The Representation of Landscape and the (Native) American in the Western

A Comparative Analysis of the American settler and the Native American as depicted on the Prairie in American Western Films between 1911 and 2017

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Introduction

In society on a global scale, history is playing a gargantuan role at the moment: historical instances of cultural difference are still present, showing the influence of this history. Colonialism, racial separation and genocide have heavily impacted the victims of these acts, but they also still influence their progeny. Next to yielding a victim, these events had an instigator as well. Thus, while looking at history or an historical event, it is important to realise that perspective plays a big role: there are always two sides to an event. It is a seemingly contradictory set of attributes of man that taints this perspective in history and causes suffering for others: the lust for power and the need to be seen as benevolent and kind. From the fifteenth century up to at least the 1950s, leaders of countries, especially European ones, have acted upon this lust for power, conquering land and enslaving people as a result. From the 1960s onward, when the process of decolonisation was nearly complete, the errors of these nations were pointed out as researchers and writers alike began commenting on the current state of the world. These researchers started schools of thought like postmodernism and postcolonialism. An effect of this process for Western countries included “the loss of the sense of an absoluteness of any Western account of History” (Young 19). The realisation that their point of view is not the only one possible was quite shocking for most countries. There is, however, one Western country that is usually exempting itself of this feeling: The United States of America (Bush 199). As a country where Native American tribes used to live, to which English settlers migrated, and to which they then brought slaves, how is its history not questioned? Formerly colonised writers like Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire wrote the following about this position in the world: “the master-narratives of the United States were chauvinistically expressing the necessity of imperialism to the formation of its culture” (Sethi 88). The United States have thus become an oddity, breaking free from British reign in 1776, and yet using African slaves on their fields while battling Native Americans for their land. My interest in this process centres around the position of the Native American and their presentation in American popular culture. Subsequently, follows the question of how the theory of cultural difference

unfolds itself in the United States, for the Native Americans especially, for the answer of which it is necessary to look into postcolonial theory.

Postcolonialism is a movement that started with a critique of colonialism. The process of colonialisation created a relationship of inequality between coloniser and colonised, against which the (formerly) colonised rebelled (Césaire 33). This instigated discussions about three concepts I would like to touch upon: cultural difference, Orientalism, and the Other. Cultural difference is a concept that can be seen as a foundation of sorts. As Homi Bhabha describes it: "Cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity" (34). It is normal for people to focus on themselves and the group they belong to and to think they are better than someone else. This is the result of differentiating between the self and the other as described by Bhabha. A term coined by Edward Said describes such an envisioned divide, Orientalism. Said emphasised the following historical status quo: "There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (Said, *Orientalism* 36). As Said describes it, a person is either marked as being on the same side as yourself, or on the other side, which can lead to a definition of 'the Other'. The concept of the Other as I would like to introduce it here, was first mentioned by Frantz Fanon, and later also used by Homi Bhabha. It is a concept that complicates the relationship between former coloniser and colonised as, "Bhabha argues that even for the colonizer the construction of a representation of the Other is by no means straightforward" (Young 143). The difficulty of the formation of an identity for the Other is something that I would like to focus on, in relation to the situation in the US as mentioned earlier.

There is a paradox to the position that the US holds with regards to cultural difference: they have been supportive of countries that wanted to be decolonised, yet from its foundation, the United States has been partly formed by the urge to go West and dominate the native population. The support

for other countries stems from the myth of American Exceptionalism, that tells the world that the US were created to be different: they are disconnected from Europe which should not interfere "with its erstwhile colonies" (Sethi 94). The effect of American Exceptionalism, then, "lies in derecognizing the role of conquest, war and exploitation in achieving economic expansion so that imperialism and complete innocence can exist hand in hand to create, shall we say, a willing suspension of disbelief" (Sethi 94). This paradox has to be accepted to look into something that the American conquest has created: the position of the Native American as being an Other. What intrigues me most, is to see what the depiction of the cultural difference regarding the Native American constitutes in American popular culture throughout the years, and how this might have been influenced by events in American history. To do so, I have chosen to look at the film genre of the western, that is sometimes defined as American history itself (Kitses 8).

Even though the western can be seen as an American genre, it is not easy to describe what the genre really entails. It is a genre about the West, there is usually a hero that is not attracted to the life in a settlement, and Native Americans sometimes show up in either an antagonistic fashion or as an aid to the hero. Moreover, landscape as the background for the American West, is an important pillar of the Western (Bazin 148). The prairie is a meeting point in a clash of cultures: settlements were created by immigrants here, yet Native Americans roamed these lands as well. How the prairie, as important concept in the western genre, and the settlers and Indians that inhabit this prairie, are depicted, might tell us something about the state of the cultural difference as experienced in a moment in American history: is the American settler who conquered the land in the right, as he holds his position of coloniser, or is it the Native American who has always inhabited the land? In other words, who can we see depicted as the Other against the backdrop of the landscape, the one who is not living in his own home. This is what I will set out to answer in this thesis.

To answer this question, I will examine six movies from different time periods by close-reading specific scenes while keeping the notion of the Other at the forefront of the discussion. The process of

close-reading will include the different angles and editing used in the film, with one goal: identifying the position of the Native American and settler in front of the landscape. The concept from postcolonial theory as described above, will be used to enable us to focus on the divide between the one in power, and the suppressed.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters, that will each cover two time periods of the western genre. In chapter 1, we shall look at the beginnings of the western film. This starts with the notion of reliving the glory of the frontier, 1903 to 1927. *The Last Drop of Water* (1911), directed by D.W. Griffith, will be examined in connection with this time period. After the reliving of the frontier glory, we will turn to the B western, 1927 to 1943, represented here by *The Plainsman* (1936), directed by Cecile B. DeMille. In chapter 2, we will focus on the heyday of the western, starting with the era of the modern western, 1943-1967. *The Searchers* (1956), directed by John Ford, is the film that will be examined for this time period. *Dances with Wolves* (1990), directed by Kevin Costner, is the film that will be used for the period of protest and insight, linked especially to the Vietnam war and its influence (1967-2001). In chapter 3, the western as film for the American masses, changes into a genre of prestige, with fewer films that ought to be of greater influence (Nelson 341). Post 9/11 society, from 2001 to 2013, will be linked to *The Lone Ranger* (2013), directed by Gore Verbinski. The final film that is to be examined, is linked to the present time period, from 2013 to the present: *Hostiles* (2017), directed by Scott Cooper. In each time period we will first explore the American historical background and the state of the western at that time, after which we will take a closer look at the film itself, with a summary, a general note on the camerawork specific to the movie, and the scenes themselves in detail.

Chapter 1: The Birth of the Western and the Popularity of the Talky

1.1.1 The Birth of a New Genre for a New Medium

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century a new medium was on the rise: cinema. It was not only a means to capture images of daily life, as, for example in the *Roundhay Garden Scene* (1888), it could also be used for imaginative purposes. Thus fantastical voyages to the moon were shown in *Le voyage dans la Lune* (1902) with the necessary special effects; and the first, popular American western film, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), showed a glimpse of the 'historical' life on the frontier (Slotkin 231). It is this film, directed by Edwin S. Porter, that instigated the birth of the western as a popular genre in cinema: "The history of the Western as a film genre begins with the decision to imitate Porter's work and repeat its success" (Slotkin 231). In *The Great Train Robbery* several outlaws decide to rob a train, as the title implies. They do so dressed in what we now would regard as a classic cowboy outfit, while wearing the infamous revolvers. Indeed, with a railroad coursing through the prairie and an attack by outlaws, *The Great Train Robbery* evokes a sense of an American historical setting from several decades before. The western genre thus "offers a landscape of stories with a resonant vocabulary referencing a moment in American history and geography" (Lusted 4). *The Great Train Robbery* was a box office success, leading to many imitative successors by other directors. Porter's movie thus not only generated enough popularity for the western genre to become a staple of American cinema, it also was a highlight of what we may see as the first part of the existence of the western as a genre, namely, the era of the silent western.

From its birth in 1903 up to 1927, when the first talky was released, the silent western had several characteristics. The western film followed the path that western novels had set out upon, that is, it is a genre that relives the glory days of the frontier. This usually involved a settlement on the frontier, with neighbouring Indian settlements, possibly a railroad in the vicinity, and quite often a protagonist who lived on the edge of good and bad. The setting of a western tied in with Turner's frontier thesis, namely, that it was implicitly necessary for the American people to move westward to have space to live: "The myth of the Garden of America authorised the imperial colonisation of a land

already inhabited and adapted by peoples of a different race" (Lusted 20). Through this construction, the West can be seen as a land of opposites, as coined by Kitses's theory of the juxtaposition of 'The Wilderness' and 'Civilization'. He assigns the individual, freedom and honour e.g. to 'The Wilderness' and the community, restriction and institutions to 'Civilization' (Kitses 11). Both of these elements are at play in the American Western and often collide. There is a fine line between good and bad, and our previously mentioned protagonist usually walks this line. He cannot stay in the settlements forever because a village symbolises the realm of 'Civilization'. The protagonist uses an excess of violence to expel evil forces from the settlements, which signifies that he is not properly adapted to life within a community: he cannot adapt to the restrictions of 'Civilization' as he is a force of 'The Wilderness', a free individual and must therefore remain on the prairie in solitude. These traits of the western movie have characterised the many outings of the genre that appeared in the cinema. An important follow-up on these traits is then how the experience of cinema going was influenced by this genre.

