Navajo Weavings in John Ford Westerns: The Visual Rhetoric of Presenting Savagery and Civilization

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how although placed in the periphery or backgrounds of many scenes, Navajo weavings are central to the presentation of the spectacle of wilderness, savagery, warfare, heroism, and salvation in many of John Ford’s westerns. In this article, the authors examine specific examples of visual rhetoric in two of Ford’s westerns: Stagecoach and The Searchers. They articulate how Navajo weavings constitute a strategic component of set designs and have consequences for viewers’ expectations and understandings of these films. These weavings are key elements of a powerful visual rhetoric in Ford’s films.

KEYWORDS

Art, Film, Indians, John Ford, Native Americans, Visual Rhetoric, Weaving

INTRODUCTION

In John Ford’s Straight Shooting (1917) Navajo blankets hang on the wall behind the entrance to the saloon and behind the bar. Inside a stage depot in Stagecoach (1939) we see a weaving over a bench under a window in the background. In My Darling Clementine (1946), a Navajo weaving covers the foot of Chihuahua’s bed. A stagecoach arrives at a station in Fort Apache (1948) and in the foreground a Navajo woman is weaving. In one of the first shots in The Searchers (1956) we see a Navajo Weaving bearing a Storm Pattern design hanging on a rail. And, finally, during the climax of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) a Chief’s Blanket hangs in a window of the general store. What are we to make of so many wearing blankets, saddle blankets, trade blankets, quilts, and other textiles in John Ford westerns? What we suggest is that, although they are placed in the periphery or backgrounds of many scenes, these textiles are central to the presentation of the spectacle of wilderness, savagery, warfare, heroism, and salvation. These weavings help to create a world that seems both untouched and full of cultural exchange, a land where we seem to find clear differences between people but where racial boundaries that have clearly been crossed, a place where wilderness and civilization blur into one another, and a setting where stereotypes make plain who is who but where their relationships are never set in stone. In other words, the weavings work as key elements of a powerful visual rhetoric in Ford’s films.

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Not only have Ford’s films been entertaining to generations of movie fans, but they have also helped to shape a popular understanding of Native Americans and their relationship to white society. Due to their placement in specific spaces, appearances in certain key scenes, and absences from other spaces and scenes, Navajo weavings and other textiles in some important Ford westerns establish the setting for plots, connote a distance from civilization or wilderness, prescribe relationships of key characters, signal class or ethnic location, and signify the triumph of civilization over savagery. Our primary task is in many ways particular and technical: to examine specific examples of visual rhetoric in two of Ford’s westerns: Stagecoach and The Searchers. Navajo weavings stand out in these two films because of their sustained appearance and impact.

STAGECOACH (1939)

At the beginning of Stagecoach we see two men riding across the desert at full gallop to deliver news to a cavalry fort about a hostile uprising (Figure 1). As they ride past a line of cavalry tents outside the fort we see one person, presumably native, wearing a Pendleton trade blanket. Pendletons and other blankets produced by Euro-Americans are important to the history of the west. Indians traded pelts and hides for these mass manufactured goods. Hudson Bay blankets, manufactured in England, for example, were popular items on the northern plains and in Canada. With widened settlement and exploration of North America, demand for trade blankets increased and several U.S. woolen mills began production of goods specifically for trade with Native Americans. In 1896 the first U.S. mill devoted exclusively to trade blanket production, Pendleton Woolen Mills, opened in Pendleton, Oregon. Pendleton executives sent designers to reservations to develop patterns that reflected Native design preferences and developed a line of blankets uniquely styled to indigenous peoples’ tastes. Obtained through local trading posts, Pendleton blankets quickly became the wearing blanket of choice on reservations. They have been especially popular on the Navajo Reservation where trading posts have flourished. Acquired in exchange for raw wool and jewelry and weaving of local hand manufacture, Pendleton blankets became valued objects that not only kept their owners warm but signified their status and served as highly valued presents in tribal gift-giving practices. They eventually displaced Navajo weavings, which became increasingly desirable objects of non-Native home decor that were more valuable to their makers as commodities for off-reservation markets than as objects of everyday use (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Stagecoach: Pendleton blanket on figure on the right
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