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Hybridity, Agency and the Distribution of Whiteness in *The Searchers*

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John Ford's Western, *The Searchers* (1956) holds a special status in American film history. It is often mentioned as an atypical Western (cf. Gilmore), not least because of the ambivalent portrayal of its main character, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) who is on the one hand portrayed as the hero who saves the girl and solves the problems of the small settler community, and on the other hand as a racist who tries to kill the girl he set out to rescue.

This ambivalence is the topic of numerous readings of the film – be it by way of a psychological analysis of the Ethan character (cf. Eckstein "Incest and Miscegenation"), by focusing on Ford's intentions or by situating the film in an overall analysis of his work (cf. Clauss; Eckstein "Introduction"), or by reading the film in light of the inspirations from grand mythological themes that can easily be depicted in the narrative (cf. Winkler). The differences between the ways in which the film's main theme is identified rest more or less on the reading of its main character. Is it about the suppressed and illegitimate passion between Ethan and the wife of his brother? Or is it about the existential loneliness of a man who is deemed to "wander forever between the winds"? [1]

Other critics have focused on the historical context of the film, involving the dichotomous world view of the Cold War and the nascent civil rights movement (cf. Slotkin). *The Searchers* is sometimes read as an early "revisionist" Western (cf. Eckstein "Introduction"), and at any rate the 1950s were marked by an emerging questioning of the hegemonic

historiography that portrayed Whites as superior civilisers and Native Americans as part of the *Wilderness* that had to be overcome and civilised. Thus, the film is interpreted in light, not only of the history of the colonisation of the West, but also of the growing awareness of racism and racial discrimination against the black population in the contemporary United States (cf. Slotkin; Henderson). As Douglas Pye points out, however, the film contains contradictions that cannot be resolved into a coherent set of perspectives (23). This very much goes for the depiction of race, which is as ambivalent as is the portrait of Ethan Edwards. It is marked both by a critical perspective on racism and by a thoroughly racialised representation (cf. Kitses). Contrary to some readings (e.g. Day; Bronfen), I will argue that despite the ambivalences, still the point of view of the film is fundamentally white in the sense that it at no point seriously questions the distinction and hierarchy between White and Indian. The distinction is, however, transgressed by the central characters and in the end it turns out to be anything but clear cut, and this is what makes the film particularly interesting as an example of a complex negotiation of the conventions of the Western genre.

Critics who focus on the film's representation of race often emphasise the fact that Ethan Edwards' heroic but problematic position depends on his transgression of the racial divide in terms of knowledge as well as in terms of the dichotomy between barbarism and civilisation with which this divide is conventionally associated (cf. Slotkin; Prats). My analysis draws on these readings but also diverges from them, primarily by focusing on how the possibility of legitimately transgressing the racial divide is unequally distributed and unequally invested with agency, dependent not only on race but also on gender and age (cf. Henderson). I employ what I term an *analytics of hybridity* in order to study the distribution of legitimate and illegitimate blending and how this determines the distribution of agency in the film.

The Film

A brief summary of the plot conveys the impression of a traditional 1950s Western: Texas, 1868. Ethan Edwards, a war veteran who fought on the losing side of the civil war and who has not yet conceded the war (Matheson), visits his settler brother Aaron after years of absence. The day after Ethan's arrival, he and Martin, Aaron's adopted son who is eighth-part Cherokee, ride out with a search party, looking for stolen cattle. In their absence Aaron, his wife Martha and their son Ben are killed

by a group of Comanches who kidnap the two daughters, Lucy and Debbie. Ethan and Martin set out to free the two girls. They find Lucy raped and killed and continue the search for Debbie who was included in the Comanches' band. After five years they find the group, kill the Comanche chief Scar, and bring Debbie back to the settler community.

The scene is set for a "classic" Western that assumes the white settlers' perspective. Civilisation faces Barbarism: A peaceful settler community is the innocent victim of a bloody assault committed by Indians for no apparent reason (cf. Kitses 99). A more comprehensive summary, however, reveals the complexities.