The experience of viewing early western films in cinema revolved around the moving images on screen as there was no synchronised sound yet, although sometimes there would be a pianist playing music alongside the pictures or "narrators might be found standing to the side of the screen to provide commentary on the action" (Lusted 69). In the early days, most western cinema consisted of copies of *The Great Train Robbery*, yet this quickly changed with the emergence of film directors like D.W. Griffiths and Francis Boggs, who brought the American film industry to California. These directors, among others, directed films about cowboys and the life on the frontier, instead of mimicking Porter's concept. As the character of the protagonist cowboy became increasingly popular, this led to the rise of silent-Western stars like William S. Hart (Slotkin 243). This phenomenon, then, worked in tandem with the popularity of series westerns as "throughout the teens and twenties, western movies were increasingly associated with individual performers" (Nelson 334). The same actors kept appearing in western movies, as American film companies would sometimes release a new western film once a week. This type of western that filled the "B-slot" in the cinema emerged in the 1920s, but would continue its rise through the 1930s, as will be discussed later. However, the films that deviated from

the line of Porter's copiers are more interesting subjects for this particular research because of the actual appearance of Native Americans. As an example of such a film from the period of the silent western, we will look at D.W. Griffith's *The Last Drop of Water* (1911).

1.1.2. Cultural Clashes on the Prairie

The Last Drop of Water was made by D.W. Griffith, who also directed the controversial *The Birth of a Nation* 4 years later. Griffith operated in a time in which the memory of the frontier and the Civil War were still fresh: "The popularity of the Western was surely not unrelated to a visual, literary and theatrical legacy that provided conventions of setting, character, narrative and action for the early Western film to draw upon" (Lusted 70). As the creation of the frontier was predominantly the act of going westwards, which included chasing Native Americans from their native lands, the Native Americans themselves were not depicted in a positive light. In actual history they might have defended their lands against the settlers, but in the early westerns this happened almost every time, sometimes without reason. Consequently, the image of the Native American in movies was, with the occasional exception, not a positive one: "Villains are most often the racial Other to the white heroes, with treacherous Mexicans, savage Indians and a specially deviant role for half-breeds, whose racial mix make them doubly suspect" (Lusted 79). This typecasting is what we will find in *The Last Drop of Water* as well, in which two men try to woo the same girl, after which one of the men marries her and they leave their town to settle somewhere else. The other suitor travels along with the caravan. The caravan gets attacked by Native Americans, one wagon is captured by them, and the remainder of the wagons form a stockade. Both of the aforementioned men go in search of water, the lover of the woman dies, and in the end, a group from the military notices the stockade and they chase the Native Americans away.

The camerawork will be the main focus of our observations of scenes in *The Last Drop of Water*, therefore, it is useful to first look at the camerawork as used during the film as a whole. Because of its release in 1911, camerawork was not very advanced yet. Pan shots were not used, and in the film we

regularly see either a medium shot or a long shot and close-up shots are quite rare. As a result, the medium shots emphasise “interaction between characters” instead of “the relation between character and environment” (Ryan & Lenos 47). When long shots are being used, it is either when we see the caravan of stagecoaches going through the landscape or a shot of Native Americans in the prairie: the latter can arguably be seen as a link to the impersonality the long shot can render (Ryan & Lenos 48). To pin-point what the landscape might say, we will look at a medium shot and a close-up shot in the film, which both tell us something about the position of the Native American.

To examine the landscape in *The Last Drop of Water* and the positions within the frame that the settlers and the Native Americans take, we will look at two scenes in detail. The first scene starts with the appearance of the intertitle “INDIANS!!”: first there are only two men in Native American garments, captured in a medium shot, that are crouching and moving across the road in this manner before the caravan passes them. After the appearance of these two men, a number of Native Americans on horseback assault the wagons from the left. In the end they do capture one of the wagons and ride away with it. The way in which the Native Americans are captured against the background is very different from the way in which the settlers on the wagons are presented: the settlers are often viewed from the front, whereas the Native Americans only appear from a side view. This is very much in line with how the settlers and Native Americans have been shown before the attack. While the caravan is traveling by, for example, the faces of the settlers can be seen in detail, as they are facing the camera. When the two crouching Native Americans cross the road, they do so without ever looking into the camera. This is also true for the real assault upon the wagons: the Native Americans approach from the left, and there is even a moment where they face the camera directly, yet they curve to the right without enabling the viewer a good look at their faces. The positioning is evident as well, as the wagons remain the focus of the image, even when two wagons of the caravan are captured. After the capture, the Native Americans victoriously pass the camera, and might even glance into it, but never close enough to enable the audience to capture their faces. The result of this

fragment is therefore that the viewer looks at a faceless villain, lurking in the depths of the prairie, clearly identified as “Indians” by the intertitle.

The second scene that is of interest takes place after the two men have tried to gather water, and only one of them has returned. Help of the military is acquired, who then chase the Native Americans in a scene much clouded by a lot of dust and smoke. The only way to separate the Native Americans and the soldiers in this chase is by looking at their respective hats, as the scene is quite blurry because of the dust. In the end, a body ends up on the floor, without any movement left in it after being shot. The chase of the soldiers is deemed successful, when the intertitle “AT PEACE” appears on screen. The most telling moment of this scene, however, is the body that ends up on the floor. Earlier in the film, when one of the men tried to get water yet died in the desert, it was a close-up that showed the viewer his state of being. The body that ends up on the floor after being shot, on the other hand, is viewed from a distance: it resembles a rock that belongs to the landscape, not worthy of any further research or respect, as it is a body clad in Native American attire. This is emphasised further by the duration and rigidity of the shot: for an astounding 5 seconds, the body is shown from the exact same angle, while other people pass him by, keeping their distance as much as the camera does. Moreover, the placement of the body is important in this regard. The body of the Native American is located in the middle of the bottom thirds of the medium shot. We can see him clearly in a lower place and because of the rigidity of the shot and the people passing him by, it is as if he is deemed not to be important, but a lowly villain in the bottom part of the screen. From this measure of distance and placement in *The Last Drop of Water*, a certain position towards cultural difference can be argued.

What does the depiction of the Native American against the backdrop of the prairie say about the position of cultural difference as signified by *The Last Drop of Water*? The outlook of this film is clearly that of the settlers, through the eyes of a young woman and her two suitors. As they travel through the prairie they are assaulted by Native Americans: the possibility of this event occurring was

accounted for, as a previous intertitle stated that multiple caravans joined for the single reason of defence against the Native Americans. This presentation presupposes a situation in which the settlers accept the Native Americans as part of the prairie, yet not as human beings that need the same living conditions as the settlers themselves, but more like animals that inhabit the prairie. By not showing the face of any of the Native Americans, and predominantly making them approach from the left instead of the right, they are set aside as a simple obstacle for the wagons, and are dehumanised in the process. They are seen as the Other, not as individuals in their own right, and as a barrier that must be breached to reach more fertile lands. Several other films in this time period had the same spirit of reliving the frontier by claiming to have cultural supremacy over the other. This claim of supremacy has not yet been researched against the backdrop of the landscape for other films: how are different races pictured within the prairie, and whose home grounds do we guess it to be? In the decades following, however, the western as a cinematic genre developed further, which begs the question whether it also improved the cultural position of the Native American.

1.2.1. A Steady Flow of Money: The B Western

In 1927, with the arrival of the talkies, a new opportunity for entertainment was ready for use in cinema: synchronised sound. For every genre this was an opportunity to construct a narrative more easily. The western genre, however, had always been one with a reliance on the images themselves rather than on a complex narrative. What the advent of sound meant to the western genre, had the primary result of repetition: in this time period the experience of going to the cinema was at least a weekly one for American audiences. The cinema featured two films in one timeslot, an A film, running around 90 minutes or more, and a B film. The B film was meant to entertain the audience with mostly clichés and recognisable elements. This was the role that the western often came to fill. The western was popular, yet not as an A-level production: “Just forty-four A westerns were made in the 1930s of a total of more than a thousand feature-length westerns” (Nelson 335). Scholars like Frank Gruber have argued out that this gigantic volume of westerns can be divided into seven different types of plot

revolving around the journey, the ranch, the empire, the revenge, the cavalry, the outlaw and the marshal (qtd. in Lusted 24). These plots are different in the following ways: in the journey plot, of which *The Last Drop of Water* is a good example, travelling settlers are obstructed by Indians or by raiders in general; the ranch plot offers a juxtaposition of opposing parties as well, yet in this case of several ranchers; the empire plot alludes to the epic scale of the western, and usually includes a heroic travelling cowboy; in the plot of the revenged the wronged man is pitted against the truly guilty; the cavalry plot is a clash between the cavalry and Native Americans; in the outlaw plot outlaws are seen as the righteous party as they contend against lawmen; and in the marshal plot this understanding is reversed. These different plots were used on a grand scale by directors to keep the B western entertaining. Every Hollywood studio made these westerns, because they were sure to be a regular source of income (Lusted 96). As A westerns were made in smaller numbers than B westerns, it was a gamble to produce one for a Hollywood studio, and every time they did make one it had to be good. The advent of the talkies has thus caused repetition with the production of low budget films that were simple repetitions of other B westerns. As an example of a film that is linked to the period dominated by the B western, I have, almost paradoxically, chosen an A western. The reason for this is that my A western of the 1930s features all the specifics of a B western, yet with the ambition to feature it as a special historical account with important characters and a big budget instead of 'just a B western'. The film is called *The Plainsman* and is an important product of its time period, because "*The Plainsman* was the product of a number of trends shaping Hollywood moviemaking in the 1930s – trends that only intensified as the decade wore on" (Nelson 335).

