"No Goin' Back": Modernity and the Film Western

Julie Anne Kohler
Brigham Young University - Provo

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“No Goin’ Back”: Modernity and the Film Western

Julie Anne Kohler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Kerry Soper, Chair
Carl Sederholm
George Handley

Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

“No Goin’ Back”: Modernity and the Film Western

Julie Anne Kohler
Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, BYU
Master of Arts

This thesis is inspired by an ending—that of a cowboy hero riding away, back turned, into the setting sun. That image, possibly the most evocative and most repeated in the Western, signifies both continuing adventure and ever westward motion as well as a restless lack of final resolution. This thesis examines the ambiguous endings and the conditions leading up to them in two film Westerns of the 1950s, George Steven’s *Shane* (1953) and John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). Fascinatingly, the tension and uncertainty conveyed throughout these films is also characteristic of life in modernity, a connection which has previously gone overlooked. In my analysis, I study the ties between the postwar film Western and the philosophy of modernity to interpret these works in a new light, illuminating their generic context and their understudied philosophic dimensions. This reading highlights these films’ continued relevance, showing how they have enabled creators and audiences to reflect on experiences of modernity in the idiom of the celluloid century.

Keywords: modernity, American twentieth-century cinema, film genre, Western genre, John Ford, John Wayne, George Stevens, Georg Lukács
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Introduction

This thesis begins with an ending—that of a cowboy hero riding away, back turned, into the setting sun. This image, possibly the most evocative and most repeated in the Western, signifies both continuing adventure and ever westward motion as well as a restless lack of final resolution. This thesis examines the ambiguous endings and the conditions leading up to them in two film Westerns of the 1950s, George Steven’s *Shane* (1953) and John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). Fascinatingly, the tension and uncertainty conveyed throughout these films is also characteristic of life in modernity, a connection which has previously gone overlooked. In my analysis, I study the ties between the postwar film Western and the philosophy of modernity to interpret these works in a new light, illuminating their generic context and their understudied philosophic dimensions. This reading highlights these films’ continued relevance, showing how they have enabled creators and audiences to reflect on experiences of modernity in the idiom of the celluloid century.

“Modern” and “modernity” are notoriously complex terms. On the one hand, they have a longstanding historical meaning—Habermas explains that the term *moderntas* and the adjectival opposites *antiqui/moderni* were used as early as late antiquity “in a chronological sense” to distinguish between the past and present (Habermas 8). However, in the 18th and 19th century, philosophers such as Hegel began to consider modernity as an intellectual and philosophical phenomenon, in the process imbuing the concept with a wealth of new meanings. Modernity came to mean not only the present day but also entrance into a state of being characterized by radical change, subjectivity, and self-definition (Habermas 7, 17). As the philosophical discourse of modernity continued to emerge, this term increasingly indicated not a single time period but
rather an ongoing process in Western cultural history beginning with the Renaissance and continuing to the present day—a process of breaking with the past and deliberately reinventing values, characterized by disorientation, subjectivity, secularism, ambiguity, melancholy, originality, and independence (Žmegač 280-81). During this time, the nature identity formation also changed, becoming an increasingly individual process. In traditional societies, those of the pre-modern period, “one’s identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a function of pre-defined social rules and a traditional system of myths...One was born and died a member of one’s clan, a member of a fixed kinship system...” (Kellner 141). As the centuries went by and industrialization and urbanization began to overtake European societies, greater individuality entered into the process of identity formation. One was less connected to a tribe, group, or clan and instead built an identity on roles formed for oneself, rather than ones socially pre-determined. Identity was newly subject to reflection, discussion, and change and could even become a matter of crisis (Ibid.).

In the post-war period, the makers of film Westerns also entered a period of change and began to create films that increasingly reflected these typically modern characteristics. Problematizing the genre and the cowboy hero in a new way, Westerns increasingly thematicized such ideas as alienation, ambiguity, and melancholy. In the process of responding to demand for more adult, complex Westerns (see Bandy & Stoehr 157), they brought themes of modernity to the narrative forefront in a way that literary Westerns and even previous film Westerns had not. The Western was a prevalent genre from the early days of film, with 1903’s The Great Train Robbery being one of cinema’s first popular films. But a shift arguably occurred after the Second World War, when the entire genre became more self-reflexive, with filmmakers problematizing the very notion of the Western and introducing many typically “modern” characters. As they had
before the War, B-list Westerns—along with the newly developed television serial Western—provided excitement and release through simple plots and relatively straightforward characters such as the Lone Ranger. Indeed, although the typically “cowboy” experiences of working outdoors on horseback or wielding a gun were actually becoming increasingly remote amidst suburbanization, the Western became more popular than ever, with the frontier providing the country a chance to play out masculinist fantasies in a vague yet exciting expanse. However, in the world of A-list Westerns auteurs like John Ford were more philosophically ambitious and made an effort to comment on cultural anxieties, their historical moment, the darker side of American history, and the genre itself. Twentieth-century philosophies such as Freudianism and existentialism were seeping into Hollywood (Bandy & Stoehr 166)—even when not mentioned by name, their larger cultural influence lead filmmakers to shape new sorts of heroes, ones with significant “hang-ups” and internal dilemmas. Major classic directors such as Ford, Henry King, and King Vidor were, in Drew Casper’s words, having “second thoughts, reworking their original commitment” (336) to a genre that continued to capture Americans’ interests but also morphed to provide more complex, thoughtful pieces. In postwar cinema, Casper writes, “a ‘larger-than-life’ world was replaced by one ‘true-to-life.’ A relatively categorical, homogenous, and stable world gave way to one that was ambiguous, heterogeneous, fluctuating ” (347). The echoes of modernity are highly apparent in this assessment, with Casper’s language being shared by modernist critics such as Georg Lukacs. While the pre-modern world was unperturbably “homogeneous” (32), he writes, modern life and society is characterized by “disparate, heterogenous parts,” with fragile connections among them (72).

*Shane* and *The Searchers* are exemplary of these trends, and both develop modern themes in a highly poignant manner. Although the two films were based on novels, their adapters altered
their tone and brought these themes to the fore in a manner that their source texts did not. *Shane* is a relatively straightforward, earnest novel that was easily adapted into a text for school children (mainly by removing the few curses in the book). As I will go on to discuss in the first chapter, director George Stevens’ adaptation is an extraordinary case because it retains the novel’s purity of story while also granting Shane’s story additional layers, imbuing it with an awareness of the cowboy hero’s limitations and weakness as well as his strength. In this chapter, I first describe Shane’s modern traits and how they shape his relationship with the Starretts, a family of settlers he protects from a violent rancher. I then analyze the climactic gun battle of the film, Shane’s gunfight with this rancher and his hired man, through a modern lens, demonstrating how it functions much like the artwork in modernity: on the one hand, it appears to create a stable, complete world (in the form of the Starretts’ peaceful valley), but on the other, it does not change Shane’s problematic nature, nor the need to exclude him from the very peace he creates. I also demonstrate how the layered nature of the gunfight, its role as both a success and a critical failure, is conveyed utilizing the viewpoint of Joey, a young hero-worshipping character in the story. Finally, drawing upon scholarship by Thomas Schatz and André Bazin, I will show how *Shane* represents a shift in the Western genre from its classical form to a more complex self-aware form and relate this shift to its modern themes.

In the second chapter, I analyze John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), focusing on its main character, Ethan Edwards, a drifter attempting to rescue his kidnapped niece from a Comanche chief he both hates and resembles. *The Searchers* also complicates its source work, as I will discuss in the second chapter. The film protagonist Ethan is based on the book character Amos—a flat, undynamic figure who for the most part does not go through profound internal struggles, growth, or redemption. When John Ford and Frank Nugent created Ethan, they broke with Alan
Le May’s novel by complicating Amos, making him an amalgamation of other characters, introducing many more “modern,” dynamic elements into him, and placing him in the center of the action. In both cases, the filmmakers took simpler material and added in complexity that is typical of the modern experience, creating more heterogeneous characters and emphasizing their dilemmas and failures as much as than their strength. In this chapter I once again begin by analyzing the modern traits of its main character, Ethan Edwards, such as his nomadism and heterogeneous identity. Following this, I analyze the philosophical dimensions of Ethan’s search for his niece Debbie, demonstrating how his quest parallels the modern search for meaning and totality. Ultimately, my work represents a re-framing of the Western, one that takes into consideration under-analyzed traits of the cowboy hero and that elucidates the philosophical dimensions of these two films.

The presence of modern themes in the genre may seem surprising since the Western is in many ways oriented toward the past. It typically idealizes a limited span of time in U.S. history from the mid- to late-19th century, focusing on the “frontier,” or the outer limits of settled territory. It is undeniably preoccupied with this bygone era, which it frequently views with nostalgia. However, this very nostalgia is in fact an inherently modern attitude, as pre-moderns do not experience deeply poignant nostalgia. Because epistemologically confident myths and traditions largely prescribe their mental framework, their world is more knowable and readily accessible; for them, there is no lost object or time for which to become nostalgic. In the 1950s the United States was experiencing growth and expansion, breaking new ground in race relations and in global politics, entering political and military entanglements in other countries, and experiencing not only economic growth but a fundamental change to a consumer economy. At the time, the idealized American past, as idealized as a pre-modern civilizations have been for
theorists of modernity such as Lukács (11-12), offered directors a safe distance from which to represent the good and bad aspects of this growth and change.