After years of searching, Ethan and Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) manage to locate Scar (Henry Brandon) and pay him a visit. Debbie (Natalie Wood) is now a beautiful young woman and apparently one of Scar's wives. When she refuses to come with them, claiming that the Comanches are now her people, Ethan draws his gun and is about to shoot her, but Martin intervenes. Next come the Comanches. Ethan is injured, and the two manage to flee. Following this episode, Ethan denounces his blood relationship with Debbie, because "she's been livin' with a buck." He declares that Martin is now his heir.

In a passage framed as a letter from Martin to his girlfriend, Laurie Jorgensen, Martin inadvertently acquires a Comanche bride, Look – a timid, clumsy creature whom both Ethan and Martin treat with contempt [2]. She is later killed by soldiers during an attack on a Comanche village in which the soldiers find some captive white women whose behaviour is best described as psychotic. "It's hard to believe they're white," a soldier comments. Ethan responds: "They ain't white any more. They're Comanche."

Towards the end of the film Ethan and Martin and a group of local rangers prepare an attack on Scar's village. Martin insists that they save Debbie first – against the will of Ethan who comments that "livin' with Comanches ain't bein' alive." Martin sneaks into the village, finds Debbie who willingly comes with him, and kills Scar. When the rangers attack, Ethan scalps Scar and pursues a fleeing Debbie. She falls and looks at him, terrified, as he closes in on her. But he lifts her up and says, quietly: "Let's go home, Debbie."

The last scene shows riders approaching the house of the Jorgensen family. Ethan rides in front with Debbie leaning in to him like a child. He

carries her to the porch where Mr and Mrs Jorgensen welcome her. Then everybody enters the house, except Ethan, who remains standing for a while, then turns and walks away.

Based on this extended summary, we can begin to disentangle how the racial divide is reproduced, overstepped and reconfirmed in different ways. In Richard Slotkin's words, the film "returns us to the primary ground of the original generic form of the Frontier Myth: the Indian wars, the tale of the white woman captured by Indians, and her rescue by the quintessential American hero, "the man who knows Indians"" (461). That is, it establishes a universe of absolute opposites: White settlers versus the Indian, Civilisation versus Wilderness. This polarity grants legitimacy to the colonisation of the West and to the methods employed during this colonisation. One of the legitimating narratives involved is the narrative of *savage war*, according to which the Indian's barbaric behaviour requires that similar barbaric methods are applied by the white man. Therefore, the hero is not just he who *preserves* and *protects* Civilisation against the Indian/Wilderness. He also *transgresses* the dichotomy. This duality of dichotomy and transgression is found both in classic Westerns in which the hero engages in savage war in order to save Civilisation, and in revisionist Westerns in which the hero joins the Indians and takes on their values, to the extent of becoming more Indian than the Indians (Pearson; Prats).

An analytics of hybridity

I will suggest that this relationship between dichotomy and transgression is best analysed through an analytics of hybridity. The concept of hybridity is contested. When employed as a simple reference to "blends" of cultures or races it has (rightly) been criticised for reproducing essentialism (cf. Frello; Friedman "The Hybridization of Roots"). Also historically, the concept is disputed (cf. Friedman "Global Crisis"; Young; Papastergiadis; Nederveen Pieterse; Brah and Coombes). Its history is loaded with quasi-biological connotations, involving an implication with racism in terms of discourses about the "contamination" of the white race through miscegenation. Thus, "hybridity" not only indicates a simple blending of cultures or races (problematic as this idea may be). It also indicates ideas of "impurity," in terms of the contamination of categories previously believed to be pure.