1.2.2 The American Cavalry and Native American Friends

Cecil B. DeMille, who directed and produced a large number of films from 1914 up to 1958, such as the well-known *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and its remake of 1956), was successful enough to be able to direct the A western *The Plainsman* in 1936. In all his films, DeMille was known in particular for his preference for a good story over historical accuracy (Kozlovic 1). This is clear in *The Plainsman*

as well, as DeMille gathers four big names of the history of the frontier who were very unlikely to have crossed paths: Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Buffalo Bill Cody and General Custer. Some critics argue that *The Plainsman* is one of the best films of the 1930s, whereas others see it as a genuine disaster (Kozlovic 1). Regarding the relationship with Indians in the narrative, the general message that *The Plainsman* conveys is quite different from the one in *The Last Drop of Water*: the protagonist used to be friends with the Native American chief and there is a reason for the conflict that ensues. This is a big contrast with the sudden assault on the caravan in *The Last Drop of Water*. In a narrative sense at least, it seems that the position within the spectrum of cultural difference has improved. To enable a comparison between the narrative and the positioning of characters against the landscape, I will summarise the narrative of *The Plainsman* here.

The Plainsman is a story about Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill Cody. The narrative starts after the American Civil War, when manufacturers of repeating rifles decide to sell weapons to the Native Americans. Bill Hickok and Bill Cody meet each other, when the latter is travelling towards Hays City to manage a hotel with his wife. During the voyage Bill Hickok finds a guide who is wounded by Native Americans, who tells him that Native Americans are assaulting a nearby fort with repeating rifles. When Calamity Jane is kidnapped by the Native Americans, Hickok decides to meet Yellow Hand, his former friend and chief of the Cheyennes. Hickok and Calamity are tied and bound by Yellow Hand's men, after which Yellow Hand threatens to kill Hickok if Calamity does not give up the directions of the troop that is delivering bullets. Calamity gives up the directions in the end, which sours her relationship with Hickok. Afterwards Yellow Hand ambushes Cody and the cavalry, but they both survive up to the moment where General Custer arrives to save Cody and his men. After this event, Hickok decides to go after John Lattimer, the man responsible for the trade in repeating rifles with the Native Americans, yet he himself ends up being chased by Cody. When they meet and discover through the tale of a Native American that General Custer has died, the most important events of this film for this thesis have taken place.

Compared to *The Last Drop of Water*, a lot has changed with regards to the camerawork in *The Plainsman*. As technology progressed, it was easier to use a pan shot, or either zoom in or zoom out from a certain scene. These are techniques that are used multiple times in *The Plainsman* as well. The medium shot is frequently used indoors, with a pan shot for the general overview, whereas the long shot is used outdoors, especially during skirmishes on the battlefield. These different techniques enable the director to create more possibilities for conveying a message than in *The Last Drop of Water*, which will become clear in the following scenes.

The first scene that is of significance for my topic is Yellow Hand's ambush on Cody and his men. This scene takes place on the prairie and clearly shows a different treatment in terms of the perspective of the camera for the cavalry and Bill Cody on the one hand, and the Native American ambushers on the other. As Hickok and Calamity are released by Yellow Hand, Cody and his men approach the valley where the ambush will happen. The Native Americans gather after this release, ready to attack, and especially the background is interesting in this long shot: Native Americans stand side by side on all the hills in the vicinity, suggesting that the land that they stand on is theirs. When they start the ambush, the landscape turns into a sea of Native Americans and their horses. We also see Native Americans, captured in medium shot, hiding behind the cover of some branches and logs, but the camera hoovers above them in high-angle. The backs of their heads are shown, and the view in front of them is obscured. When the soldiers are in a similar position, however, it is a close-up of their faces that is shown, inviting a sense of familiarity in contrast to the distance that the camera is taking from the Native Americans. A few frames later we see another soldier in hiding, with again the camera being closer to him in comparison to the Native American behind the bushes in the next frame. From the first part of this scene can be deduced that, at first there is a certain respect for the Native Americans that have come to ambush Cody. Their position in the landscape show them as sovereign on the prairie, compared to Cody and his men that appear in the distance. When the confrontation starts, however, the proximity of the camera to the soldier, juxtaposed with that of the Native Americans, shows the preference for the soldiers within this narrative: the camera is closer to them as if to support them and

stay close to them, while the Native Americans are viewed from afar within the landscape of this ambush. Even though the Native Americans fight for maintaining their land, which should be a righteous cause, the soldiers in this scene are depicted in closer proximity to the viewer, as the camera stays with them. This helps the viewer to identify with them and thus almost automatically take their side in the conflict.

The other scene from *The Plainsman* is less complex than the previous one. When Cody has found Hickok to capture him on General Custer's orders, a Native American approaches who tells the story of General Custer's death, something which is shown in a flashback. General Custer stands on the prairie, as shown in a medium shot, sovereignly leaning against an American flag. He casually fires his revolver from time to time, as a cloud of dust and Native Americans is generated around him. After a few of these shots, he is shot himself, and collapses to the ground while still holding the American flag. The Native Americans in this scene are only shown as shadows in the background, without making clear who exactly shot General Custer. It is as if he is swallowed by the landscape while holding on to the American pride and courage. This scene shows another preference for the view of the military, and diminishes the role of the Native American in this conflict: the Native Americans are not even properly shown, or pictured as heroic when they are claiming a glorious victory. Only General Custer is shown as heroic and important in this shot, and the viewer has to adhere to this. In this scene about General Custer, he is elevated in status above the Native Americans in his presence in the picture, that shows a clear difference between the soldier and the Native American.

My analysis may suggest that this second film takes a similar attitude as *The Last Drop of Water* in which the Native Americans remain an anonymous mass of people. However, when looking at *The Plainsman* as a whole, it is clear that the position on cultural difference is not the same as in *The Last Drop of Water*. There now is actual speech among the Native Americans who speak a language that is different than English, and it is made clear why they are attacking the soldiers. Nevertheless, the camera stays in the proximity of the soldiers and distances itself from the Native Americans, so to

speak. It would have been possible to show the Native American from the same proximity as well, given the fact that they now have been given more of a face and a speaking part than in *The Last Drop of Water*. This has clearly been a choice to convey something to the audience, or at least not support a contrary opinion: that the Native American might very well be equal to the American in a cultural way. Nevertheless, it is evident that there is an improvement from *The Last Drop of Water* to *The Plainsman:* there are actual conversations between Native Americans and the American soldiers, and there are sometimes even close-ups of Native Americans, and yet, the camera still remains further from the Native American than the soldier.

There is a series of events and repercussions that could have influenced the position of the Native American in the US between 1910 and 1930. An example of one of these events happened in 1917 in Arizona. The sheriff of Cochise county decided to round up a group of men to deport them, using the question 'Are you an American, or are you not?' (Benton-Cohen 1). This action led to such a commotion that President Wilson had to get involved. This trend came down to the fact that the treatment of Mexicans, Slavic people and Native Americans in the United States was simply inhumane. Publicity was garnered for their causes as this happened more often than not, and it can be argued that this subsequently led to the realisation that other races should be treated in a humane fashion as well. At the end of the era of the B western this is something that has permeated the landscape of the Western film more and more.

Chapter 2: The Pinnacle of Popularity and Subsequent Protests

2.1.1. The Heyday of the Western

A second phase in the history of the western is the period of 1943-1967, which begins near the end of the second World War: "As soon as the war seemed virtually won and even before peace was definitely established, the western reappeared and was again made in large numbers" (Bazin 150). The pinnacle of the popularity of the genre actually spans from the late 1930s up until the 1960s, yet most of the films that nowadays are seen as masterpieces of the western were made after the war (Nelson 331). From being a regular B film production genre, the western turned into a "staple A film production from the 1950s on" (Lusted 11). This period in time was an interesting one: a war had just been concluded and many countries in the world were (being) decolonised, in part with the help of the United States. These developments created an interest in cultural differences, leading to a change in the western: it was no longer enough to repeat the popularised elements of the B western, indeed, additions to the genre had to be made to keep the western as interesting as possible. Bazin calls this altered form of the western the 'superwestern' and describes it as follows: "The superwestern is a western that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence – an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic interest, in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it" (Bazin 150-151).