_Slane_ and _The Searchers_ are ostensibly two extremely different films. On the one hand, _Shane_ is airy and bright and has been described as “graceful” (Warshow 45) and fairy tale-like (44). _The Searchers_, meanwhile, is a dark and psychological\(^1\) film that deals with the illegitimate desires of a violent, bigoted man. These differences notwithstanding, however, the protagonists in both films characters exemplify many typically modern traits—they are haunted wanderers, alienated from family and society, who face enemies who strongly resemble them, nomads with hazy pasts and uncertain futures, whose morality is also strained and ambiguous. Despite their contrasting appearance and tone, they are both manifestations of the increased depth and complexity of Westerns in the post-war period, and both deal with dilemmas and pains that also afflict the modern subject, as I will demonstrate.

Much recent analysis of the Western has focused on gender, and the prominence of the fractured, wandering subject in Western films certainly this has something to do with hypermasculine machismo—staying tough and riding on despite injury, loss of loved ones, or the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (_Hamlet_ 3.1.59), bandits, and Indians. However, rather than treating the Western hero as a masculine stereotype, I seek to find its symbolic implications for the life of the mind. The hero of the Western is possibly more complicated, or angst-filled that we might at first think, including outside of those films widely acknowledged as existentialist or deeply philosophical Westerns. _Shane_ and _The Searchers_ temporal setting in the past may make it seem like they are evading modernity, not representing it. However, in a way they are both stories about two men driven to reach for something they seek to recover or protect

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\(^1\) Adjectives which, incidentally, describe many fairytales
but cannot lastingly hold on to, a modern dilemma. Indeed, at their heart these are stories about
the search for totality in a world that is fragmented and complex.

It may also seem incongruous to focus on the “modernity” of these films in the post-modern age. How could such a discussion be relevant in an age of skepticism toward myth and modernist meta-narratives? Hasn’t our culture recognized the misplaced nature of nostalgia? In fact, this discussion remains critical in a number of ways. For one, studying efforts to grapple with modernity is important to understanding much of the cultural output of the 20th century. Even if not high art, popular works such as those by Ford and Stevens still reflect cultural anxieties about change and social disconnection, as well as fascination at the one who can “go it alone.” Today the individualistic, hypermasculine spirit of these works may seem unappealing, even dangerous, but reading these films in terms of modernity allows us to appreciate the cultural work they have performed. Indeed, it elucidates the very nature of genre in the 20th century.

According to Lyotard, “…modernist aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure” (81). These qualities are frequently found in genre films, which rely on convention (“recognizable consistency”) and are frequently made for entertainment (“solace and pleasure”). The Western genre, furthermore, is an undoubtedly “nostalgic one.” This is not to say that genre films cannot also challenge their audience and defy expectations. Indeed, to a point, they must, to keep viewers interested. However, consistent genre conventions also attract viewers by fulfilling their expectations time and again. From the perspective of modernity, audiences sense the fragmentary nature of their lives and society and seek an artwork, a film with which to temporarily bridge that gap. This suggests that films such as *Shane* and *The Searchers*
are actually fascinating meta-projects, allowing audiences to cope with their own lack and fragmentation by watching this troubled, fissured figure.

Understanding the cultural power and function of these films and of genre entertainment generally is not merely a historical matter. Post-modernity offers to take the edge off the ache of transcendental nostalgia by putting into question the possibility of history or progress. It has provided diversified, more flexible perspectives on such matters as identity formation and truth. However, these altered viewpoints have not altered the fact that the conditions of modernity largely remain with us. Although some of the theorists of modernity I draw upon, these films, and the present day are separated by many years, they can still be brought into conversation with one another because “modernity” is not fixed to one time period but rather an ongoing phenomenon. As Louis Dupré puts it in Passage to Modernity, “…[W]e are still living in the modern age and, however critical we may be of the principles established at its beginning, we continue to share many of them. Critics of modernity implicitly accept more of its assumptions than they are able to discard” (6). For example, even if some post-modern theorists are skeptical of the validity of myth, critic Richard Slotkin reminds us that myths remain an important means of cultural transmission, imagination, and revision, and that as long as we express our cultural imagination in shared works and artifacts, we will as a society continue to create and receive these vessels of meaning (659-60; see also 665).

Film has been the dominant mass medium in which cultural anxieties have been expressed and questioned in the last century. This thesis examines the role modernity has played in that process by examining one of cinema’s most impactful genres and two of its most iconic

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2 However, Branston critiques this idea, explaining that despite problems with the modernist values of the Enlightenment, which have been widely criticized by post-modern thinkers, “…‘[M]odernity’ can alert us to more satisfying projects than those fashionable approaches which announce ‘history is over’ or that we are living in ‘knowledge’ or ‘virtual’ economies.” (3). Instead, these approaches, she argues, establish themselves as a kind of progress, working against their stated project.
films. What follows is a bold new reading of the Western, one that places *Shane* and *The Searchers* in their historical generic context and illuminates their previously unexplored meaning as works grappling with the experience of modernity.
Chapter 1

“Beauty is an artifice; it is imaginary.” (Kristeva 100)

The most basic sartorial rhetoric of the B-Western is expressed in the phrase “black hats versus white hats.” In this familiar semiotic paradigm, evil is represented by a clear villain dressed in dark attire, willful and greedy. His opponent, the dealer of just deserts, is clad in a white cowboy hat, symbol of his purity of heart. This moral hero consistently takes the side of the weak against the strong and refuses glory for himself. On the surface, Shane may look like it is reproducing this pattern and the simplistic morality it implies. After all, the hero Shane rides onto the screen wearing a beige buckskin suit and hat, while his enemy Jack Palance wears a black hat and gloves. However, the individual who responds to this menace is by no means a simplistic hero. In fact, he embodies many modern characteristics, and his character is a manifestation of the growing self-reflexivity of the Western genre in the 1950s. Shane has been read as a white knight errant (Bazin 52, Kael 347, Moss 181), a Christ-type (Marsden, “Savior in the Saddle” 393), a Greek tragic figure (Marsden, “Shane: a Story for All Media” 344) and as a Benjaminian flaneur eschewing the wage economy (McGee 12), among other readings. While all of these analyses help to illuminate some aspect of his character and function in the film, in this chapter I will read Shane as a wanderer paralleling the modern individual. I will first introduce the parallels between Shane and the modern subject, then discuss his last gunfight as an act of artistic creation, and finally discuss how Shane’s status as a landmark in the genre relates to its modern themes. In the process, I will reframe the social, moral, and artistic dynamics in the film.

The film Shane is based on Jack Schaefer’s novel of the same name and is inspired by the Johnson County War, which took place in April 1892 in Wyoming. In the mid-1940s, Schaefer, who had never been west of Toledo, Ohio at the time (Marsden, “Shane: a Story for All Media”
339), wrote a story containing almost a microcosmic version of the War in which a cattle baron-homesteader conflict occurs in one small settlement, narrating it from the perspective of a boy who grew up in the valley, now long since grown to adulthood. Turned from a magazine story into a novel and published in 1949, it was filmed in 1953 under the direction of George Stevens. Working with scriptwriter A. B. Guthrie, Stevens reused much of the storyline and some dialogue from the book, and, as I will later discuss, retained the perspective of the young boy.

The story follows Shane, a gunfighter from parts unknown, who rides into a Wyoming valley and onto the property of the Starretts, a family of homesteaders. The Starretts and their neighbors are in conflict with the Rykers, owners of a large ranching enterprise and competitors for the land of the valley. Shane agrees to become the Starretts’ farmhand in exchange for room and board and is quickly drawn into the conflict between the Rykers and the sodbusters. When it turns violent and the ranchers begin torching houses and shooting settlers, Shane realizes he must take up his gun and fight. In a dramatic gunfight, he kills Ryker, his hired gun Jack Wilson, and a ranchhand, receiving a bullet in his side during the fight. Wound notwithstanding, once he has killed the rancher and hired gun threatening the livelihood of the little boy’s family, Shane recognizes that his violent ways are incompatible with the settlers’ way of life and absents himself from their now-peaceful valley. In secondary criticism about *Shane*, it is a well-understood aspect of the story that Shane’s purging the valley of dangerous elements ultimately means removing himself as well\(^3\), and I concur with this conclusion. My reading of the film differs from previous interpretations, however, in the philosophical meaning I see in Shane’s sacrifice. From a modern perspective, Shane’s making the valley safe represents the creation of a stable, peaceful totality in which he cannot personally take part due to his violent nature.

