



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 15=

The Searchers

Cinema's poet of the Wild West, John Ford already had countless westerns (among over 100 films) under his belt before reteaming with regular star John Wayne for this disturbing story of racism, obsession and revenge.

Intending to kill his kidnapped niece (Natalie Wood) when he finds her, assuming her long since defiled by her Comanche kidnappers, morally complex Ethan Edwards is the role that convinced many that Wayne could truly act. Ford sets the hulking actor against the awe-inspiringly rugged terrain of Arizona's Monument Valley and, in the iconic final shot, frames him within the doorway of a homestead, standing outside on the cusp of a civilisation where he can never fit in. It is one of the medium's most unforgettable images of isolation.

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At the heart of *The Searchers* is a complicated, unvarnished character portrait, one of the greatest ever: John Wayne as Ethan Edwards – brutal, driven, curdled, racist. There are familiar generic elements here, but it's the less than familiar, I'd argue, that elevates the film in critical estimation: moments of savage poetry and mystery. Take the haunting (studio) shot of two men on horses in the snowbound trees, like a gorgeous Richard Prince *avant la lettre*.

Doors are a common-or-garden metaphor in cinema, but here the opening of the door at the beginning – and that slow track through it – ushers us into such strange vistas; Monument Valley here is virtually a sci-fi landscape. And never was a door more eloquently, heartbreakingly and definitively closed than it is in the final shot. What gives this the edge over so many other brilliant westerns is its sense of a plenitude of meanings – of being utterly inexhaustible. Just like the spirit of Ethan Edwards, still out there, still searching for a place of rest and peace, a home.

Kieron Corless, *Sight and Sound*, September 2012

A reviewer of *The Searchers*, attempting to demonstrate Ford's abuse of 'realism', observed that the story ranges all over the West, up into Canada, and down into Mexico, but the players never seem to leave Monument Valley. Precisely. Monument Valley is more than a real place to Ford. It is a state of mind. Its beauty is reminiscent of the decadent poets' theories about the aesthetics of uselessness, for it is both a dead end and an ultimate value, the perfect setting for the *acte gratuit*. Its weird, gargantuan panoramas resemble nothing so much as an extra-terrestrial landscape; indeed, Stanley Kubrick used it in the stargate section of *2001*. Monument Valley is a moral battleground, stripped down and rendered more perfect by the absence of organic life within its boundaries. It is both primeval and beyond society. In Ford's 'dream' Ireland, a man returns to his past. In the American Dream, his every move reverberates into the future. The horizons of Monument Valley point toward eternity.

The Searchers has that clear yet intangible quality which characterises an artist's masterpiece – the sense that he has gone beyond his customary

limits, submitted his deepest tenets to the test, and dared to exceed even what we might have expected of him. Its hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), is a volatile synthesis of all the paradoxes which Ford had been finding in his Western hero since *Stagecoach*. A nomad tortured by his desire for a home. An outlaw and a military hero. A cavalier and a cutthroat. Ethan embarks on a five-year odyssey across the frontier after his brother's family is murdered and his niece taken captive by the Comanches. Like Homer's Ulysses, he journeys through a perilous and bewitching landscape. Even more than in Ford's earlier Westerns, the land is felt as a living, governing presence. Previously the great rocks were a backdrop, omnipresent but glimpsed from a distance. Usually it is the Indians (the test) who move among the rocks in Ford's Westerns; the pioneers, vulnerable and exposed, move through the plains below. Here, however, much of the important action takes place up among the rocks, crevices and cliffs. There are many more high-angled shots than is usual in Ford. The epic detachment conveyed by the vast aerial views lends an almost supernatural aura to Ethan's quest which is denied to the more prosaic characters of the other Westerns. The demons which drive him onward, almost against his will, seem to emanate from the 'devilish and grinning' land. The killing of the family, an action horrifyingly abrupt, brutal, and gratuitous, is only the first in a long chain of bizarre events which bedevil Ethan and, finally, drive him mad. Within the classical symmetry of the story – the film begins with a door opening on Ethan riding in from the desert and ends with the door closing on him as he returns to the desert – Ford follows a subjective thread.

The Searchers has had a curious critical history. It was largely misunderstood and underrated at the time of its release in 1956; apparently the only serious contemporary critique was the *Sight and Sound* review by Lindsay Anderson, who was amazed to find that Ethan was 'an unmistakable neurotic', and asked, 'Now what is Ford, of all directors, to do with a hero like this?' Anderson's *Sequence* articles on *They Were Expendable* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* were the pioneering work in Ford criticism, and his disillusionment with Ford after *The Searchers* was prophetic of the line which the English-speaking critical establishment has only recently begun to reconsider. Odd as Anderson's incomprehension may seem today, we must remember that we are looking at the film with full knowledge of the sombre cast Ford's vision took in such late works as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Seven Women*.