Adding other features to the genre resulted in the creation of great westerns like *High Noon* (1952), *Shane* (1953), and *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). These films tend to (meta-reflectively) explore the western genre, while still staying true to its frontier roots. It is this type of western that most audiences in present day America think of when they conjure up an image of a western, as the appearance of the B western is not attractive anymore due to its age and the different state of technology that it was captured with. Another type of film that was different from the classic American superwestern, yet captures the imagination of many audiences as well, emerged in the later years of the period 1943-1967: the spaghetti western. The development of the spaghetti western was

instigated by Sergio Leone, an Italian filmmaker, who has made a number of very popular films, leading to the establishment of the spaghetti western as a subgenre. Even though these films are, most of the time, made with the American tradition in mind, I will not discuss them in this thesis, as the view of an Italian director might have influenced the perspective on American cultural difference too much. Instead, we will look at *The Searchers* (1956), directed by John Ford.

2.1.2. The Controversy of the Frontier

John Ford is a director with an extensive career. He was the very first recipient of the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award, having made his fame with mainly westerns, including *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), but also films like *The Quiet Man* (1952). There is not a distinguishable line or trademark in all his work, which can be said to have derived from, for example, a certain faith or conviction, except from the fact that his body of work was, for the most part, decidedly American. It is this feature that surfaces in *The Searchers* as well.

In the first few years after its release, critics were not very enthusiastic about *The Searchers*, yet gradually the film came to be lauded as one of the best American films ever made (Day 133). *The Searchers* is a very complex epic western film as it deals with issues such as racial hatred, but also incorporates epic and comic elements. This has led critics and scholars to suggest very diverse things about certain aspects of the film, such as its narrative framework and the relation to the classical epic, and books have been devoted to the film as well, most of it in praise, to this story about a former American soldier and his family situation that is torn apart by a Comanche chief and his men. I will introduce some of these views in the following paragraphs, yet for the purpose of my thesis I will focus on the landscape and the characters moving in front of it.

The opening scene of *The Searchers* tells us that we are in Texas, in 1868. A woman is standing in a doorway, after which her family receives Ethan Edwards, who is just arriving at the farm, his brother's place. After their reunion, Reverend Clayton comes to gather men for chasing a group of Comanche that have killed some cattle. Ethan and his adopted nephew, Martin Pawley, join these men

to give chase. In the end, this Comanche action turns out to be a diversion, as it enables the Comanche chief Scar and his men to attack the undefended farm. Everyone at the farm is killed, with the exception of Debbie and Lucy, Ethan's nieces, who are kidnapped. Consequently, Ethan and Martin decide to chase the Comanche together with Clayton. After some time of searching, Clayton and his men return, while Ethan, Martin, and Lucy's lover continue their search. Ethan finds out that Lucy is murdered, after which her lover storms off to his own death. Ethan and Martin return to the Jorgensen farm, the neighbours of Ethan's dead brother for a short time, after which they continue their search. After many years, as partly described in a letter that has been sent to the Jorgensens, they return, having found Debbie in the meantime, though not having been able to take her back, as she has changed, according to Ethan. After their return, the current camping place of the Comanche is discovered and ambushed by Ethan, Martin and Clayton and his men. In this process, Martin first infiltrates the camp to save Debbie, yet ends up shooting Scar. The remainder of the men, including Ethan and Clayton, follow, and when Ethan finds a dead Scar, he decides to scalp him. In the end, they return to the Jorgensen farm with Debbie, and Ethan leaves the farm to live on the prairie once more.

In this narrative, there are two other things in particular that we should take note of. First of all, Ethan really hates Native Americans without any clear reason, even to the extent that he wants to kill Debbie after her years spent with a Comanche tribe. And, secondly, there is more information than in the previous films about why the Native Americans, or in this case the Comanche Chief Scar, are attacking the settlers. Because of these two narrative pieces of evidence, it can be argued that *The Searchers* shows a particular perspective on the history of the United States, namely that "the territorial U.S. rested on a virulent racism and genocidal war against aboriginal peoples, a war that would not have been possible and perhaps would not have been won without the hatred of characters like the John Wayne character" (Pippin 227). There undoubtedly have been many men and women in history with the same attitude as Ethan, and by making this explicit, John Ford thus places a mirror in front of the American people. However, does this also have an effect on the mise-en-scene of the film? It might be expected that Ford either positions the army and settlers in the landscape in such a way

that it seems to be their home, or that this is done for the Native Americans instead. By looking at several scenes, we will examine how this plays out in the case of *The Searchers*.

A first thing to say about the camerawork in *The Searchers* is that it is intricately done and has deserved praise from several critics and directors. Long shots are frequently used at the start of the narrative to show the magnitude of the landscape and the small figures of humankind against this backdrop. Intricate close-up shots give depth to the characters that appear in these shots and the pan shot is frequently used from a distance to show the prairie to the audience. The diversity of camerawork in the film is obvious, which assures us that the following scenes do not have to be particularly different from other shots in the film.

The first of these scenes, then, takes place after Ethan, Martin, Clayton, and Clayton's men have lost their way and are finally back on the prairie. When we see the band of men for a few seconds travelling there in a medium to long shot, Scar appears on a hill in the distance. The scene changes to a medium shot of Scar, as he signals to his men to be ready. In a matter of mere seconds, the band of men is surrounded by Scar's men, as they are standing on nearby hills. Scar's men may remain nameless, yet there are several close-ups taken of his men, against the backdrop of the American prairie. They are first viewed from a low angle, whereas Clayton's band of men is filmed either on a horizontal level, or even from a high angle. It is as if respect is paid to Scar and his men while they are surrounding Clayton's group. As a response to this, Clayton orders everyone to make a run for it towards the river to swiftly cross it. After crossing the river, they take care of their wounded and prepare themselves for firing back at the enemy. Directly after this we see the Comanche in close-up chanting the death song, as identified by Ethan. On the other side of the river we see another close-up: Martin Pawley and Mose, the local lunatic, are hiding in the bushes. The contrast between both sides is thus a large one. On one side of the river, people are hiding in the bushes, while on the other side, the Comanche are portrayed as heroic men. In this scene happens something that we have not seen in previous examples: Native Americans are, arguably, given more respect in regards of angles

and close-ups than the band of men that is pursuing them to rescue Debbie and Lucy. This could be attributed to the fact that they are acting stupidly by following Clayton into unknown territory, or that they are simply encroaching on another man's land, and should not have done this. The scene in which Ethan and Martin have their first official meeting with Comanche chief Scar will perhaps illuminate this observation.

Ethan and Martin have found a Comanchero, a trader that deals with the Comanche, who knows the location of Scar, and leads them to him. Upon arrival, the whole tribe seems to stand in attendance outside the camp, to welcome the traders. Ethan and Martin arrive before Scar's tent, and when he steps out of the entrance, we see close-ups of both Ethan and Scar: Ethan is standing before a very high rock, whereas Scar's own tent forms his background. This confrontation could show that Ethan is out of his element here, although this could also signify his power and perseverance. When we see Martin, this rock pillar is clearly next to his head, arguably because he is less a part of the problem, and not of direct white American descent. Ethan steps right up to Scar after this, for a stare off. The horn of an animal skull seems to pierce Scar's head in the meantime. Especially because of the angles that are used in the welcome for the traders, it can be said that the respect that is given to the Comanche still lasts. The sign language of the horn that pierces Scar's head, however, can be argued to signify a bad end for Scar if he continues in the same fashion.

The third important scene succeeds the previous one quite rapidly. During their meeting with Scar in his tent they see Debbie, who now is one of Scar's wives. Scar orders her to show Ethan and Martin his collection of scalps and in that moment, they recognise her. After this meeting, Ethan and Martin decide to make camp on the other side of the river, to allegedly talk more with Scar on the following day. A few moments later, when Martin and Ethan are shown in medium shot with a sand dune in the background, Debbie appears in the background of the shot to warn them. During their meeting she acknowledges that she has recognised them, and Ethan wants to shoot her, as she has 'turned Indian'. Then, an arrow hits Ethan from afar, and Martin returns the shot with his gun. A chase

ensues, where we do not have any close-ups of the Comanche that are following them, as opposed to the earlier scenes. Ethan and Martin flee to a big rock where they can take cover, and several Comanche are shot down from afar, without allowing the viewer to see who has died. The exception to this is a short close-up of Scar, when he orders his men to attack Ethan and Martin as they are holed up in the crevice, shown either from up close or in a medium shot, and when he is shot down from his horse. His men do not get close-ups anymore. This can be argued to be a conscious siding with Ethan and Martin instead of paying respect to the Comanche: the Comanche are chasing two men who have not actually done anything bad for the time being, and perhaps this should cause the audience to lose faith in them, as shown by the short view of Scar's astonished face in one close-up. These scenes in *The Searchers* therefore show a different view of cultural difference than the previous films.