\(^3\) See, for example, Barefoot 244.
Early on in the film, Shane (Alan Ladd) is characterized by a number of qualities that are shared by the modern individual, such as homelessness; an uncertain, problematic identity; and an inability to integrate into a community. When Shane arrives on the Starrets’ property and is invited in, he gives no clear account of his origins, saying simply that he is “going north” and to call him Shane. At no point in the movie does Shane provide his last name, representing his isolation from family as well as a certain ephemerality of identity. A family name is handed down over generations and suggests rootedness, whereas Shane’s truncated moniker—which he provides with a subjective “Call me Shane” rather than an incontrovertible “I am Shane” or “My name is Shane”—implies that his identity is entirely self-made and therefore less stable, if no less impressive. Patrick McGee in *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Westerns* performs a psychoanalytic reading to the film in a chapter entitled “Why Shane Never Comes Back” and identifies Shane as a “nomad,” that is, “the subject that destabilizes any fully constituted identity and the determination of a specific end” (6). McGee states that “Shane is a nomad not only because he is mobile and without a domestic center like Joe Starrett’s but because he has no story that can explain his being” (6). The fact that the other characters and the audience know little of his backstory also makes it seem as though Shane’s immediate situation is always his essential existential situation—he is in fact not a dynamic character, but rather a tragic figure who rises to the occasion.

Shane’s major problems, in fact, have to do with not fitting in, neither in time nor in a place, evoking the problematic, non-integrated nature of the modern subject. For example, according to Lukács, in a pre-modern world, “[t]he world is wide and yet it is like a home.” Shane’s world is certainly wide, a sense underscored by the vastness of the plains on which he rides and of the Teton Mountains, the backdrop to every outdoor scene in the film. However, it is
not a home, as he is unable to settle anywhere in it. Within the film, he is both pulled in and repelled by the community and must wander on. Furthermore, Shane experiences the vulnerability to time that Lukács says describes the characters of the representative modern literary form, the novel. Whereas the epic is timeless, populated by figures who do not truly fade or die, the novel is filled with characters vulnerable to time’s passage. According to him, the “entire inner action of the novel is nothing but a struggle against the power of time” (122). Shane also faces this struggle as a gunfighter facing the advent of the civilized West, where men of his trade are not welcome. Marian, fulfilling the domesticating role played commonly played by women within Westerns, expresses this after seeing Shane demonstrate his marksmanship on the farm. Frowning, she tells him, “We’d all be much better off if there wasn’t a single gun left in this valley. Including yours.” While she may personally be drawn to Shane, the future she imagines for her child has no place for someone whose life is so tied to violence.

Ultimately Shane does not integrate into either of the two competing groups in the valley, the ranchers or the homesteaders. When Ryker offers him a job as a hired gun, Shane refuses and persists in taking the side of the settlers, which leads the ranch men to consider him an enemy. Despite his opposition to them, however, he is still identifiable with the ranchers through his skill at violence and his lack of a family of his own. On the other hand, allying him with the homesteaders is his choice to defend them and his admiration for their way of life, even though it is one that cannot tolerate a killer like him. Unlike Clint Eastwood’s Unforgiven (1992), which centers on a gunfighter who gave up killing and retired to a farm, Shane never really entertains the idea that its hero can do this, preferring a more tragic portrayal in which he is visually expunged.4 Shane’s melancholy also comes from the fact that he and the ranchers he opposes are

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4 It is worth noting that Unforgiven follows this return of this gunfighter, Will Munny, to killing, leading to the question whether his violent nature could ever be altered completely.
all growing anachronistic, working in careers unsuited to, even forbidden in, the new world of homesteads and towns. This is expressed in his final conversation with Ryker, which focuses on the fact that Shane and Shane warns Ryker, “You’ve lived too long. Your kind of days are over.” “What about yours, gunfighter?” comes the retort. Shane’s answer is confident and yet unavoidably self-defeating as well: “The difference is, I know it,” he says. His placelessness echoes the idea that in the modern period the world no longer easily echoes to the individual what he truly is—he has to seek it himself, with no promise of finding a simple, divine, or correct answer (see Lukács 36 and 97).

Even though Shane is eminently moral within the film, taking the side of the oppressed against the strong and condemning senseless aggression, his character is still marred through his violent way of life. Although Shane only fights when provoked in the story, he is characterized from early on as a long-time gunslinger who has developed an almost neurotic readiness for danger. Any time Joey rattles something behind him, for example, Shane rapidly springs and grabs for his gun, putting the settlers on edge. Director George Stevens intentionally built up this side of Shane and was aware of the moral compromises Shane makes. In an interview he said, “In some sense Shane is a boy called to go into the Marine Corps because he’s the strongest and best qualified to carry out his country’s point of view. When you ask a man to fight and take a life, you not only ask him to risk his own life but you ask him to make a great sacrifice of his moral ideals” (qtd. in Moss 180). Shane is poignantly aware of violence’s effects on him and his relationships, and his consciousness of his compromised nature gives him a melancholy air. This is best expressed in his final speech to Little Joe. After the final gunfight, in which Shane kills his enemies Wilson and Rufus Ryker, Joey is puzzled why Shane must leave. Shane explains that “…there’s no living with a killing. There’s no going back from one. Right or wrong it’s the
same. The brand sticks.” It is this fatalistic acceptance of his own inadequacy that leads him to keep moving on.

Shane’s issues integrating do not stop at the level of the community but are actually most poignant in the Starrett home. It is in this setting that Shane’s longing for peaceful relationships is most evident but ultimately frustrated. With all of his allure, to man, woman, and child, Shane quickly becomes a clear, though not malicious, threat to family stability as all of the Starretts are drawn to this potent wanderer and the exciting possibilities he represents. Joey, for example, is thrilled by Shane’s gun and begins to emulate Shane instead of his father, who is the proper model to follow to ensure the greatest social order. In the Jack Schaefer novel, in fact, the son of the family is named Bob, whereas in the film, he shares his father’s name, emphasizing that he is the proper progeny of his father and that Shane is an interloper. The elder Joe is also highly admiring of Shane, however. Two scenes are devoted to their bonding—the first when Shane helps Starrett remove a tree stump in the farmyard and later when they get in a fight at the saloon with Ryker’s men. In both scenes the two grin as they labor with masculine verve, and grow in admiration of one another. The most potentially disruptive relationship Shane forms is with Marian, the devoted, pacifistic wife and mother. Her bashful attention over Shane and their warm, long looks betray a budding attraction from early on. The first night of Shane’s stay as Marian is tucking Joey into bed, she tells her son, “Don’t get to liking Shane too much…He’ll be moving on.” But this is actually for her own sake as much as her son’s, as is clear from what she says next. Having left Joey’s bedroom Marian pleads with her husband, “Hold me, Joe. Don’t say anything, just hold me,” as if to fortify her commitment to their little family.

While a romance between Shane and Marian may be intimated, it remains far from realized, prevented by the characters’ commitment to family stability and by Shane’s own
nature—his history of violence and nomadism has resulted in a melancholy solitude into which Marian cannot enter. Marian represents the totality longed for by the modern individual—the spiritual home that will never be established, the sense of comprehension that will always elude. Not only Lukács but Kristeva and Benjamin also identify this kind of longing as modern. Caputi writes, “In Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, Julie Kristeva writes of how she and Walter Benjamin share a common theory of melancholia. This theory posits the modern subject as one who longs for an anterior richness missing from the present, a person driven by an internalized desire that, by definition, can never be fulfilled.” (Caputi 27). This desire is for a “former union that never really existed” and “a cohesion that has now been displaced” (Ibid.), similar to “totality” in Lukács’s theory. Lukács writes that in pre-modern times social structures are close to “the archetypal home: love, the family, the state,” (33), all of which Shane is ultimately cut off from. He adds that in such a time “It is a homogeneous world, and even the separation between man and world, between ‘I’ and ‘you’, cannot disturb its homogeneity,” (32). But of course, that gap is unbearably deep for Shane. He works with the Starretts but is not organically part of them, and is compatible with all of them but is possibly a threat to their relationships. His status as an outsider who cannot be assimilated into the family is spatially indicated in the film, for example, in the way Shane sleeps in the stable on the Starrett’s farm, not their cabin. Joe is easy to associate with his homestead and Ryker’s men with the saloon, but Shane is part of both spots and yet neither, and eventually departs into the wilderness. What is more, before long there will be no place for him in the entire nation, press westward though he might.