Far from invalidating a critical focus on hybridity, I will argue that this

burdened history adds to the relevance of the concept since it indicates the depth of what is at stake in constructing, reconstructing and displacing ideas of purity. My inspiration for focusing on hybridity comes primarily from cultural studies and postcolonial theory (cf. Ang; Bhabha; Hall), where it is employed in order to highlight the destabilisation and displacement of established and hierarchical identities and identity categories, thus providing a critical perspective on essentialist notions of culture and race. Analysing *The Searchers* through the lens of hybridity thus directs our attention to the ambivalences involved in the seemingly polar universe of White versus Indian. When employing an *analytical* approach to hybridity it is, however, vital not only to focus on the destabilisation and displacement of essentialised categories but also to be attentive to the fact that not all hybrid positions function in the same way. Different in-between positions cannot be reduced to a simple middle ground since they are constituted in different ways, and they cannot be harmonised into a peaceful cultural or racial blending, since they are based on historical atrocities and tied up with power differences. However, the transgression of racial and cultural categories does not automatically destabilise these categories. It may in fact contribute to their fixation. An analytics of hybridity therefore focuses on the specific discursive constitution of different hybrid positions, particularly in terms of legitimate and illegitimate blending and in terms of how this is related to the distribution of agency (cf. Frello). Furthermore, the ways in which each category is transgressed, intersect with other socio-cultural categories. Therefore an analysis of hybridity is also an intersectional analysis in the sense that when focusing on race one should pay attention to how race is lived through other sociocultural categories, such as gender and age, in the specific context.

In the following, I will focus on three related aspects of an analytics of hybridity that together highlight the complexity of *The Searchers'* dealings with race: polarity, transgression and agency. This triple focus enables an analysis of how conventional understandings of socio-cultural categories and agency are both reproduced and challenged. Through identifying possible transgressions of the categorical poles, the analysis also identifies the criteria for such transgressions and the boundaries that are taken for granted as intransgressible within the universe of the film and thus constitute the preconditions for the moral criticism that the film presents.

The analysis of *polarity* is concerned with the role of categorical dichotomies, that is, the constitution of taken-for-granted categories and how these relate to each other, for example in terms of (in)compatibility.

This aspect of the analysis is concerned with how race is established as a meaningful category, how White and Indian are hierarchically portrayed and assigned different properties, and which race relations are articulated as possible and natural.

The analysis of *transgression* is concerned with the nature of the boundaries between the dichotomous racial categories, for example in terms of whether transgression is portrayed as a threat against – or as an enrichment of – race properties. It concerns the conditions under which transgression can take place and how such in-between positions are described, in terms of contamination or insight for example. Thus it concerns the construction of legitimate and illegitimate, constructive and problematic in-between positions.

The analysis of *agency* is concerned with the constitution of the (im)possibility of action in relation to different subject positions. This involves firstly the question of who is endowed with the capacity to actively and legitimately transgress the categories and under what conditions. Secondly, it involves the question of how positions endowed with the capacity to establish the distinction between the hybrid and the pure are constituted, and thus also the question of who can occupy these positions.

Reproductions and transgressions

First I will take a brief look at the simple reproduction of categories. This is most obviously found in the scenes with Look and the captive white women. The portrayal of Look is downright racist: she is a comic figure that Ethan and Martin can legitimately push around and laugh about (cf. Eyman; Sharrett; Pye; Kitses). This portrayal contributes to establishing and preserving a dichotomy between Whites and Indians, making Martin and Ethan appear as representatives of Reason and Civilisation, while Look appears primitive and ridiculous.

The scene with the captive white women is more complicated since it demonstrates and depreciates Ethan's racism by focusing on his twisted, hateful face. It is thus one of the scenes in which the film clearly *exposes* – rather than endorses – white racism (cf. Eckstein "Introduction"). Yet still the gap between White and Indian is legitimised through the portrayal of the women as mad (Pye): white women who are forced to live among Indians may not become "Comanche," such as Ethan contemptuously

remarks, but the fact that they are described as mad indicates that no liveable space can exist across the boundary between White and Indian, at least not for women.

These portrayals of minor characters confirm the racial divide. The portrayals of the main characters, however, question the easy distinction between (White) Civilisation and (Indian) Barbarism. Firstly, we have Debbie who moves (or is moved) back and forth across the racial divide: from White to Indian to White again. Debbie's racial status is a question of (presumed) sexual contact and thus of contamination by the Indian seed. It is an explicit theme in the film, since her proper status and the right to define it are important elements in the conflict between Ethan and Martin.