As an interpretation of the general message of *The Searchers* has shown us, the film itself is conscious of the history of the United States: settlers conquered land that used to belong to Native Americans. The narrative of the film shows us that Ethan and Martin are victorious against the Comanche chief Scar in the end, and the Comanche tribesmen are a clear enemy of the protagonists as well, yet from a cinematographical point of view, they are respectfully depicted: the camera does not keep its distance, especially in the first part of the film, and the Native Americans are even shown in close-ups. In the later scenes, however, we see fewer close-ups of the Comanche, perhaps because we have gotten acquainted with them as enemies, or to show that the white man remains in power to this day. The ambiguity in *The Searchers*, as is also shown in the juxtaposition of Ethan and Scar in a cultural sense, comes down to two possible interpretations: through the way the film is constructed an American audience can see either what wrong they have done to the original inhabitants of their country, or it may make them proud of their American heritage. A final thought on Ethan as a white soldier in the prairie, has to do with his positioning against the background of the prairie. At first, he is shown as a small figure travelling amongst the gigantic rocks, but in the end he surveys the Native American camp from a high rock, standing above the rocky hills of the prairie (Ryan & Lenos 102). This can almost be seen as an attempt to triumph over the aspect of nature that loomed over him at first.

Nevertheless, what *The Searchers* in 1956 shows us, is that the Other gets an almost equal place in film as the white settler. The audience gets to know the faces of the enemy, instead of simply seeing them die their deaths. As in the narrative Ethan and Martin emerge victoriously, so does the camera show this in the last part of the film, by keeping its distance from all the Comanche except for Scar. This observation is what leads us to the next period of time, when fierce battles were fought elsewhere on the globe, and parts of the population were protesting against violence.

2.2.1 Protest against the war, a decline in historical violence

Between 1960 and 2000, numerous historical events changed American society. Important events that had an impact on the western genre specifically include the continuation of the Cold War, the Vietnam war, and the rise of postcolonialism. During the early 1960s, up to his assassination, John F. Kennedy was president of the United States. During his presidency he focused on foreign relations because of the ongoing Cold War and Vietnam War: "Kennedy's foreign policy called for a counteroffensive against Communism on the 'frontiers' of the Third World: the new Frontier's frontier; the stage for the expansion of American influence and power" (Slotkin 490). This quote resembles the feeling of the frontier as it was in the nineteenth century, it calls for the expansion of American power. This was possible at the time because of the continuing conflicts in Vietnam where violence raged on. A way for the American citizen, but also the returning soldier, to deal with the conflict in Vietnam was through the Western: "Tropes and symbols derived from Western movies had become one of the more interpretive grids through which Americans tried to understand and control their unprecedented and dismaying experiences in Vietnam" (Slotkin 547). In the creation of these westerns, predominantly of the cavalry type, as mentioned above, forts played an important role. In these forts, American soldiers would be holed up, while they were being attacked by Native Americans (Slotkin 547). Another product of the violence in Vietnam were the protests in America. The overseas violence was condemned and a fight not only for peace, but also for equality was prevalent in the US. In this fight for equality, many parallels can be drawn to postcolonialism, as explained in the introduction. An interesting connection

is exclaimed by a Native American regarding the violence in Vietnam, tying in with the American history that centres their forefathers: "'history repeats itself and this is not the first time that American soldiers have murdered women and children . . . how about Wounded Knee'" (Slotkin 589). Tensions within America like the former, gave rise to the popularity of a different type of western movie, the revisionist western.

It is normal for a western to celebrate the west, yet the revisionist western is constructed in a different way: it finds more to condemn than to celebrate (Lusted 233). This type of western re-imagines the west to fit in the time of protest and changes the cast of characters (Lusted 238). The Native American often gets a more important role and the position of the American soldier is often deprecated. An important revisionist western is *Little Big Man* (1970), in which a man recounts the story of his life as he was born in a family of settlers yet later adopted by Native Americans. It heavily critiques the American soldier and shows sympathy for the position of the Native American. Another example is *A Man called Horse* (1970), in which an American man wants to rediscover himself, and ends up being caught by Sioux, who turn him into a Native American warrior in the end. The film that I have selected for this time period is also a revisionist western that shows contact with the Sioux. It was made two decade later, yet still embodies the spirit of the revisionist western and the time period: *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

2.2.2 The Native American Way

Dances with Wolves is based on the book with the same title written by Michael Blake in 1988. It is the story of a civil war veteran who is decorated, and decides to pick a next post where he can see the frontier. *Dances with Wolves* is the directorial debut of Kevin Costner and was an ambitious project at the time. It included extensive practice of a Native American language for all the actors and amazing shots of the landscape. After *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves* is a true revisionist western, showing American history from the other side. Critics have marked the film as a starting point for a slight rise in popularity of the western, as it was the big Academy Award winner in 1990. Critics at the time have

described the film as unsettling, for example, as it changes the perspective one might have of the Frontier (Bowden 391). There is thus much to be expected from *Dances with Wolves* with regards to the landscape and the people that populate it.

The film starts during the civil war: Lieutenant John Dunbar is wounded, yet an heroic action of his decides the turn of a battle. He is decorated because of this and decides he wants to see the frontier. Everyone declares him to be mad, but he heads there anyway. He arrives at a fort that has been abandoned by the previous troops and starts fixing the place as well as he can, until he meets a nearby tribe of Lakota Sioux. After a few meetings he befriends them and learns the language from an American woman that has lived with the Lakota Sioux for a long time, Stands with a fist. He observes the ways of the Sioux and is accepted as one of them, finally marrying Stands with a fist. When the Sioux move their tents to their winter camp, Dunbar remembers that he has left his notebook at the fort, yet when he goes off to recover it, he discovers that it is inhabited by soldiers once more, leading to his capture. The soldiers do not believe his stories and transport him. During this transport he is rescued by his friends, the Lakota Sioux. In the end, he arrives at the winter camp, yet he leaves the camp behind with Stands with a fist, for he is a man hated by an army that will not stop chasing him.

The general way in which *Dances with Wolves* is structured in a cinematographical fashion, highlights the environment that it is shot in: beautiful long shots of the landscape appear quite often to paint a picture of where John Dunbar is at that moment. The most famous scene that embodies this aspect is the scene of the buffalo hunt in which the massive creatures run around the great plains. There are of course also medium shots to capture the first attempts of conversation between John Dunbar and the Lakota Sioux and close-ups in emotional moments, but the long shots in *Dances with Wolves* that magnify the landscape and the impact of ‘the white man’ draw the most attention.

In John Dunbar’s story, then, it is near his fort that he meets the Lakota Sioux for the first time. Some youngsters from the tribe decide to steal his horse, Cisco, while John is asleep, yet the animal is able to break free and swiftly returns. The next day, men from the Lakota Sioux tribe come to

investigate the fort and they steal Cisco in the process, while John is shaving his beard near the river. When he returns he only sees them ride off with Cisco. One of the Sioux, Wind in his hair, sees John, and shouts his own name out in his Lakota language while he is shown in a medium shot. After this, he rushes up to John, up to a close-up, to tell him that Wind in his hair is not afraid. He rushes off again without any harm being done. Cisco breaks free from his captors again and John decides it is time to meet the Sioux at their camp. There are some specific angles and pictures to be observed in this scene. This starts with Cisco's capture by the adult Sioux: they gallop away, as pictured in a long shot, without any sign of violence or haste. The landscape and peaceful clouds are idyllically portrayed behind them, as if they are just strolling around. In the next few moments, Wind in his hair stares at John. In the first shot we see the Native American, the focus is on the clouds behind him. In the shot after this, we can clearly gaze upon his face. This exchange of nature and human being, can arguably be seen as a sign of Wind in his hair belonging in that space and time. When we see a close-up shot of John, there is an American flag fluttering behind him: I would like to interpret that as a sign that he is still attached to the American ways. He is not portrayed in a bad way as a protagonist, as these shots only seem to show that he still has no knowledge of how the world could work, that he is not on the right path as his later friend, Sioux shaman Kicking bird, will tell him.