In the short few days after Shane’s arrival, the conflict between the homesteaders and the ranchers grows violent. After a fistfight between Shane and Starrett in the town saloon, Ryker sends for a gunfighter of his own, the menacing Jack Wilson (Jack Palance). After Wilson taunts,
then shoots one of the homesteaders, Shane decides to take matters into his own hands and rides into town to face Wilson and Ryker, leading to a gunfight. In this sequence, Shane takes on the role of creating a peaceful valley where the homesteaders can flourish through this critical gunfight. The creative nature of the fight, the way it engenders something new (in the form of a safe community), means that it can be read it as an artistic act. According to Lukács, in modernity, art—used in a broad sense that includes literature as well as visual art—provides people the opportunity to create a complete, non-fragmented world for themselves. He asserts that art is “a created totality,” a way to establish a type of unity since “the natural unity” of the world “has been destroyed forever” (37). The modern artist still realizes that this is only an ersatz, a temporary, limited creation—and hence it is bound to be ironic, tinged with the creator’s awareness of its incompleteness (77)—but it is still an important means of establishing meaning and transcending the rifts inherent in modern identity. The fact that Shane’s victory is tinged with failure means that it is essentially ironic and bears a number of important parallels to the artwork in modernity. Shane paradoxically loses while winning, which occurs twice over—first, he kills all of his opponents in the gunfight but is probably going to die himself, and secondly, he makes the valley safe for the Starretts and their neighbors, but in order to keep it that way, he must himself leave their midst. Shane’s resemblance to his opponent Jack Wilson contributes to the drama of the situation. As Moss points out they are both “mythic, artful, often solitary,” noting that Stevens referred to them as ‘melancholy’ figures (180). Shane himself suggests their resemblance when he rides off to the gunfight, declaring to Marian, “This is my kind of game.” Their similarity means that Shane is facing the spectre of self-annihilation by challenging this

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5 Kristeva felt Benjamin also identified the ironic limitations of art in modernity. In *Black Sun*, her work on melancholia, she writes: “Walter Benjamin has stressed the melancholy substratum of the imagination that has been deprived of both classical and religious stability but is still anxious to give itself a new meaning (as long as we speak, as long as artists create), which nevertheless remains basically disappointed, racked by the evil or the irony of the Prince of Darkness (so long as we live as orphans but creating, creators but forsaken...)” (171).
doppelgänger. As gunfighters, the two of them face a continual dilemma—in killing other men of their own brand or make, they wipe their own kind out in order to live. Only Shane seems to apprehend the gravity of this continual paradox, however, growing introspective while Wilson comes across as sadistic.

All of these factors are brought to head in the film’s climactic gunfight. After repeated confrontations with Ryker, Joe and the rancher decided that the only way to settle their feud is direct combat. Shane, however, decides to preserve Joe’s life by going in his place, first knocking him unconscious to make sure the sodbuster cannot follow. When Shane rides off to face Ryker, Little Joe trails behind him unseen. Joey’s perspective on the gunfight is critical because it helps give the victory its apparent layers, making it appear simultaneously as a triumph and a deadly failure. His viewpoint is conveyed through dialogue but also through the cinematography of this scene. When Shane gets to the saloon, Joey watches the fight from the porch, peering in from underneath its swinging door. Initially in the scene, Jack Wilson is filmed from a distance across the room and is therefore much smaller in the frame than Shane, behind whom the camera is positioned. This means that Shane’s form and his viewpoint dominate the shot, adding to the sense that he has the moral upper hand and dominates the narrative. Then the camera switches to Joey’s point of view, with a full-body, low-angle shot looking up at Shane. This low-angle shot further enhances Shane’s stature, whereas when the camera cuts to Wilson, he is filmed from a more level view-point. After Shane claims that he has heard Wilson is “a low-down Yankee liar,” Wilson invites him to “Prove it.” For several tension-filled moments the camera cuts between Wilson, who wears a weird smile, and the resolute Shane. Wilson begins to draw, but Shane is quicker and in an explosive burst falls both his opponent and Ryker,

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6 A reference to Wilson’s deliberate taunting of the sole Confederate veteran in the settlement in order to engage him in a gunfight.
who has risen from his seat in the background in an attempt to draw on Shane. Shane then steps forward to survey the scene, passing in and out of the dim light in a gauzy veil of gun smoke, the shifting light adding to the sense that he is ambiguously both lethal and benevolent. Shane reholsters his gun with a spin and the camera cuts to Joey, who grins broadly, providing a boyish affirmation of his hero’s success.

While Shane was successful versus these two, he fails to notice Ryker’s brother poking his rifle out from the balcony above the saloon. Joey then plays a critical role—because he has seen the man, he calls, “Shane look out!” The camera cuts back to Shane, who turns as the Ryker’s brother shoots, his bullet striking Shane in the side. Regardless, as his last bit of superhuman accuracy, Shane’s aim is true and the man is shot in the chest and tumbles over the balcony, breaking through the bannister. The camera cuts to Joey’s concerned face, which gradually works into a smile when he thinks the danger has passed. As a contrast between his comprehension and Shane’s, the camera then switches to Shane and we see him look over the scene sadly, turn, and go out the door, spurs jangling. Watching this scene the audience has shared in Joey’s excitement at seeing Shane finally unleash his full violent potential, a point the entire film has been building up to. However, we also observe Shane’s sadness at the vital cost of his victory, a more mature response to the gunfight.

Even though Shane does not completely triumph, even though the scene proves his weakness as well as his strength, because he appears to win in Joey’s perspective, Shane is still partially, mythically a hero. Žižek explains that in *Shane* the “real object of fascination is not the displayed scene, but the gaze of the naive ‘other’ absorbed, enchanted by it” (42). He adds that “we can be fascinated by the mysterious apparition of Shane only by proxy, through the medium of the ‘innocent’ child's gaze, never immediately” (Ibid.). In this way, the film, and in particular
this final scene, is characterized by an artificial distance. It represents an apparent totality—Shane’s success and the peace of the settlement—that is actually shot through by a bullet, communicated in part by the combination of adult and childish perspectives. The final departure scene carries on with this pattern, and further develops the idea of childlike versus adult viewpoints. When Shane walks off the porch of the saloon and remounts his horse, it is twilight, past sunset, evoking the inevitable end of his kind of fighter and hinting at the likelihood he will die. Joey’s first response to the gunfight demonstrates his worshipful belief in Shane: “I knew you could, Shane. I knew it just as well as anything.” Shane, just now comprehending that Joey was there, tells him that he has to be going and that Joey needs to go home. When Joey asks why he must go, he also explains that there is “no living with a killing,” as quoted previously. With Joey’s next remark the boy symbolically approaches adulthood. Noticing the wound in Shane’s side Joey exclaims, “It's bloody! You're hurt!”—expressing a realization that heroes can be wounded. However, the idea that Shane might actually be dying is too much to grasp, and Joey’s next line is a retreat back into a child’s powerful belief in myth. As Shane begins to ride away, we see Joey desperately clinging to the idea of Shane’s superhumanness: “He’d have never been able to shoot you if you’d have seen him. He never even would have cleared the holster, would he Shane?” But Shane says only, “Bye, Little Joe,” letting his actions do the talking in typically laconic Western fashion. Joey will soon be on the precipice of young adulthood, with the realization that even heroes can be defeated imminently facing him. But for now, he is just a little boy who wants his champion to come back, calling out Shane’s name as night advances and the blue of the light melds into the blue of the Tetons dwarfing the rider.

The play between invincibility and vulnerability in *Shane* creates an ironic, layered Western. On the one hand, Shane is *the* fastest gun, the best man in town by Starrett’s own
acknowledgement. What is more, the way he rides in out of nowhere to help the homesteaders makes him seem almost like a mythic deliverer. According to Warshow, Shane even seems to achieve “apotheosis” in the end (45). On the other hand, though, he is also human and capable of being mortally wounded (at least by someone who does not fight fair), an ironic contrast. Furthermore, the fact that Shane is identifiable as a Christ figure—a man who comes in dressed in white and lays down his life for his friends (Marsden, “Savior in the Saddle” 398-99), receiving a wound in his side—speaks to the idea that from a “modern” and secular perspective, heroes cannot actually be divine, that they must be marred by the human. Lyotard remarks, “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (77). Shane shatters the idea of the immortal cowboy hero—he is gloriously unworldly, it is true, but in the end he also shows himself to be critically physical.

Were Shane completely capable of being apotheosized, as Warshow asserts, this film at first would not be “modern” at all, but would instead reflect the characteristics of the ancient epoch: like a Greek hero, Shane would enter the Elysian Fields, represented by this Wyoming valley at twilight. However, as Bazin, Warshow, and later Žižek point out, Shane is actually only possible as a meditation on the classical myth, lending it self-awareness, deemed both a modern and adult trait (see Lukács 12). What makes Shane a particularly interesting example of self-awareness in the Western genre is that it thematicizes the difference between an adult perspective and a childlike one while also representing a shift of that nature within the genre generally, from straightforward classical simplicity to conscious contemplation of the Western myth.

The concept of self-consciousness in genre is a debated one, but Thomas Schatz’s definition in Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System helps clarify
what is implied in the term. Schatz posits that a genre develops through several stages, beginning in a state of transparency, when story itself is allowed to shine through without “formal interference” or elaboration. The genre then moves into a “classical” stage, in which “the narrative formula and the film medium work together to transmit and reinforce that genre’s social message” (Neale 212). The final stage is one of opacity and refinement, wherein the filmmakers deliberately bring viewers’ attention to “the form itself to examine and appreciate its structure and cultural appeal” (Schatz 123).

The question of whether *Shane* is a “classical” creation—pure, earnest, and straightforward—or an example of Schatz’s opaque, self-aware “final stage” is fascinating because critics have put it in both categories. On the one hand, Will Wright dubs it “the classic of all classical Westerns” (34) in his structuralist study of Western, *Sixguns and Society*. Indeed, *Shane* does include many typical Western elements, such as a hero in white, a villain in black, a domestic(ating) female figure, and helpless townspeople. Žižek adds that “on the level of its immediate diegetic contents, it is of course a Western pure and simple, one of the purest ever made” (42). What is more, the passage of time has made this seem even truer than when it was made. *Shane* certainly seems like a simple, distilled tale compared to Sergio Leone’s baroque sagas of wicked men, Sam Peckinpah’s rough and tumble stories of anti-heroes, or the wide-ranging Westerns the post-modern era has seen, from Clint Eastwood’s repudiation of the genre in *Unforgiven* to the delightfully strange, rhapsodic meditation that is *Dead Man* (1995).