Secondly, we have Martin who by being eighth-part Cherokee oversteps the divide in the biological sense. Despite Ethan's contemptuous rejection of any familial relationship to the "half-breed," throughout the film Martin is portrayed as a natural member of the white settler community. This fact is emphasised both by the scene with Look – in which he falls clearly on the White side – and by his relationship with Jorgensen's daughter Laurie, who gives voice to some of the most blatant racist expressions in the film – next to Ethan [3]. Even Ethan's attitude towards Martin is ambiguous, starting with contempt and becoming increasingly paternal throughout the film (cf. Henderson; Reiter). This ambiguity is most clearly illustrated by his announcing Martin his heir, when he annuls the kinship with Debbie. Martin's rejection of this offer and his insistence on continuing the quest to rescue her contributes to the characterisation of him as a rightful member of the Civilised (White) community (cf. Sharrett).

Despite the fact that it is Debbie and Martin who most obviously transgress the distinction between White and Indian, still it is Ethan who emerges as the single most ambivalent figure in light of this distinction. He is the Indian hater who wants to kill his beloved niece when he suspects that she was "tainted" by the Indian Scar. He is supposed to be guarding the boundary between the Civilised and the Savage, but he transgresses this boundary repeatedly throughout the film: shooting out the eyes of an already dead Indian, and killing buffalos with the sole purpose of preventing the Comanches from hunting. And as remarked in numerous studies of the film, Scar is in many ways portrayed as Ethan's alter ego – a portrayal that both questions the polarity between White and Indian and underlines the ambiguity of the Ethan-character and of his quest (cf. Cantor; Buscombe; Day; Reiter; Eckstein "Incest and

Miscegenation"; Pippin).

It is Martin, not Ethan, who eventually kills Scar. The portrayal of Martin does not, however, involve any of the hatred and ferocity that characterises Ethan, who in Eyman's words, "hates Indians for their Savagery *and* takes their scalps for killing his relatives, he despises Martin's Cherokee blood *and* makes him his heir, he wants to kill his niece for having sex with an Indian *and* he embraces her and takes her safely home. Ethan is a monster *and* he is John Wayne" (155).

Ethan embodies the complexity of the hero's position in the Frontier Myth, as described by Slotkin [4]: he is protecting White Civilisation against the Wilderness. However, he does this by engaging in savage war, thus transgressing the polarity between Civilisation and Wilderness. Furthermore, the savageness of the Ethan character involves not only a potential for violence. It also indicates a special "insight." As Prats emphasises, the film grants Ethan the "uncontested power to define that which the Western asks us to accept as authentically Indian" (Prats 64). Ethan is a man who "knows the Indian."

Numerous readings of *The Searchers* centre on Ethan's "savageness," arguing that his transgression of the boundary leaves him outside of the Civilisation that he defends (Cantor; Prats; Slotkin). As Martin Winkler puts it: "Although he can take Debbie back to white society, Ethan cannot himself return to civilization" (160). Often Ethan's transgression of the boundary is analysed in terms of a psychological ambivalence of the character. (cf. Day; Reiter; Bandy and Stoehr). I will argue, however, that such an interpretation is reductive, since it fails to address the question of the *positioning* of the Ethan character. Ethan remains an outsider, but he is still the hero of the film – and not only because he is John Wayne. What remains invisible in psychological readings of the film is that the possibilities of legitimate transgression are unequally distributed among the characters dependent on factors such as race and gender.

Relationships and agency

The racial distinction organises the overall narrative of *The Searchers*. Whiteness appears as the locus of reason and insight, as the place from which the irrational Otherness can be identified and excluded – as in the depiction of Look and the captive white women. Despite the fact that Martin, Debbie and Ethan all transgress the boundary between White and

Indian, their transgression does not *eliminate* the distinction. The significance of the categories remains and is, in fact, reproduced through the transgression. Furthermore, the depiction of the harmonious settler society rests on this distinction. Therefore the various forms of transgression that are depicted in the film have to be "dissolved," as when the equation of Whiteness and Reason contributes to positioning Martin as White through his portrayal as the quintessential civilised young man. This portrayal does not disturb the hierarchy between White and Indian. Rather, it adds to Martin's Whiteness.