In the next telling scene, John has been accepted into the tribe and already knows a fair bit of the language of the Lakota Sioux. This scene is the first in our observation where there is just one American man on the scene in the midst of two parties of Native Americans. There is a war ongoing with a neighbouring Pawnee tribe because of the wish for more food supplies, and while the Sioux warriors have gone to meet them in the field, the Pawnee aim an attack on the camp of the Lakota Sioux. John has collected rifles from his fort to reinforce the Sioux with, and as they know the attack is coming, they lay an ambush for them within the camp. The Pawnee silently creep into the camp, and are then ambushed by the Sioux. The Sioux have a clear advantage because of the firearms, and in the end there is only one Pawnee warrior left who dies an honourable death in the middle of a Sioux circle. From the very start of the Pawnee attack there are some noteworthy shots. Upon their arrival, we see,

in a close-up shot, that a village dog has already been killed. We do not see who has shot the dog, we only see a pair of legs and a hand that is removing the arrows. As they encroach upon the village, we see a stream of Pawnee men, and even a close-up shot of some of them. They blend in with the environment and are even shown as being a part of nature, blending in with the colours. As the violence ensues, there is no clear side that has been chosen for the audience: both parties are shown in close-ups from time to time, without any clear preference for either of them; there is a balance between them without any clear decision for the audience. The picture that breaks up the scenes of dying men, is that of a shooting gun. It is the guns that lead to the demise of this particular band of Pawnee, as the last one, that we have seen the most in close-ups in the meantime, ends up on his own. When we look at his last living moments, he dies heroically in a circle of Lakota Sioux. It is a medium shot in which we do not see anger or discontent, but a discharge of emotions. Through these observations, it could be said that despite being enemies, both parties are shown as equals within the scope of the landscape: the prairie is the land of both of them and this is only a squabble for food, not for power or land. The balance is gone if the American army joins the fray, as we will see in the next scene.

In the moment that John remembers that his notebook containing the location of the Lakota Sioux is still in the fort, he decides to return there. In the meantime, the Lakota Sioux are already moving on to their winter camp without John. As John arrives at the fort and discovers that there are soldiers there once more, he gets discovered by them rather quickly. They see him as a Native American and shoot Cisco and him on sight. When they transport him to the fort, we see it in a state of disarray, as opposed to the tranquillity it exuded in the time John inhabited it. The very next shot after this is a long shot that shows the audience the magnificent plains and the Lakota Sioux that are moving through it, when they decide to go back for John as it is taking him too long. This juxtaposition of the military fort and the tranquillity of the Sioux in the landscape tells us which party to side with, and particularly who the land should really belong to. This is emphasised in the scene where John is being transported by the army and rescued by the Lakota Sioux. The soldiers are joking amongst

themselves and poking fun at John, when suddenly an arrow kills one of them. The battle is very one-sided as the soldiers are killed without mercy. One of them survives longer than the rest and attempts to kill Smiles a lot, yet ends up being killed by him instead. All their deaths are not really remembered by either John, the Sioux, or the audience. The main example of this is the last man who dies when he is struck by Smiles a lot: he dies in agony while he is in a land that he clearly does not belong to. His mouth is agape while he dies: the amazement at having being killed in this situation can be read from his face in a close-up. These scenes show us the change that has happened within John, changing him from a soldier with an open mind, to a Lakota Sioux that respects nature.

Throughout *Dances with Wolves* we see the views of John Dunbar change. At first he is portrayed as an American soldier who has to get used to the frontier, but is still portrayed under his flag. When he appears on the battlefield between Pawnee and Sioux, he can be counted as one of the Lakota Sioux, and in the later scenes we see that his place in nature is accepted more than that of the soldiers in the army. *Dances with Wolves* is a straightforward revisionist western in this regard, not only in terms of its narrative, but also in the way the landscapes and the characters in front of it are depicted. It was designed to make the audience think of their role in American history and that they might not have been in the right after all. Perhaps this should be the sort of film in the genre of the Western to strive for, where mistakes are accounted for and which can show an audience a different perspective. After a film like this, made in a time of postcolonialism and perhaps an increasing acceptance of cultural difference, one might expect that this would continue to be the case; however, the following time period that starts after 2001, will prove to be more complicated.

Chapter 3: An Assault on the American Identity and a New Position for the Western

3.1.1. The Effect of an Attack on American Soil

With an attack on the Twin Towers on September 11th 2001, the mindset of the American nation was also assaulted. It was the first attack by a foreign force in years on American soil and the President at the time, George W. Bush, responded in dire terms, seeing the assault as directed at freedom itself. John White describes the speech as given by Bush on the evening itself as "a series of words put together in a certain way so as to be impregnated with a culturally known (and now activated) ideological conception of America and with the perceived relationship of that country to the rest of the world" (2). Indeed, it was a speech evoking the spirit and self-representation of America as the home of the brave and a bastion of freedom. This feeling became apparent in American movies as well, to consolidate a feeling of unity in the United States. The notion of inclusivity and thought given to other nations and peoples, waned as a result. Given the traditional embodiment of the American spirit in the western, there was a slight rise in the production of films post-9/11 within the western genre. Films like *Open Range* (2003) and *True Grit* (2010) reinstated the powerful cowboy in the picture, replacing the seemingly sensitive character such as that of Lieutenant John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* (1993).

In the previous chapters, we noted that the cultural bias towards the Native American and its one-sided depiction in the western was decreasing. The event of 9/11 is something that may be said to have changed this, as hatred of the Islam was starting to manifest itself because of it. The main response of the American government was to emphasise the need to protect their own country and the American culture. Many other cultures were neglected because of this, creating a large contrast with the former American aid in times of decolonisation. Even though the Native American had been accepted in the country for many years already, the tendency to focus on the American culture only might influence the view of a director on American history. The result of this is both a return to the classic western, as well as a renewal of some revisionist elements. Remakes of films like *3:10 to Yuma*

(2007) were made to reinvigorate the feeling of the superwestern, while a film like *Bandidas* (2006) features women as the protagonists in a comical western setting. There are thus some changes in the content in the western, yet these changes are not of a reflective nature in terms of cultural difference. The cultural heritage of the United States from the perspective of the white settler is what seems to be the most important in this period. An exemplary film then, of this peculiar period between 2001 and 2013 is *The Lone Ranger* (2013), directed by Gore Verbinski.

3.1.2. The Tale of a Tainted Comanche and a Masked Lawman

Important to note about *The Lone Ranger* (2013) is its history. The film features the same characters as the TV series *The Lone Ranger* that first aired in 1949, that is, a masked lawman and Tonto, his Native American sidekick. These seem to be the only main elements copied from the series, as the remainder of the set-up consists of a Disney-like setting, created by Gore Verbinski. At this point Verbinski had acquired major fame by directing the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series and the plan might have been to create another box office success by revamping *The Lone Ranger*. However, this movie did not garner as much attention as the former series of pirate movies with Johnny Depp, which resulted in a bit of a box office flop for this 2013 production. *The Lone Ranger* has clear parallels with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series in terms of action and special effects, but the content seems more simplistic than *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

The critique on *The Lone Ranger* is divided, as some see it as “lightweight spoof” and others as “a more serious satire” (White 73). John White in *The Contemporary Western: An American Genre Post-9/11* stresses the escapist function of *The Lone Ranger*. He describes the prairie in the film as a world of possibilities, where there are no apparent rules (White 75). It is like going on a rollercoaster ride in a Disney film, where behind every turn a surprise might lurk. These surprises are made possible through the multiple aspects that the lone ranger and Tonto represent. It is a narrative of the glorious old West, re-imagined through a narrative that is told in San Francisco by an old Native American.

The story of *The Lone Ranger* starts on a fair with a Wild West Show. A young boy enters a tent and sees an aged Tonto, who tells him his story. It centres on John Reid, a lawman, who ends up chasing Butch Cavendish together with Tonto. This narrative crosses the endeavours of Latham Cole while he is expanding the railroad routes in America and colluding with his brother Butch Cavendish in the meantime. Through a series of events we see Tonto's past and his relation to Butch Cavendish, the death of John Reid's brother, and Cole's continuing lust for power. In the end, Tonto and John vanquish the evil that is Butch and Cole, but the railroad remains.

Tonto and John triumph over the evil forces in the end, yet how are Tonto and his tribesmen depicted in the process? The very first time we see Tonto in his 'natural habitat' is in the Wild West tent in 1933. He is described as 'The Noble Savage' by the same plaque that marks the prairie-like painted panel as his natural habitat while he is being approached by a young man who is dressed like a cowboy with a black mask. Noble is not what we might call Tonto as we see him standing in front of his tent, wrinkled up and seemingly lifeless. He is just standing still amidst the mountains of the prairie that loom over him, but he is not really a part of the prairie. We see a close-up shot of him for a few seconds as the boy approaches him and he simply seems out of place. This might have to do with his disconnected relationship with the prairie: he left his tribe to hunt for Butch and Cole who were infected by greed because of the silver they found. It is as if Tonto is a caricature of a Comanche Native American because he acts out of place in what should be his own habitat. Later scenes in this background have him acting strangely as well, moving erratically along the screen, caught up in the story he is telling.

The camerawork in *The Lone Ranger*, as can be gleaned from Tonto's erratic movements, is as can be expected from a Disney production with a high degree of action: fast-paced, exciting, and not overly artistic. The eyes of the viewer are easily caught by a diversity of shots and angles that follow each other in rapid succession. There are thus not any shots or angles that draw specific attention to

them, as anything might happen from a cinematographical point of view. This also goes for the first scene in our observation, that centres the magnificent American landscape.