However, Žižek and Bazin make a convincing argument that Shane is actually highly self-conscious and opaque, reflecting on and elevating the cowboy myth as a whole. The Western was prevalent from the early days of film, with 1903’s *The Great Train Robbery* being one of cinema’s first popular films. But a shift arguably occurred after the Second World War,
when the entire genre became more adult and self-conscious, troubling itself and introducing
many troubled characters. Citing Klinger, Neale writes that in the 1950s Hollywood was
deliberately trying to appear more “adult” in response to “a series of post-war crises (declining
audiences, government investigations, the demise of vertical integration, competition from
television and other leisure pursuits, and so on)” (213). Bandy and Stoehr second the idea that
the changing demands of audiences for more mature films was part of the reason for the shift. In
their words, “Hollywood producers were certainly aware of their audiences’ increasing need for
more complex ‘adult’ movies that reflected the public’s gradual disillusionment with traditional
myths of unfailing heroes and inevitable communal progress” (157). Instead, TV Westerns such
as Gunsmoke and The Lone Ranger started to fill that role with the uncomplicated hero fully
exultant in his triumph.

Bazin was one of the first critics to identify self-reflexivity as a characteristic of the A-list
Western in the postwar period. In his essay “The Evolution of the Western” (1955) he asserts
that the new Westerns of his time, instead of focusing primarily on romance, drama, and
spectacle, attempted to make social, intellectual, and aesthetic statements, inspiring him to call
them “superWesterns.” He writes, “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,” (51). Initially Shane may not sound like it
qualifies, given its purity of story. However, Žižek clarifies that Shane’s “additional interest” is
the Western myth itself. He writes that “…[Shane] is a Western that implies a kind of nostalgic
distance toward the universe of Westerns, a Western that functions, so to speak, as its own myth”
(42). It renders admiration of the Western in such a way that is only possible by coming after

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7 Also translated as “meta-Westerns” or “suprawesterns"
previously established patterns. As Bazin says, “The others do their best to extract explicit themes from the implied myths but the theme of *Shane* is the myth” (51), creating an elevated work of homage. To appreciate *Shane*, one must reflect on the power of the Western myth in its previous iterations, and see the layered ways in which it is both deconstructing and celebrating them, most clearly seen in its split adult-child perspective.
Chapter 2

“The world – a gate
To a thousand deserts silent and cold!
He who has lost
What you have lost never rests.”

(Nietzsche 329, my translation)

The stanza above, taken from the middle of the harrowing poem “Farewell” by Friedrich Nietzsche, expresses the lonely yet driven solitude of a person condemned to wander a wilderness, separated from civilization. While it is doubtful Nietzsche had the American cowboy in mind when he composed these words, the figure he describes and the cowboy share with the modern individual a compulsion, sometimes internal, sometimes externally imposed, to wander in lonesomeness. No Western character better exemplifies this fact than Ethan Edwards, the protagonist of John Ford’s The Searchers (1956). Possibly one of the most complex Westerns to ever have been filmed, The Searchers is the story of a troubled, violent man’s search to recover his kidnapped niece from a Comanche chief. Its psychological exploration of Ethan (John Wayne), a Confederate army veteran and deeply racist individual, is among the most compelling in the genre. In this chapter I examine the parallels between the modern individual and Ethan, such as his nomadism, heterogeneous identity, and experiences of lack. I also relate his search for his niece Debbie (Natalie Wood) to the search for totality in modernity. In the process, I present a reading of The Searchers that illuminates philosophical dimensions of this story that have previously gone overlooked.

As an auteur filmmaker, John Ford was able to bring formal and symbolic complexity to the Western. The Searchers, based on Alan Le May’s 1954 novel of the same name—he and his scriptwriter Frank Nugent were able to focus the story far more onto Ethan and create new layers
of meaning in his character. He is largely based on the character Amos from the book—both of them join their foster nephew Martin on the search for Debbie; both have a deep-seated hatred of Native Americans; and both are in love with Martha, their sister-in-law. However, in the novel, Marty is the central character. The narrator is third-person limited omniscient, and while it is an exterior novel—emphasizing characters’ visceral reactions, physical suffering, and descriptions of landscape rather than introspection or philosophizing—we are more privy to Marty’s thoughts than anyone else’s. Amos is flat and static by comparison; according to Garry Wills, he in essence remains hateful and distrustful throughout the book, and must therefore be killed off (252). In the movie, however, Ethan is the central figure, overshadowing his nephew. At the narrative’s end, he is able to be redeemed if not rehabilitated. In the book, the search may force Marty to prove himself, testing his mental and physical endurance, but Debbie always remains the true object. In the film, Ethan is not only looking for his niece but part of his humanity.

Amos and Ethan are both troubling characters; the great difference between them is that Ethan is himself troubled. John Ford called the film a “psychological epic” and said that he intended Ethan’s character to be “profoundly problematic,” (qtd. in Eckstein 3, 4). Ford called a “psychological epic” and said that he intended Ethan’s character to be “profoundly problematic,” (qtd. in Eckstein, “Main Critical Issues” 3, 4). When scholars have studied the ideas symbolically at work in The Searchers, many have done so in political terms, as Jeffrey Church and Robert Pippin have. One exception to this is Richard Gilmore’s analysis in his book Doing Philosophy at the Movies. Gilmore identifies Ethan as representing the human urge to philosophy, which he describes as the effort to attain self-knowledge in a difficult world (16). While I agree that Ethan is on a journey of mind, and not simply a physical excursion, that an

8 “Problematic” being the term Lukács uses for modern civilization (28; see also 78).
even richer analysis is possible by analyzing Ethan not as an uninflected philosophic prototype but rather as an exemplification of human beings’ internal state in modernity.

The film opens much as *Shane* does, with the approach of the drifter Ethan Edwards toward the Texas homestead of his brother Aaron. Aaron, his wife Martha, and their children are part of a small community of settlers trying to raise cattle in the harsh environment of the desert, the home of the hostile Comanche. The first shots of Ethan are from the perspective of Martha, looking out at the distant Ethan as he approaches in a shroud of dust. This opening symbolizes a number of important things about Ethan, all of them related to his “modern” traits. As Clay Steinman describes in his essay “The Method of the Searchers,” the contrast between inside and outside, home and wilderness that is set up in this scene is “[t]he film’s central dichotomy” (19). In Lukácsian terms, the “inside” characters like Martha and Aaron can be described as “integrated”—embodying the stability, sociability, and homogeneity of the pre-modern frame of mind. Ethan, on the other hand, is a “problematic,” modern character—fragmented, alienated, pulled by conflicting influences—and stays mainly on the periphery. This shrouded entrance suggests the difficulty the other characters and the audience will have getting to know him, as well as the complexity of his character, his ambivalent beliefs and unclear past and future. The next sequence, which shows Aaron’s family gathered around to greet Ethan, confirms these traits even as it introduces more information about his past. It is 1868, three years after the Civil War ended, but Ethan avoids discussing where he has been and what he has done after his service for the Confederacy. There are signs, however, that it was adventurous and possibly extra-legal. For example, he gives his brother a bag of silver that is newly minted, which indicates that Ethan may have stolen it from a bank (Buscombe 9, Kalinak 120). Additionally, when Debbie, around ten years old, asks him for a locket, he gives her a war medal from Mexico, suggesting he may
have fought there as a mercenary (Eckstein, “Main Critical Issues” 5). These hints remain only that, however, and confirm that Ethan is a complex figure whom his associates can only partially come to know.

That evening yet another visual device marks Ethan as an outsider—at the family has gone to bed, Ethan stays out on the porch alone, once again solitary. Part of Ethan’s difficulty integrating with his brother’s family is Ethan’s hinted-at attraction to his sister-in-law Martha. While it is never stated outright in dialogue, there are a number of important indicators that Ethan is in love with Martha and that she returns his affections. For example, after word comes to the homestead that cattle rustlers have been at a neighboring homestead, Ethan rides out with the Texas Rangers to catch the culprits. Before he leaves, Martha gathers his things for him, spending a few extra moments to contemplatively stroke his Johnny Reb coat. As he takes it from her, Ethan kisses Martha on the forehead, their mutual desire showing in their strained postures. It is also significant that Ethan still swears allegiance to the battle-born Confederacy, the creation of which threatened the Union, like he now threatens his brother’s domestic union. His deep yearning for Martha is further witnessed to by his response when he realizes that the attack on the cattle was no more than a diversion and that Comanches have actually been on a murder raid to the Edwards’ homestead. When he reaches their home, he runs through the flaming structures yelling not his brother’s name but Martha’s, only to find her violated and murdered in a hovel on the property. His calling her name highlights that she is the most important member of the family to him, and when he finds signs that her daughters—who could have been his were the two of them able to unite—have been kidnapped rather than killed by the Comanche, he begins searching for them, symbolically seeking the closest semblance of Martha now left in the world.
Martha is more than a simple love interest for Ethan. If we read her through a modernist lens, she is the objective corollary to the stability and totality that the modern individual desires but cannot have. Having a wife, family, and permanent home would mean having a fixed place in an intact world and an assurance of identity for Ethan. Instead of this, he is a complex wanderer, blown about by circumstance and wearing different hats along the way—soldier, possibly outlaw, and knower of Indians, as I will go on to describe—but always denied the form of self-realization he most wants, union with Martha. Lukács writes that the modern individual experiences an “abyss” in himself because of the “unbridgeable chasm” between “cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world” (34). Subjectivity is the one ultimate truth in modernity, as Descartes discovered and Kant expounded upon, meaning that one can no longer confidently assume to comprehend the universe.9 Ethan’s experiences are interpersonal rather than metaphysical, but their psychological outcome is still the same—he possesses a haunting lack, an abyss in himself due to the unbridgeable distance between him and his sister-in-law. It is this distance he seeks to bridge by searching for her daughters, and its poignancy can be seen in the doggedness of his search.