The racial dichotomy also organises the portrayal of the relationship between the Ethan, Martin and Debbie. In the case of Martin, it is his partially Indian descent that is central to Ethan's initial rejection of kinship between the two. In the case of Debbie it is her "Indian defilement" that motivates Ethan's reversal from potential saviour to potential killer as well as his changing attitude towards Martin when he writes off the kinship with Debbie and chooses Martin as his heir in her place.

A first analysis thus reveals that Martin, the eighth-part Indian, comes to occupy the White position – as Ethan's heir – while Debbie is expelled and placed in the position of the Other – the Indian. However, this is not a simple reversal of racial belonging, since the White/Indian-dichotomy turns out to be ambiguous: in Martin's case, Indianness is constituted by blood, while in Debbie's case it is constituted by (suspected) sexual contact.

Debbie's Whiteness is initially beyond questioning because she is the biological daughter of Aaron and Martha. Even when she declares the Comanches as "her people," she keeps the signs of Whiteness as they are indicated by the narrative. She is not a psychotic or ridiculed, humiliated Other but a passionate, beautiful woman. Like Martin, she can bridge the gap between Indianness and Whiteness by being recognisably portrayed through conventions of Whiteness. Thus the film's dissociation from Ethan's racism is partially reached through the sympathetic portrayals of the hybrid figures of Martin and Debbie.

Slotkin relates the story about Debbie to the traditional *captivity narrative*, which he describes as follows:

The captive woman is significant only as "rescue object," a totem whose seizure sanctifies as "Christian" and "peace-

making" a project that is inherently un-Christian and aggressive. Moreover, the realization of the White man's quest for power and justification can *only* be achieved through her victimization. The engendering condition of the captivity myth is the abduction or "rape" of the White woman. Without the violence done to her, there is no motive or justification for the hero to vindicate his manhood by attacking and destroying the Indians. (Slotkin 470; cf. Eckstein "Introduction"; Studlar)

The same situation that justifies the hero's revenge on the Indian, namely the sexual defilement of the White Woman, also makes it unnecessary to save her, because the defilement removes her from the white sphere and makes her terminally Indian. Thus, the woman is no longer a person worth saving. Her only significance lies in the fact that it is her abduction that justifies the action of the hero.

This narrative is not left unchallenged in the film. While the captured woman in conventional captivity-stories usually resists a "fate worse than death" and preserves her virginity until the hero saves her, this is not the case in *The Searchers*. Debbie transgresses the boundary to Indianness first and foremost by her (alleged) sexual relations with Scar. And the narrative of the film does not support Ethan's rejection of her: Martin's insistence on saving her contributes to the portrayal of him as the civilised of the two. Furthermore, Debbie is endowed with an agency that is usually absent from traditional captivity-stories: She is not only a victim but a woman who is (at least temporarily) capable of making her own choice of belonging.

This agency is, however, contradicted and undermined by the film's "happy ending," which leaves no room for Debbie to choose her own belonging: Ethan brings Debbie back to the white settler community. Gone is any hint not only of Ethan's hatred, but also of Debbie's defilement. The problem is not addressed. It simply disappears. In some analyses, this solution indicates a critique of racism (Studlar; Bronfen). My analysis suggests a different direction: the "rescue" of Debbie involves the overcoming of Ethan's racially motivated rage, but it does not change the basically racialised universe of the film. On the contrary, the fact that Debbie's rescue constitutes the film's "happy ending" confirms that happiness is White. And this confirmation is reached through naturalising the racial hierarchy and depriving Debbie of agency.

While Martin sustains his Whiteness through his own agency, Debbie's

position is ultimately not settled by her, but by the men who surround her. The possibility of crossing the boundary between White and Indian turns out to be gender-specific; firstly, because Debbie's hybrid position becomes a matter not of her agency but of defilement, and therefore cannot endow her with superior knowledge as the one who "knows the Indian"; and secondly, because others determine whether her transgression is acceptable and, if not, whether she can be "restored" as white. Ultimately then, she is reduced to being the object of the men's quest – in accordance with the captivity myth.