The Searchers did violence to that 'simple, sure, affirmative' heroic vision which seemed (and, indeed, still seems to many critics) to be Ford's *raison d'être*. Even *Cahiers du Cinéma* gave the film a scant three-line notice; by 1962 its stature had so increased in retrospect that it placed at the top of a *Cahiers* critics' poll on the greatest American sound films. Fordian scholars Peter Bogdanovich and Andrew Sarris also rate it among the best of Ford's work, compensating for the derogatory remarks made about it in critical studies of the director by Jean Mitry and Philippe Haudiquet, who agree with Anderson that le *vrai* Ford ended in the mid-Fifties and what followed is mostly 'self-parody'.

The film is not in fact an aberration, but a crystallisation of the fears, obsessions and contradictions which had been boiling up under the surface of Ford's work since his return from World War II. Godard hints at this in his delightful comment: 'Mystery and fascination of this American cinema... How can I hate John Wayne upholding Goldwater and yet love him tenderly when abruptly he takes Natalie Wood into his arms in the last reel of *The Searchers*?'

Ethan is both hero and anti-hero, a man radically estranged from his society and yet driven to act in its name. His strengths and failings, like the promise and danger of the land around him, are inextricable. *The Searchers* is, on the surface, a highly romantic subject – a knightly quest – but the knight's motives are impure, and as the search progresses, Ford begins to undercut his morality.

Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1971

The Searchers

Directed by: John Ford
Production Company: C.V. Whitney Pictures Company
Presented by: Warner Bros.
Executive Producer: Merian C. Cooper
Associate Producer: Patrick Ford
Production Supervisor: Lowell J. Farrell
Assistant Director: Wingate Smith
Script Supervisor: Robert Gary
Screenplay by: Frank S. Nugent
From the novel by: Alan Lema
Photographed by: Winton C. Hoch
2nd Unit Photography: Alfred Gilks
Technicolor Colour Consultant: James Gooch
Special Effects: George Brown
Film Editor: Jack Murray
Art Directors: Frank Hotaling, James Basevi
Set Decorator: Victor Gangelin
Properties: Dudley Holmes
Men's Wardrobe: Frank Beeton
Women's Wardrobe: Ann Peck
Make-up: Web Overlander
Hairdresser: Fae Smith
Music by: Max Steiner
Orchestrations: Murray Cutter
Sound: Hugh McDowell, Howard Wilson
Wranglers: Glen Holly, Robert Reeves, Desmond Lane, Logan Morris, Ellsworth Vierelle

Cast

John Wayne (*Ethan Edwards*)
Jeffrey Hunter (*Martin Pawley*)
Vera Miles (*Laurie Jorgensen*)
Ward Bond (*Rev Captain Samuel Johnson Clayton*)
Natalie Wood (*Debbie Edwards*)
John Qualen (*Lars Jorgensen*)
Olive Carey (*Mrs Jorgensen*)
Henry Brandon (*Chief Scar/Cicatriz*)
Ken Curtis (*Charlie McCorry*)
Harry Carey Jr (*Brad Jorgensen*)
Antonio Moreno (*Emilio Gabriel Fernandez y Figueroa*)
Hank Worden (*Mose Harper*)
Beulah Archuletta (*Look/Wild Goose Flying in the Night Sky*)
Walter Coy (*Aaron Edwards*)
Dorothy Jordan (*Martha Edwards*)
Pippa Scott (*Lucy Edwards*)
Pat Wayne (*Lieutenant Greenhill*)
Lana Wood (*Debbie as a child*)

USA 1956

114 mins

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

The Searchers Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35
Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)
Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40
Apocalypse Now: Final Cut
Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX
Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari) Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00;
Wed 15 Mar 14:30
Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom) Sun 5 Mar
10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50
Shoah Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00;
Mon 13 Mar 20:35
The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc) Sun 5 Mar
14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)
Citizen Kane Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30
Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)
Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00
2001: A Space Odyssey
Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00
Au hasard Balthazar Mon 6 Mar 18:30
Vertigo Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10
In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah) Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar
21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30

Late Spring (Banshun) Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar
18:20
The Night of the Hunter
Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45
Mulholland Dr. Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15
Beau Travail Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+
intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College
London)
Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+
intro)
Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu) Wed 8 Mar
20:30
Singin' in the Rain Thu 9 Mar 18:10
(+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30
Persona Thu 9 Mar 21:05
Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)
Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50
The Godfather Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15
La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)
Sat 11 Mar 18:05
Do the Right Thing Sat 11 Mar 18:10
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles Sat 11 Mar
18:50
Playtime Sat 11 Mar 20:30
Taxi Driver Mon 13 Mar 20:40

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