Understanding the relationship of Ethan to Martha and the modern person to totality is vital to understanding the phenomenon of the search, which lies at the heart of the film and at the heart of a “modern” literary form, the novel. After Ethan and his nephew Marty find most of Aaron’s family murdered, they and the other homesteaders strike out to find the Comanche tribe that abducted them, a search party eventually whittled down to just him and his nephew Marty. As discussed in the introduction, the act of searching is one of the significant ways in which Ethan resembles the individual in the modern condition. Journeys, searches, and exiles play a major role in theories of modernity. While it would be an oversimplification to say that

9 See Habermas 16-19 for greater discussion of subjectivity in modernity.
modern individuals merely wish to recapture the simplicity of pre-modern life, numerous theorists suggest moderns sense the lack of the surety and totality it provided and seek it in other ways more suited to their own age. Nikos Papastergiadis, who relates the experience of immigrants and exiles to modernity, “…exile is not just the consequence of modernity, but also a metaphor for the processes within modernity” (1). Detaching from the known and familiar, entering a subjective, individualistic form of perception and analysis—these processes may describe the life of the modern mind, but they also resound with Ethan’s situation.

Lukács goes beyond other writers who identify searching and journeying as part of modernist psychology and relates the phenomenon of the search to the literary form that reflects that psychology, namely the novel. The Greeks’ foremost literary form was the epic, best exemplified in the works of Homer. “For the epic,” writes Lukács, “the world at any given moment is an ultimate principle; it is empirical at its deepest, most decisive, all-determining transcendental base” (46). In the Iliad, for example, “which has no beginning and no end, a rounded universe blossoms into all-embracing life” (55). The novel, contrastingly, lacks this kind of totality—a subjective genre, it is often limited to one character’s viewpoint, reflecting the “fragile and incomplete nature of the world” (71). “Thus,” Lukács writes, “the fundamental form-determining intention of the novel is objectivized as the psychology of the novel’s heroes: they are the searchers”10 (60, translation modified, my italics). Through this artistic creation, modern writers posit a kind of self-contained universe, but it can never hope to actually present world-embracing, empirical system of truth. Rather, “The novel tells of the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself” (89).

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10 “So objektiviert sich die formbestimmende Grundgesinnung des Romans als Psychologie der Romanhelden: sie sind Suchende.“ (50).
Ethan’s search is much the same, as it involves not only scouring the desert but also a
certain amount of soul searching in Ethan. As previously stated, Ethan is deeply hateful towards
Native Americans, even though he is more educated in their languages and way of life than any
other white character. He constantly criticizes his foster nephew Martin because he is one-eighth
Cherokee, and at one point he begins shooting buffalo simply to deny food to the Native
Americans who subsist off of them. Most importantly, Ethan’s hate of miscegenation is so strong
that as time goes on and the chances of Debbie marrying a Comanche increases, it is seldom
clear whether Ethan means to bring her home or kill her. Indeed, when Ethan and Marty finally
locate her, she tells Marty that after years of praying for him to rescue her to no avail, she
adopted the Comanche as her kin; “These are my people,” she declares. Disgusted by her
betrayal, Ethan tries to shoot her, even after she risks her safety by warning him and Marty to
flee from an approaching group of attackers from her tribe. The disgrace of sex with a non-white
(in particular a white woman with a non-white man) is the idea talked around in the film but
mostly too horrifying to put into words. For example, after Marty stops him from trying to shoot
Debbie, Ethan shouts, “She’s been living with a buck! She’s nothing but a…” and cannot finish
his sentence, torn between his disgust and likely some kind regard he still has for her. Unlike
some scholars who argue that Ethan is driven primarily by hatred or perverse obsession to
recover his niece (Eckstein, “Darkening Ethan” 7-8), I argue that Ethan has ambiguous feelings
about her. She represents contradictory things, such as his love of Martha and his hatred of the
Comanche who killed her, and family ties as well as miscegenation. I therefore argue that not
only is the audience left questioning Ethan’s intent, but he also is unsure of it, a point supported
by Gilmore’s analysis. He writes, “It is my contention that the search for her [Debbie] took so
long in part because he [Ethan] did not really want to find her. He did not want to find her
because he did not know what to do if he did. He was always of two minds, driven by love as much as hatred, although he himself seemed to be unaware of this conflict” (32). It is in these contradictory feelings that lie the seeds of tolerance that eventually lead him to accept his niece and Marty.

Further complicating this matter is Ethan’s own intimacy with Native American cultures and his embodiment of both white and Indian traits, resulting in a heterogeneous identity that contributes to the complexity and violent fragmentation of his character. His ability to survive in the wilderness and his knowledge of the Indians sometimes make his mind seem more in tune with theirs than with other white men’s. In addition, there are specific aspects of his resemblance to Native Americans that are particularly relevant to his role as a transcendental “searcher.” The first is that the name of the band of Comanche for whom he is searching: Scar’s band are called the Nawyecki, which translates to “round about,” or “Them As Never Gets Where They’re Going” (Le May 104). In other words, they are wanderers, much like Ethan himself.

Additionally, when at one point he finds an Indian corpse, Ethan shoots its eyes out so that it will wander “restless on the wind,” rather than reaching the afterlife, an act echoing with karmic significance and suggesting a kind of provisional acceptance of Indian beliefs, at least as much as Ethan accepts any religion. Furthermore, like Shane, Ethan faces a kind of doppelgänger in his enemy Scar, the Comanche chief who murdered Martha and kidnapped Debbie (Buscombe 23). For example, both Ethan and Scar have suffered loss of family members (in Scar’s case, two sons murdered by settlers), which now fuels their retaliatory violence. Additionally, during their initial meeting Ethan also knows that Scar is the particular chief he has sought because the latter is wearing the war medal Ethan earned in Mexico and gave to Debbie as a child. At this same meeting there is a somewhat humorous exchange in which they each display familiarity with one
another’s cultures. Finding they are able to communicate Ethan remarks to Scar, “You speak pretty good English, someone teach you?” Scar responds in kind: “You speak pretty good Comanch;’ someone teach you?”

These parallels between Ethan and his Comanche foes were deliberate on the part of Ford and his screenwriter Frank Nugent, as they are not present in Alan LeMay’s novel upon which the film is based. For example, in the book it is Martin, not his uncle, who learns to communicate with Native Americans in their own language. Additionally, as Buscombe (24) and Eckstein (“Darkening Ethan” 15) point out, Scar has sex with Martha, something Ethan also desires to do. This assertion must be tempered by the recognition that Scar’s act and Ethan’s desire are not the same—rape is an entirely different matter than sexual intimacy. These critics are right, however, that both men have transgressive sexual designs upon Martha. All of these points of resemblance indicate that Ethan’s racism is more complicated than it may initially appear, as it also contains strong self-hatred. Ethan never articulates this in the film—to do so would not be true to his laconic, rugged stoicism. However, these deliberate parallels suggest that Ethan loathes himself as well as the Comanche, especially after he allows Martha to be killed. The fundamental idea conveyed by their similarities is that the self and the Other are of the same at the deepest levels—is a sophisticated tack that prefigures the revisionist Westerns of the 1980s and 1990s. All the same, while Ethan is clearly familiar with both white and Native American cultures, he is not really integrated into either group, which is yet another way his world remains heterogeneous and chaotic—in a word, modern.

Both the circuitousness and the setting of Ethan and Marty’s journey resonate with transcendental, modernist significance. Their journey is circuitous in two senses. The first is physical—Marty and Ethan travel back and forth across Texas, going from Oklahoma to what
appears to be Mexico. However, their search is also indirect in that Ethan is looking not for his true desire, Martha, who is now beyond reach, but only a shadow of her. Speaking again of the novel Lukács writes, “The simple fact of seeking implies that neither the goals nor the way leading to them can be directly given,” (60). Instead, the focus is on the protagonist’s process of becoming, not his or her unchanging, essential nature. Lukács argues that for the modern subject, whose psychology is reflected in the novel, the path to access sense, sure knowledge, and totality is a tortuous one. Papastergiadis also characterizes modern goals and points of departure as being ambiguous. He writes that “…the real difference between the uncertitude of this epoch as compared with others is that the foreignness and uncanniness of a journey is measured not by the distance travelled, but in the unlocatability of the moment of departure and arrival. When did one truly leave? Was it in a dream, with a rumour, on a wish, or in the ship? As for arrival, is it the place of destination or some way between destiny and return?” (6). Ethan does not immigrate from one homeland to another, the experience evoked in this description. However, the goal and point of origin are likewise unclear, hazy like in the first and last moments of the film. Is the goal finding Debbie and bringing her home or ending her life? Where does he go when he cannot enter the homestead? The only answer is that he will journey.