The illegitimacy of Debbie's hybrid position is further emphasised by the fact that the restoration of normality in the "happy ending" is precisely constituted through the abolishment of this position and thus the confirmation of the unequivocal boundary between White and Indian. Above all, it is Ethan's mysterious U-turn in the end that secures Debbie's return not only to the white community but to Whiteness. Although Martin's position – unlike Debbie's – is accessible to his own agency in the sense that he can *practice* Whiteness and thereby transgress the boundary and demonstrate the unfairness of Ethan's rejection of him, he cannot extend this agency to the definition of Debbie's position. He can save her life, but he cannot restore her Whiteness. Only Ethan has this power. [5] From the point of view of an analytics of hybridity, the intriguing question here is not why Ethan changes his attitude towards Debbie but how the ambiguity of Ethan's position assigns the figure a certain form of agency that positions him as the one who can ultimately bring Debbie "home" – despite the fact that it was Martin, not Ethan, who killed Scar and "freed" Debbie.

It is often noted that the initial scene in which Ethan greets the child Debbie by lifting her up is repeated in the scene in which Ethan lifts up the young woman Debbie in order to bring her "home" (Lehman; Bronfen). In my analysis the significance of this repetition lies in the way that it works by symbolically portraying Debbie as a child, thereby "deleting" the intervening period, including her sexual contact with Scar. Harmony is restored because "Debbie once again can become a child to a loving mother" as Studlar remarks (192). My point is, however, that if harmony is to be restored within the universe of the film, this "loving mother" must be white. Thus, contrary to Bronfen who argues that the inclusion of Martin and Debbie in the white Settler community unsettles the Whiteness of this community, I argue that the ending confirms rather than transgresses the racialised universe of the classic Western: the "solution" – the elimination of tension and restoring of normality –

consists in deleting Debbie's Indianness, and this is accomplished by portraying the grown-up Debbie as a child, thus depriving her of agency. The person whom Ethan brings "home" in the end is not the passionate young woman from the scene outside the Comanche village, it is the abducted child from the attack five years earlier.

The nature of Ethan's hybrid position is crucial in this context. Ethan – like Debbie and Martin – is a hybrid figure and he is the only one whose ambiguous position is not dissolved into clarity. However, unlike the others Ethan is not the *object* of delimitations made by others. He is the sovereign subject, who not only is able to move on both sides of the boundary, but also has a high degree of power over the positioning of others. Ethan transgresses the boundary to Indianness but this transgression endows him not only with the savageness that is discursively associated with this position. It also grants him insight and authority, and although the ambiguity of the character is what leaves him outside of the familial idyll at the end, it is also precisely because of his dual status as a racist and Indian fighter on the one hand, and as the hero and the one who "knows the Indian" on the other, that he can restore Debbie's Whiteness and wash away the Indian defilement of her. Ethan occupies the position as the outsider within – not in terms of an intermediary between the two (Böhnke; Bronfen), but as the border figure whose transgression of the order is a prerequisite for its maintenance. Therefore, the fact that Ethan remains an outsider is not only an interesting riddle for psychological analysis. It is also a key to understanding the tacit normativity that the narrative is based on.

Conclusion

My reading of *The Searchers* is indebted to earlier readings of the Western genre, such as those of Slotkin and Prats who both demonstrate how the position of the white hero depends on the transgression of the boundary between White and Indian. By focusing on hybridity in terms of the distribution of legitimate and illegitimate blending and how this determines the distribution of agency, I indicate a possible way of further unravelling the complexities of the genre's dealing with socio-cultural categories such as race and gender.

Focusing on the Frontier Myth helps illuminate why Ethan's position as a hero is not seriously threatened by his racism, nor his savageness. To understand this, it doesn't suffice to point out – as Eyman does above –

that Ethan is indeed a monster, but he is also John Wayne. Ethan's duality as a monster and a hero is portrayed as a problem, but also as a legitimate position that occupies an established discursive space in American history. He is the man who "knows the Indian" and who must transgress the boundary of civilisation in order to protect it.

