

[Update from March 3rd, 2021: I should note that this is a copy of the original document that I turned in. I made a few minor changes to correct some typos, and to update some wording. However, this paper is still almost exactly identical to the one I turned in. As I mentioned in [my entry for The Searchers](#), most of what I wrote here was just some B.S. analysis in order to get a grade. Reading through it now, I don't really stand by most of the analysis that I made here, but such is the nature of a paper that you write for an assignment that you don't really care about.]

[Original paper written in March 2016.]

Thought Paper 8: The Searchers

In the film *The Searchers*, the cinematography used emphasizes the distinctness of one individual from another, and of one group of people from another. The film shows that what makes individuals different and what makes groups of people different is their point of view. It does this primarily by putting one individual or group in the foreground, and another in the background. Some examples of this include showing the difference between Laurie's and Martin's different motivations, establishing a difference between the various protagonists and the Comanche, and by finally showing that Ethan is different from the rest of the protagonists in the film.

The film attempts to get us to sympathize more with Laurie and her longing to be with Martin more than it tries to get us to sympathize with Martin's desire to search for his adopted family. One instance of this occurs immediately after Laurie angrily tells Martin to do as he wishes and leave to search for his family. In a medium shot, the camera focuses on her as she leans against the fence, with sadness expressed on her face. Though we hear Martin getting on a horse, and starting to ride away, we only see him extremely briefly as he passes from right to left in the background of the shot. Rather than showing Martin bravely "riding into the sunset" in a rescue attempt, we instead focus on this relatively still shot of Becky's emotion. Another time this happens is toward the end of the film when Martin and Charlie are engaged in a fistfight over Laurie. While the camera shows the start of the fight, the majority of the fight takes place off-camera. Instead, the camera focuses on Laurie, and while we initially see alarm or frustration on her face, as we hear the fight continue, her expression changes to happiness as she realizes that Martin is finally back and that he still loves her. These various shots that focus on Laurie rather than Martin try to get us to see things from her point of view. This is particularly helpful to the viewer, as the story may make it seem like Martin's actions are the logical and "right" choice, and if these scenes had been shot from Martin's point of view, it may have made Laurie seem like she fell into the trope of a "foolish and love-struck woman" (which was a fairly common negative stereotype in films at the time). Instead, by focusing on her, it helps the viewer to better observe and understand her emotions.

The film focuses on the "otherness" of the Comanche by using subtle shooting techniques to keep our focus primarily off of them. Throughout the film, in the extreme long shots that feature both the protagonists and the Comanche, the Comanche are always farther in the background and the protagonists are closer to the foreground. Most of these happen during chase scenes. But this also occurs during the scene when Ethan is shot with an arrow - he is closer to the foreground (in the bottom third of the screen) and the Comanche that shoots him is in the background (in the top third of the screen). This also happens in some medium shots. Though we do get a few instances of seeing Scar's face, this rarely happens when a protagonist is on the

screen. In the scene where Ethan and Scar are speaking to each other, Scar's back is to the camera, while Ethan is facing the camera. Likewise, in the shot where Scar enters Debbie's tent, we only see his legs, we never see the rest of his body. A final scene that uses this is when Ethan and Martin are running into a cave. The shot uses vectoring—using lines to draw our attention to a certain location. In this instance, because the camera is situated inside the cave facing outward, the walls of the cave serve to focus on the action taking place outside of the cave. In this frame created by the cave walls, we see Ethan and Martin running on foot trying to get into the cave, and Comanche on horseback trying to shoot them. By keeping the protagonists as the focus of the shot, it seems to be a literal reminder to the viewer whose side we should be on. Likewise, by keeping the focus away from the Comanche, it adds a sense of mystery and danger to them.

However, this pattern changes drastically at the end of the film, starting with a similar shot at a cave. In this instance, the cave walls once again create vectoring to focus on the action just outside of it, but in this instance, Debbie is in the foreground running away on foot from Ethan, who is on horseback. Here, Debbie thinks that Ethan is trying to kill her, and we get a similar sense of fear and danger (though it is quickly shown that Ethan is not trying to kill her). Additionally, in the final shot of the film, we get a frame within a frame, as the camera dollies from outside the house, to just inside the door of the house (with darkness surrounding the doorway) and the frame that the door creates focuses on the outside. First we see Ethan in the background, with the Jorgensens, along with Debbie, in the foreground. They enter the house, and we see Martin and Laurie initially behind Ethan. They pass Ethan, move into the foreground, and enter the house. Lastly, we see Ethan turn his back to the camera, and he walks away from the house as the door closes. By suddenly applying the types of shots that had previously been used only for Comanche to Ethan, the viewer is led to believe that there is something different about him than the other characters. Perhaps this now reaffirms that Ethan is not the hero he seemed to be at the beginning of the film (as evidenced by his many actions during the film, such as unnecessarily shooting a dead Comanche in such a way as to prevent him from reaching the afterlife according to Comanche beliefs, and trying to kill Debbie, though he eventually saved her).

Whether through putting Laurie in focus over Martin, the protagonists over the Comanche, or by removing the focus from Ethan, this film uses the camera to tell us whose viewpoint we should be siding with. By doing this, the camera tells us something that the writing alone could not: that Laurie's desires are just as sensible as Martin's, that the Comanche are to be feared, and that Ethan may not be the flawless hero that he may be perceived to be.