The setting of the search also conveys the lonely, fraught nature of the search and Ethan’s troubled psychology. Both book and movie are both ostensibly set in Texas, but Ford instead chose to film against one of the United States’ most dramatic vistas—Monument Valley in northern Arizona and southeastern Utah. To anyone who knows even a little bit about the topography of those states this is an obvious inaccuracy. However, that fact plays little role—rather, what matters is that this landscape is more dramatic and psychologically fraught than Texas prairie would be. Although this was a typical landscape for John Ford—he shot here time
and again from *Stagecoach* (1939) to *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964)—it takes on deeper meaning in the context of *The Searchers*. The red canyons of the film speak to the fissures in Ethan’s character, and the mesas stand like unmoved deities, dwarfing the two men and emphasizing their peril—in Ethan’s case spiritual as well as physical as he decides how to respond to what he perceives as his niece’s miscegenist crimes. Scenes of the two of them riding alone amongst the craggy landforms remind that the frontier is an ambiguous expanse. On the one hand, its openness is a clear symbol of freedom and possibility. However, Warshow describes that it can also be surprisingly undercutting in the Western. He writes,

> “Once it has been discovered that the true theme of the Western movie is not the freedom and expansiveness of frontier life, but its limitations, its material bareness, the pressures of obligation, then even the landscape itself ceases to be quite the arena of free movement that it once was, but becomes instead a great empty waste, cutting down more often than it exaggerates the stature of the horsemen who rides across it” (41).

The frontier represents not only wide-open possibility but lack. In Gilmore’s words, Ethan “lives in the presence of absence” (22)—the wilderness is a reminder of Ethan’s loneliness, his anti-social violence, his missing niece, and his denied love. But it is also the space that he retreats to in the face of these things. When he rides on the plains or into the desert he is experiencing a modern phenomenon—a constant search, often for peace with the past or human nature and arguably a total understanding of the world and its parts that is ultimately unavailable to him. Lukács writes of the “transcendental topography of the . . . mind” and asserts that in the case of the modern man, this topography involves an “unbridgeable chasm” between “cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world” (34). The landscape of Monument Valley powerfully echoes Ethan’s inner world, the fragmented nature of which ties him to modernity.
Of course, the film title is plural, not singular, so why do I except the nephew Marty in this analysis of the search? After all, he journeys with his uncle and is actually the one to kill Scar, the war chief who took Debbie captive. While physically Marty joins in the pursuit with Ethan, he does not share the same inner search with Ethan and in fact lacks the traits and attitudes that mark Ethan as a typically modern individual. Marty is not homeless like Ethan—he will probably return to homesteading, likely marrying a former neighbor, Laurie, soon after returning with Debbie. Furthermore, violence does not mark him as an outsider, and, critically, he does not exhibit the same haunted, world-weary pensiveness as Ethan. Additionally, Marty does not risk what Ethan does in searching for the girls, namely the need to overcome his deep-seated bigotry. Risk plays a critical role in the modernist search, as Lukács describes, and reflects its personal stakes. In a pre-modern age, searching would not be necessary, as identity and meaning are both easily graspable (Kellner 141). In such a society, “The soul goes out to seek adventure; it lives through adventures, but it does not know the real torment of seeking and the real danger of finding; such a soul never stakes itself; it does not yet know that it can lose itself, it never thinks of having to look for itself” (30). Marty is on the “adventure” that is searching for Debbie, endlessly concerned for her, but not about to lose his soul in consequence of the journey. Ethan, however, faces precisely this dilemma, losing his soul either through despicable violence to Debbie or by loss of the shallow sense of identity he derives from his belief in the superiority of white males over all other people.

In the end, Ethan’s regard for Debbie and her mother triumphs over his self-destructive desire for vengeance and his senseless insistence on racial superiority. When a neighbor hears where the Nawyecki might be camped, a posse gets together again, this time with additional firepower from a nearby contingent of Texas Rangers and attacks the camp. Debbie, now
resolved to re-join her brother and return to white society, escapes from the camp. Ethan is the one to catch her, and the audience is on edge for several seconds, anticipating that he probably means to kill and scalp her, just like he scalped Scar a few moments before. Instead, he lifts her high in the air, then says, “Let’s go home, Debbie,” echoing the way he picked her up as a little girl at the beginning of the film. According to Buscombe, these are “surely the most moving yet bitterly ironic words in Ford” (64). Ironic of course because Ethan speaks so gently to a niece whom just recently he attempted to kill, but also ironic because he never can go home.

The film’s final scene confirms this. It provides one of the most haunting visuals in the movie, perhaps in all movie history: as his niece and nephew are reunited with their neighbors, Ethan hangs back alone, visible through a darkened door frame. He takes a few steps forward, watching the reunion, and then stops, as though he realizes he has no real place in this happy scene. He turns around, trudging back out into the dusty landscape, and then the homestead’s door closes behind him, marking him as an outsider and wanderer forever. His five-year search is now over, and what has it gotten him? We leave him much like he was in the beginning, though having experienced even more painful losses than before. He is reconciled with Marty and Debbie but has lost Aaron, Lucy, and above all Martha.

His lonesome departure suggests he will be traveling for years yet, trying to come to terms with what has happened. Similarly, the immanence of meaning in the modern literary form, the novel, “lies in the hero’s finding out through experience that a mere glimpse of meaning is the highest life has to offer” (Lukács 80). The brief moment of reconciliation with Debbie and not a home, abiding kinship, or his great love was really all that one could hope for Ethan. Ultimately, the process of searching for meaning “extends over a lifetime,” Lukács writes, along “the way towards a man’s recognition of himself” (Ibid.). Nor is there any end to this
journey in sight—as he puts it, the novel’s very concern is “seeking and failing to find the essence”\textsuperscript{11} (122). Ethan, the last scene of the film suggests, will continue in this process alone, without any destination except perhaps another “glimpse of meaning” that will help him to achieve a degree of self-knowledge.

Jeffrey Church portrays \textit{The Searchers} as a drama of connections that Ethan either builds or destroys, connections such as those between him and his relatives and between him and Scar. Church sees Martin, who is apparently going to settle down and join the community, as proving the point that individualism like Ethan’s must ultimately be tempered with human connection (Church 54). However, I conclude that Ethan is not unsuccessful simply because he chooses to not integrate. Rather, his distance reflects the inability of others around him to understand the depths of his experiences—his incredible grief over Martha, the encounters he has had with Native Americans. As someone who has entered the modern frame of reference, he cannot successfully relate to those who have not. Papastergiadis writes, “Perhaps what is unique to modernity is not just the unprecedented scale of migrations, or even the nature of the imposition or the obligation to leave home, but rather the experience of estrangement that precedes departure. In modernity foreignness is not commensurate with distance traveled” (13). While \textit{The Searchers} does not deal with global migration, Ethan is still a character who is driven away from the community by an internal estrangement. In terms of “foreignness” he is easily contrasted with Marty, who is able to go on the same journey as Ethan and yet still return home. The fact that Marty is part Native American by descent makes the contrast even stronger. This ethnic difference from the other settlers is a reason he could be alienated from them, but it is Ethan who is the outsider.

\textit{Over The Searchers’} last scene the Sons of the Pioneers sing these lyrics:

\footnote{\textsuperscript{11} „das Suchen-müssen und Nicht-finden-können des Wesens“ (125)}
A man will search his heart and soul,  
Go searching way out there,  
His peace of mind he knows he'll find,  
But where, oh Lord, Lord where?

These “melancholy” words, written under the direct supervision of Ford (Eckstein, “Darkening Ethan” 5), suggest both an inward search (“his heart and soul”) and an outer one (the marvelously expansive “out there”). The outer search is the one Ethan was on during the long years he traversed the land looking for Debbie; the inner search, when he finally decided not to kill her. The song’s optimism about finding peace of mind, however, contradicts what the film implies, Ethan’s departure echoing instead the question, “But where”? The departure ending is the most evocative and most repeated in the literature of the Western. Almost to the point of stereotype, the story ends with the cowboy riding away into the sunset. John Saunders notes that this ending is so common that in Henry King’s The Gunfighter (1950), “we see Gregory Peck making the customary exit over the final credits, in spite of his funeral in the penultimate sequence,” (33). The reasons for departure are a bit different in each film, but by studying many of them patterns and types emerge. Comparatively studying these endings helps elucidate what is at stake in this type of conclusion, including in The Searchers. First, there is the difference between leaving to return again and leaving for good. As Armando Prats points out, in many serial and B-Westerns the cowboy hero rides away just so he can continue his adventures again later (105). In these cases viewers are interested in him not as a fully developed, realistically well-rounded character but as an episodic adventurer—he goes away simply to come back. Another reason is that if we were to see the cowboy hero settle down and live an ordinary life, his super-human mythos would be shattered. In Prats’s words, “to have followed him beyond the end of the ride might have meant acquiescing in the inevitable dissolution of his powers” (106). We can’t see him wrestle with commonplace matters such as “pigs and taters,” as Chris
Calloway puts it in *Shane*. That might be appropriate for a homesteading couple, but not the quasi-mythic hero.