The first scene we see of the tale he is recounting takes place after asking the young cowboy with the black mask if he happens to be his old friend John Reid. We see Tonto standing on the edge of a cliff in a long shot from the side, while John approaches the cliff and is featured in the same shot. As he approaches Tonto, the camera shows both of them in a medium shot from the front. Even though the shot was first focused on one side, it switches to the other side so that John is featured in the foreground of the shot, against the majestic backdrop of the mountains. It is the introduction of the two protagonists of this tale yet John Reid, as the future Lone Ranger, is featured in the forefront of the picture. This is something to keep in mind for the remainder of the analysis: Tonto will almost appear solely as a sidekick to John Reid, as a Robin to a Batman. This can be seen in the placement of both characters in front of the camera as John will almost exclusively hold the forefront when both of them appear in a scene. These fragments show us that there is apparently no lasting interest for the position of Tonto as a Comanche Native American, displaced in his own landscape, and more for that of the heroic Lone Ranger. How will this hold up when Tonto and John are captives of the Comanche in his story?

The first thing to say about the capture of Tonto and John is the simple fact that they are captured, which is strange as Tonto once belonged to the Comanche. The moment that John is shot with an arrow comes out of nowhere. We see no enemy at all as they are hidden from sight. After a short intermezzo, it appears that Tonto and John have been caught. John gets to talk with the Comanche in a tent, but never do we get an introduction or an actual close-up of the Comanche, as happens frequently with John Reid within the tent. The man that appears to be the Chief of the tribe then tells him Tonto's story: how he saved two white men when he was a young boy, only for them to betray his trust by slaughtering his tribe, even after he led them to a source of silver. The tents are burning in a shot with both Tonto and the landscape around it, perhaps showing Tonto's

misplacedness. The start of Tonto's story is thus the origin story of Butch and Cole as well, and might be the only reason that we see the destruction of the tents and the capture of John and Tonto. All the reasons for the conflict between the Comanche and the 'white men' they are going to war with converge in this meeting, and the appearance of the Comanche and Tonto are put to the side to capture the start of the bad guys, Butch and Cole and their products of destruction. As important as the Comanche might seem within the conflict in *The Lone Ranger*, and of course Tonto as one of the protagonists of the film, their placement almost only seems to serve as leads for the conflict between John Reid and Butch and Cole. The role of Cole in building the railroad through the prairie will only emphasise this.

To enable us to have a closer look at the divide between the Native Americans and the narrative of Butch, Cole and John, I have selected a scene of Cole holding a speech for news reporters near a bridge for the railroad. This scene happens directly after we see John being shot by a Comanche arrow, as we see workers labouring on the railroad and Cole standing on a raised platform. The interesting thing to note here, is the background of the medium shot where he is holding his speech: it is the rocky landscape that he is going to conquer by placing his railroad tracks there. In this moment in time, we are not informed of Cole's collaboration with Butch yet, but if we look at his position, we can be quite sure that he is not a 'good guy'. He is standing above the mountains of the prairie in both his close-up shots and the medium shots during the speech, literally towering over them. It is a powerful pose and it complements the fact that he is scheming to cause war with the Comanche to expand the railroad tracks. Butch and his men have also disguised themselves as Comanche to incite this conflict by attacking settlements. The narrative thus centres around the two evil brothers on the one hand, and John and Tonto on the other. As such, everything else is not deemed of importance against the landscape. The cultural difference in this scene is thus of a great magnitude, as Cole simply tramples over the prairie, when towering over the mountains. It feels as if no attention has gone to any other aspect than the image of building a great American nation and the conflicts that took place in these times.

The general message that is conveyed by the use of landscape in *The Lone Ranger*, seems like one of American supremacy and trust in the American hero. The mastermind behind the problem in the film is Cole, the one to solve it is John Reid, with a bit of help from Tonto: Cole has instructed his brother Butch on everything he should do, and Tonto only appears in the background during all the actions he carries out with John. It is strange how this relationship is constructed and presented in *The Lone Ranger* while the conflict is all about the Comanche territory. Why does there seem to be a lack of respect towards the Comanche and Tonto as well, and why are they almost only shown as caricatures and minor characters? I would like to argue that the reason for this is that *The Lone Ranger* is a product of its time. After the attack on the Twin Towers, the leaders of the United States have increasingly paid attention to their own values, instead of looking at the population as a whole. My view in this, is opposite to that of some scholars writing about *The Lone Ranger*. Several scholars have identified Tonto as being a trickster, "an archetype of Native American cultures" (Corrigan 395). They argue that it is through his intelligence and trickery that their mission succeeds. While looking at it from a purely narrative perspective, I could well agree with this, yet, from the message conveyed by the camerawork and placement of the characters in front of the camera I will still argue against this point. My view of *The Lone Ranger* as magnifying the role of the white American, then, has led to a difference in position as opposed to the decades after the Vietnam War. Whether these sentiments have changed after 2013, is something we will see in the final time period.

3.2.1. The Rise of New Civil Movements

The reason why 2013 is the year to begin the last and most recent time period of Westerns is the emergence of new civil movements like Black Lives Matter and MeToo. These movements have given value to populations that feel left behind in whichever way. Because of this general sentiment, revisionist western films have become more prominent as well, just like in the period up to the attack on the Twin Towers. Another factor in the change in attitude to cultural difference, might have to do with the election of Barack Obama as the first Afro-American President of the United States. The

effects of the presidency of Barack Obama are sometimes tangible in western films between 2013 and 2020, as they appear to be more inclusive than films between 2001 and 2013. This is something that we can see in the film that I have chosen for this time period as well, while it still remains a powerful outing of the western genre.

What most of the modern Western films have in common is that they have a specific goal: to make a statement. The amount of Western films being released has decreased over the years, but there is a gigantic accumulation of Western films in general over the years. Thus, when a director wants to add something to this collection, they have to make something that is special, because the time of the B western has passed. Examples of these changes to the western are: establishing a new perspective of gender like in *Jane got a Gun* (2015) or taking a comical turn like *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014). It is not a genre that generates a steady income for studios anymore, but is still a versatile genre that can be used in multiple ways. In *Hostiles* (2017), the film I have selected for this time period, we will see another revisionist approach to the Western, comparable to *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

3.2.2. Enemies behind the same starting line

Hostiles was directed by Scott Cooper, a director known for films with an American theme. From *Crazy Heart* (2009) and *Out of the Furnace* (2013) to *Black Mass* (2015), all his films have featured big names in the Hollywood acting circle. This is a trend that will play a role in *Hostiles* as well. The film itself has received average critiques from film critics and audiences in the cinema. The preparation for this film seems similar to *Dances With Wolves*, as multiple actors speak languages that they clearly have not spoken to an acceptable degree before shooting the film: an important feature of a film that so heavily leans on an attempt to heal the broken connections between the American settler and the Native American tribesman.

Hostiles starts with a Comanche raid on a farm, turning Rosalee Quaid into a widow right away. In the meantime, Captain Joe Blocker receives the order to deliver Cheyenne Chief Yellow Hawk to

his home grounds to die a peaceful death. This man has been his enemy for a long time, which is clear in their attitudes towards each other, especially the way in which Joe treats Yellow Hawk. As they leave for the home grounds of Yellow Hawk in Montana, they meet Rosalee Quaid on the way. During their journey, they try to leave Rosalee in a military town, but she chooses to continue travelling with the group as they get another burden to take with them: a soldier that is to be tried before the law. While getting closer to Montana, they lose more men over time, and when they finally end up in the sacred Cheyenne territory, very few soldiers are left. They get into a conflict with a landowner and his sons, leaving only Joe, Rosalee, and the grandson of Yellow Hawk alive. The final scene shows Rosalee and Yellow Hawk's grandson leaving by train, and Joe joining them in the end.

In terms of camerawork, *Hostiles* is reminiscent of *Dances with Wolves*. It is not as fast-paced as *The Lone Ranger* in terms of changes in angles and shots, and there is a clear focus on use of long shots for the landscape and medium shots for the interaction between Joe, his men, and Yellow Hawk's family. As we have seen in previous films, whether a person that is shot down deserves a close-up shot, is something that determines their position as well. This can thus be seen once more in *Hostiles*.

Hostiles is a film that features different Native American tribes. The Native Americans that are raiding and seen as dangerous in this narrative are the Comanche, the Cheyenne are the ones being escorted, and the Apache are rounded up in the first ten minutes of the film by Joe and his men. The very first scene of *Hostiles* is quite homely: Rosalee Quaid is teaching her daughters and her husband Jacob is doing work around the house, up until the moment that the Comanche raid arrives. The focus is of course on the family that is being raided, and as the Comanche approach, there are no close-ups of the riders on horseback. We only see them approaching from a distance, first in a long shot, subsequently in a medium shot from the side, interchanged with an over-shoulder shot of Jacob, who is shooting at them. Only when Jacob is shot and one of the Comanche towers over him to collect a scalp, the face of the Comanche who does so is shown with a low angle shot. Rosalee

then manages to escape into the woods, with the Comanche following her. As the Comanche track her, we see the first real close-up shot of the same Comanche warrior that killed Jacob: menacing eyes that are set in a face covered in war paint. Rosalee manages to escape in the end, and it will only be later on in the film that we will see traces of these Comanche. There are a few things that can be said about the events as caused by the Comanche. They are not the most prominent villains in the film, but are more like a vehicle to make Rosalee a widow. They are portrayed from a distance, without the camera ever getting close to them, except for the target of Rosalee's hatred: the man who killed her husband. It is, in this scene, still too early to say that they are not respected in terms of portrayal in the movie, yet it can be concluded already that they will not end up to be important characters from how they are depicted on screen. They are thus shown on screen as much as could be expected.

