley Revisited

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### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows (No. 09J00240).