However, there is more to this matter in both *The Searchers* and *Shane*. The departure reflects Ethan and Shane’s transcendental homelessness, an important modern quality they share. As discussed in the introduction, “transcendental homelessness” is a spiritual rootlessness that is a consequence of the shift in worldview between the ancient and modern times (Lukács 41). Lukács explains the difference between these sense of “home” experienced in pre-modern and modern societies by likening the life of the mind to individuals’ ability to navigate by the stars. Speaking of pre-modern times he writes, “Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths . . . The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is the of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and fire are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another…” (29). In contrast, Lukács’ says that in his age, “Kant’s starry firmament now shines only in the dark night of pure cognition, it no longer lights any solitary wanderer’s path (for to be a man in the new world is to be solitary). And the inner light affords evidence of security, or its illusion, only to the wanderer’s next step. No light radiates any longer from within into the world of events, into its vast complexity to which the soul is a stranger” (36). *The Searchers* does not deal explicitly with Kant or astronavigation, but the latter state described in this celestial analogy explains the philosophical dimensions of what Ethan is going through. He is not secure but is rather characterized by dichotomies, for example by being white and bigoted while at the same time resembling the Nawyecki. The “vast complexity” of the world is thus reflected in Ethan. Shane is in a number of ways a simpler character, but he too is a mix of benevolence and violence, of social ties and independence. Again, as Kitses describes in *Horizons West*, it’s the dialectic
between Wilderness and Civilization that helps form the cowboy hero-figure; he usually stands somewhere ambivalently between these two (59). Consequently, he will not constantly stay in the frontier town, nor will he completely cut social ties, a fact represented visually in *Shane* and *The Searchers* in the way both protagonists are kept outside the family homes (Shane in the family’s shed and Ethan on his brother’s porch).

Indeed, another critical aspect of their departure is the fact that both men leave alone. In some Western stories, including *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *Stagecoach*, and *High Noon*, the hero leaves with a romantic partner. Departure in a couple indicates leaving behind social conditions which are unproductive or harmful for the promise of flourishing new life together in the future. In all three of the works named above, the central couples leave towns which embody all that Rousseau found distasteful about “culture”—hypocrisy, vanity, competition—and head for a more Edenic life, enjoying the positive aspects of community without the negative aspects of “society.” The couple may be constrained in their current circumstances, but they are surely going to other conditions better suited to their union, where they can prosper and typically live a higher morality than the townspeople they are fleeing, like Sheriff Kane and his Quaker wife in *High Noon*. Leaving can be a way to start over free of the prejudice and circumscribed identities they have known, such as when Jane disentangles herself from Mormonism in *Riders of the Purple Sage* and Dallas is able to become a farmwife rather than a prostitute in *Stagecoach*. The lone departer may share to a small degree in these promises of re-invention and liberation, but “going it alone” seems to indicate that his chances of success are far lower. Oftentimes his reputation meets him in the next town, and frequently when we meet these protagonists at the beginning of films, they are introduced as someone already having a dodgy, often nomadic past, as occurs in both *Shane* and *The Searchers*. The modernist loner is not able to settle and flourish
in the way a couple is, whose mutual support of one another and pooled material but especially emotional and social resources lends them the means to start a stable new life. The very act of departing alone suggests chaos, imperfection, an inability to become whole, modern attributes that help to explain the hero’s onward drive.

Some commentators have suggested that the Western is appealing because audiences enjoy the vicarious experience of the cowboy’s freedom—we like the idea of being able to leave home and not be tied down by responsibility and community. This idea may be valid for some Westerns and some viewers, but this does not explain *The Searchers*, in which the protagonist’s solitude is a result of suffering, not just strength. Viewing Ethan as a “modern” figure suggests a different explanation as to why Ethan is compelling—as “modern” viewers, we are homeless wanderers in pursuit of self-knowledge and totality. Even if our struggle does not involve Comanche or kidnapped niece, it is also marked by partial realizations and transformations, long struggle and brief moments of insight and redemption. It is interesting to note that Lukács declines to weigh in on whether the life is greater in ancient or modern times and whether the transition to modern times represents progress or merely change (37). Rather, he only goes so far as to state though that the modern world is “richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the [ancient] Greeks” (34). Likewise, *The Searchers* is a richer and more compelling if also more challenging story because of Ethan’s problematic nature. While his struggles are commonly viewed as merely those of a single narrow-minded individual, my reading of this film shows that Ethan’s journey has meaning for any who have felt the freedoms and constraints of modernity.
Conclusion

In his book *The American Adam* R.W.B. Lewis traced the idea in 19th century literature that part of the American project was the establishment of a new culture of innocence and possibility, a kind of Edenic societal reset to be realized in the freedom of the frontier. The nation was meant to develop a “radically new personality,” an individual “happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). By the mid-20th century, the literary concept of the frontier American had changed, especially in A-list cinema. Instead of this optimistic type, at the center of some of the periods’ most important frontier narratives was a troubled wanderer, alone but not self-sufficient, not blessed by his lack of ancestry but instead haunted by a hazy past and incapable of forming lasting human connections. Indeed, as Durgnat and Simmon observe, the curse of Cain rests upon many heroes of the film Western of this period, including Shane and Ethan (76); it is this, not the promise of Adam, that for them characterizes the frontier.

This Biblical metaphor is elucidating, but an even more promising framework for re-reading the film Western is that of modernity. Shane and Ethan in their heterogeneity and independence, echo the modern individual as described by numerous theorists of modernity, including Lukács, Kristeva, and Benjamin. Like the modern subject, they long for but are left without a secure spiritual home, metonymically represented by women in their lives. They pursue totality and meaning—be it through a gunfight or a manhunt—which effort rewarded with partial but not lasting victory. Both stand apart from the characters around them, who largely echo the resolved, stable quality of pre-modern life.
This is, of course, a metaphoric reading that looks beyond the immediate action of both films. Although *Shane* does reflect on the changing political and economic nature of the West at the close of the 19th century, neither movie obviously and deliberately takes “modern times” as its subject, in the same way as, for example, Charlie Chaplin’s film by that name or Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera*. However, questions of individuality, social integration, freedom, and immanence are similarly reflected in both the philosophy of modernity and these Westerns. Additionally, while both are typically narrative, realist Hollywood productions, not avant-garde works (such as the Vertov film mentioned above) the filmmakers’ focus on these modern themes does signal a new direction in the genre itself. On the one hand, Shane, an elevated distillation of Western stories, at once glorifying the myth and yet ready to undermine its classical hero. On the other hand, Ethan represents the growth of a kind of revisionist anti-hero whose response to loss is both compelling and dangerous. While very different films and very different heroes, they indicate a deepening and growing complexity in the genre in the 1950s. The cowboy hero of the Western is a figure who still fascinates Americans like few others. Even though he may not as frequently be represented in popular entertainment as 60 years ago, the country has not ceased to draw upon him in their conception and critique of the nation. Politicians pride themselves on being mavericks independent of any “brand,” for example, and the cowboy was frequently invoked for both praise and condemnation in discussion of President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq (Dodwell). However, while the cowboy hero may be widely referred to, my research demonstrates that more nuanced consideration needs to be given to this figure before we truly understand the role he has taken in popular entertainment.

My research has not been able to cover all aspects of the Western and there are many questions related to my subject that remain open for further study, such as how the “modern”
cowboy fared as the genre evolved in the 1960s and beyond. How did changing social conditions of these times affect this figure’s dilemmas and values? Do the amoral or immoral protagonists of the spaghetti Western still experience the compromise of character through violence that Shane does, for example? And have new meanings have been brought to the departure ending by Westerns of the 21st century such as *Open Range* or *Django Unchained*? I have entertained these questions during my research and have come to tentative answers, yet they are worthy of in-depth analysis of their own.

Although post-modernism has supplanted many modernist ideas and greatly altered present-day conception of the history and myth, the discussion of the modernity of these films is still significant. The conditions of post-modernity still offer individuals great freedom to make their intellectual way in the world and form their worldviews, but they do not immediately provide the confidence to counterbalance the challenges and dilemmas this inherently creates. Indeed, our repudiation of modernity has not changed many aspects of the pursuit of meaning. In many ways it continues to resemble Shane and Ethan’s frontier journeys, characterized by an endless search for immanence, rewarded by moments of insight and connection; the solitude and depth of the subjectivist mind, contrasted with the simplicity of pre-modern community; and an always shifting balance of freedom of our powers and the constriction of our pasts. There may be “no goin’ back” as Shane puts it, but studying these texts shows us the rich meaning of what is already here.
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