The next scene makes the difference between the Comanche warriors and the Cheyenne tribesmen particularly clear, as during the next encounter with the Comanche, the Cheyenne are present for comparison: we can clearly see if the camera shots and angles are different around the Comanche or the Cheyenne. During their travels through the land, Joe and his group notice that they are being followed by the Comanche that assaulted the Quaids. All of a sudden, a gunshot is heard. With the next gunshot a quite unknown soldier, DeJardin, is shot down. We see a close-up shot of him, although we do not really know him. In the midst of the fighting that follows, we see several close-up shots of Yellow Hawk and his son, but never of any of their attackers, except for a small moment in which we see Jacob's killer with his menacing eyes. In this regard, it is quite strange that there is such a focus on the death of private DeJardin, but not on equally insignificant characters within the Comanche group. This is an aspect in the film that makes you question what the role of this preference for the insignificant American soldier is. Afterwards, when the skirmish is over, Rosalee walks over to the dead body of a Comanche and fires a gun at him multiple times. Either her revenge is fulfilled by doing this, or the raid has inflicted such pain on her that it is driving her mad. In this juxtaposition of Cheyenne and Comanche tribesmen, we see a clear preference for the former,

even though at that moment, they are still in chains because of Joe's orders. The last scene in *Hostiles* will then present a final view on the Cheyenne and settlers in Montana.

In the final part of their journey, the group arrives at the Valley of the Bears, the sacred grounds of the Cheyenne. As they arrive, we see a landscape with magnificent mountains, and the group is riding towards it, as we see them in a medium shot from behind. The perspective then changes to a medium shot from the front, in which we can see that the group admires the view. After this moment, we get close-up shots of Yellow Hawk's daughter and Yellow Hawk himself, showing that it is their land. Only after these close-ups, a close-up of Joe and Rosalee is shown, signifying the approaching end of his mission. One of the most memorable moments in this landscape will be the last moment we see a living Yellow Hawk: we see a silhouette of his face as he is gazing into the distance with the mountains in the background. A shot like this really places him in synchronisation with his background, depicting it as his home. The next scene we see of Yellow Hawk, is when he is placed on a wooden construction, parallel to the horizon, as he died the night before. The shot places him above the mountains of the background, increasing his importance in this image, showing that it will always be his home. When the group then starts to bury Yellow Hawk, Cyrus Lounde and his boys show up. They appear on screen as if they own the land, and Cyrus is eager to tell that to the group as well. A gunfight ensues, where everyone but Joe, Rosalee and Yellow Hawk's grandson, dies. The way in which this is shown is recognisable: we once see Cyrus Lounde and his men during their conversation, but there is never a close-up shot of them from that moment on. They are killed and are forgotten, without ever seeing their bodies again. This is different for the deaths within the group, as they each get a close-up shot before they die, as if the camera pays its due respect to each character. With this aspect, the camera shows that Cyrus believes the Valley of the Bears to be his land, yet it is really the Cheyenne under Yellow Hawk that can call it their home.

There are many parallels to be drawn between *Hostiles* and *Dances with Wolves*. They seem to embody the same spirit, as a soldier turns into a beneficiary to a Native American tribe, and cultural

differences are accepted within the scope of the bigger picture. Anyone who stands against them will not be 'treated kindly' by the camera. It is thus quite a move away from the position of protecting the American land, as was shown in *The Lone Ranger*, perhaps because of the rise of movements like Black Lives Matter. This willingness to investigate other cultures is what distinguishes *Hostiles* from *The Lone Ranger*.

Conclusion

After discussing six American Western films in the previous chapters, there are several notions left to explore to conclude this research: the clear development of cultural difference with regards to character placement in front of the landscape; the cinematographical treatment of different Native American tribes; different types of Westerns and how they represented cultural difference; the influence of postcolonialism that made the creators of films more aware of cultural difference; and in which ways this subject may be researched further.

While watching *The Last Drop of Water*, *The Plainsman*, *The Searchers*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Lone Ranger* and *Hostiles*, it is clear that the phenomenon of cultural difference in the context of the use of the landscape as part of the mise-en-scene is different for every film. Where we see an intertitle with "INDIANS" in *The Last Drop of Water* and the characters themselves are presented from afar, in later films we see them in closer proximity through medium shots or even close ups. Up to *The Searchers*, there is still a discrepancy between the position of the Native American and the settler against the backdrop of the landscape, yet in *Dances with Wolves* the settler and the soldier switch roles with their Native American counterpart in terms of positioning. In *The Lone Ranger* then, it appears as if the roles are reversed once more, which is strange in terms of cultural development. I agree with, among others, John White here, in seeing the Twin Towers attack as a major factor that might have even instigated this. *Hostiles*, luckily, paints a more positive picture of the present views on cultural difference. The most poignant observation in this research is thus the digression that *The Lone Ranger* has created in terms of cultural difference. Further research could point out if this film is just an exception, or the norm for the period after 9/11 and up to 2013.

Another significant element of all these films, is that they portray the Native American tribes in a different way altogether. One film might show the Lakota Sioux as a peaceful people, like *Dances with Wolves*, where another film might see them as vicious assaulters of settlements. There is no clear line that is followed in several films, showing perhaps a lack of attention to the history of these tribes. It can sometimes even sound if, even in more contemporary films, they were lucky to find a speaker of

Comanche language, for example, and decided to make the actors learn that specific language to be able to give more depth to characters that are peaceful and friendly, instead of as marauding enemies that only shout war cries. This inconvenience in finding certain tribesmen that have had a specific role in history as needed for the film, influences the representation of Native American tribes in Western films. Another important thing to consider with Native American roles in westerns, is that in the present day, they are usually played by people of Native American descent. The western is one of their only means to enter the world of actors with. The role in which they are placed then, can be that of another Native American tribe, as they are simply cast because of their appearance. This is something that can influence the construction of identity mentioned by Bhabha, as described in the introduction, in complex ways, adding to the complexity of the western cinema.

Nevertheless, historical accuracy in terms of the representation of Native American tribes in film has never been a necessity for the creators of the American western. Something that was apparently far more important to show was the versatility of the genre to attract audiences to the cinema. In the sources that are used in this thesis we can distinguish at least three different types of the western: *The Last Drop of Water* and *The Plainsman* can be seen as classic westerns, *The Searchers* and *The Lone Ranger* as epic westerns, and *Dances with Wolves* and *Hostiles* as revisionist westerns. These types of westerns are very much a product of their time. It would be an exceptional situation to see a revisionist western that is made before the 1950s, as the response of American society would have made these films a box office flop: the audience was not yet ready for critique. The different types of westerns are also focussed on sending a different message, to be appropriate for the time period that they were made in. These different types of westerns are thus important to recognise in determining the qualities in a western film with regards to cultural difference: in a classic western it would be more normal to see a large schism between the treatment of settlers and Native Americans, as opposed to the situation in a revisionist western.

It is then this revisionist western that plays the biggest role in changing the perception of who feels at home in the prairie: the American settler or the Native American. The protest culture around the Vietnam war and the rise of postcolonialism are what instigated this change. It magnifies the presence of the American settler in the originally Native American land, and what kind of trouble they have caused. In *Dances with Wolves* for example, we see the useless slaughter of buffaloes being condemned by John Dunbar and the Lakota Sioux. Films like these have changed the depiction of 'the other', as they sometimes supported the Native American instead of the American settler. It was postcolonialism as a movement especially, that magnified the situation of cultural difference between the coloniser and the colonised, that leads to an interest in 'the other' instead of simply seeing the American settler as superior.

To conclude, this thesis has shown that through close reading scenes of six American Western films, there is a development where the cultural difference between the American settler and the Native American in terms of placement in front of the American landscape diminishes over time, except for events that instil a sense of urgency for protection of the home country in the American people like the events of September 11th, 2001. The question also arises how the effects of an event like George Floyd's murder will influence future western films, as the call for equality becomes ever more pressing. It is a testimony of how events that happen in a country can influence the creation of films in that specific area. This was a research on a smaller scale; for further research on this specific topic, it might be feasible to use more sources and perhaps do a quantitative analysis of the instances that we have observed in this research of cultural difference. By doing so, it might be possible to see a real trend in the development of cultural difference within the American western, instead of it only keeping the status of assumption without being able to assert the reflection of American society in the western film.

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