The analytics of hybridity further contributes to elucidate this position by turning our attention to the construction of polarity, transgression and the distribution of agency. The present analysis is not the first to employ the concept of hybridity in the reading of *The Searchers*. Worth mentioning in particular is Elisabeth Bronfen's analysis of the ways in which Ford negotiates the notion of "home" through the various hybrid characters of the film. What Bronfen's otherwise insightful analysis fails to acknowledge, however, is that the simple fact of Debbie's and Martin's inclusion in the white community does not in itself challenge the racial categorisation. My analysis demonstrates that the racial transgressions that drive the narrative do not in the end disturb the racial dichotomy that the narrative rests on although specific individuals (temporarily) move (or are moved) across the boundary. Therefore, the film's criticism of racism turns out to be a *moral* critique, rather than a criticism of the racial categories and the characteristics associated with them. The white man's position as the sovereign subject is not disturbed by this kind of criticism.

The analysis also demonstrates, however, that although based on a dichotomy, the racialised universe of the film ultimately defies any simple polarity. The boundary between the racial poles is not a fixed line that unequivocally divides between Us and Them – White and Indian. It is also not a continuum that can be described by an identification of "more or less White" and "more or less Indian" positions. None of the hybrid characters in the film can be exhaustively described simply as being positioned "between" White and Indian. Rather than simple blendings, the various characters can be characterised as different types of hybrid figures that – although they are all situated in-between White and Indian – are constituted in radically different ways: in terms of blood (Martin), sexual relations (Debbie), or actions and knowledge (Ethan). This is due both to the fact that "race" is a highly manipulable category, and to the fact that the characters' possible positioning in terms of racial categories are partly constituted by their possible positioning in terms of other social categories – in this case notably gender. Hence it is not the "distribution" of Civilisation and Savageness in the character of Ethan that defines his position. It is the specific type of hybrid position that he occupies and the special agency that this provides. The meaning of racial purity and

blending turns out to be marked by a high degree of contextual flexibility and social negotiability. Transgressing the racial divide does not carry any specific meaning in itself. Whether a particular hybrid position is powerful, critical, or vulnerable therefore depends on how it is given meaning in the specific context.

I have chosen *The Searchers* as the object of analysis because of the position it holds as an early “revisionist” Western that challenges the normative foundations of the genre, while still fully functioning as a “traditional” Western in terms of the overall narrative. *The Searchers* is interesting today because it – despite itself and its confirmation of conventional understandings of race – displays the complexity of racial categories and their conflation with other socio-cultural categories. The history of the Western is full of examples of films that use the format while challenging its usual politics – often through depicting some of the leading characters as somehow transgressing conventional categories, such as lieutenant Dunbar (Kevin Costner) in *Dances with Wolves* and the homosexual cowboys (played by Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal) in *Brokeback Mountain*, just to mention two acclaimed and very different examples. By focusing not only on the transgression of categories but also on the distribution of legitimate agency, an analytics of hybridity can unravel the tensions and contradictions that are often found in representations that struggle to overcome stereotypes and dichotomisations that are also part of the basic cultural narratives of their genre, time and society.

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Endnotes

1. This is how Ethan describes a Comanche belief in an oft-quoted passage.
2. The name, Look, is due to a communication error.
3. Laurie protests against Martin’s insistence on bringing Debbie home,

saying: "Fetch what home? The leavin's of Comanche bucks – sold time an' again to the highest bidder. With Savage brats of her own?" Laurie's uncontested remark points to a less "benign" reading of the racial attitudes among the settlers (cf. Pippin; Sharrett).

4. Slotkin presents a thorough analysis of *The Searchers* based on the Frontier Myth. However, he focuses primarily on the psychology of the Ethan character and on Martin's relationship with Ethan (Slotkin 461–473).
5. Prats even suggests that Ethan "restores Debbies "whiteness' by surrendering his own" (63).

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