賈繼中
國立臺灣科技大學應用外語系助理教授

摘 要

美國文學中的「羈縛」敘事傳統可以回溯自 1682 年。當時的 Rowlandson 女士就曾在她的著作中記錄被印第安人羈囚 11 週的心路歷程。而隨著愈來愈多的歐洲人移民新大陸，更多類似的遭遇也不斷上演。然而大部分這類型的敘事模式都清一色的著墨於白人的英勇救援以及被俘者如何歷經劫難重返社會。而值得玩味的是 20 世紀美國幾位重要電影導演紛紛利用此一傳統作為敘事框架，但主要用意卻是要重新檢視含蘊其中的困境難題與焦慮。約翰福特在其 1956 年的西部片經典《搜索者》當中安排了一幕令人大感訝異的場景：女主角在遭印第安人俘虜多年之後，當她遇見尋覓她多年的叔叔時，竟不願跟他重返家園，從此處切入探究引申出更深層的社會批判與族群議題。在這些電影當中主角不但歷經劫難，但也遇到文化自我認同危機，根深柢固的族群偏見與文化優越感也經由這些自我質疑的論述而得以被重新審視，形成更多的議題與辯論，從而開創包容與尊重多元文化社會的可能性。

關鍵字：「羈俘」敘事、遭俘者與營救行為、族群與文化認同、異文化、包容與多元的社會
Reappraisal of the Captivity Narrative Tradition in the Searchers, Taxi Driver, the Deer Hunter and Dances with Wolves

Chi-Chung Chia
Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Foreign Languages, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology

Abstract

The captivity narrative in American literature can date back to 1682 when Mary Rowlandson published the account of her 11 week captivity by Narragansett and Wampanoag Indians in New England. Since that time this literary tradition has enjoyed a tremendous popularity. As more Europeans migrated to America, more stories of captivity by Indians began to spread, most of which focus on the whites’ battle against the native Indians over the territorial control and they almost unanimously end on a note of the eventual victory of the American whites over the Indians and of how the captives endure great pain but get rescued and rejoin the white society. The captivity narrative tradition is once again employed by John Ford in his 1956 movie The Searchers, in which the captivated white female Debbie initially refused to be saved by Ethan Edwards played by John Wayne. By staging the drama of refutation this film attempts to reappraise the captivity narrative as a legitimate and sanitized convention to erase the tension and problems behind it. One kind of tension that might cause trouble in the captivity narrative is the scenario that the female captive might develop intimate relationship with the captor, usually an Indian, thus diminishing the white Americans’ cultural superiority and confidence. In these Hollywood films one can discern a common theme which challenges the rescuing hero’s narrative authority and demonstrates the captive’s implicit and schizophrenic urge to resist the hero’s rescue and would rather choose to undergo another kind of cultural transformation. These captives pose a threat to the stability and self-complacency of American culture, raising such issues as how to cultivate a more tolerant and multi-cultural society.

Keywords: the captivity narrative, captives and rescue mission, the racial and cultural identity, the alien culture, a tolerant and multi-cultural society
The captivity narrative in American literature can date back to 1682 when Mary Rowlandson published the account of her 11 week captivity by Narragansett and Wampanoag Indians in New England (Slotkin 102). Since that time this literary tradition has enjoyed a tremendous popularity. As more Europeans migrated to America, more stories of captivity by Indians began to spread, most of which focus on the whites’ battle against the native Indians over the territorial control and they almost unanimously end on a note of the eventual victory of the American whites over the Indians and of how the captives endure great pain but get rescued and rejoin the white society. This captivity narrative tradition is widely employed by Hollywood filmmakers in the twentieth century. Yet the battleground is no longer the traditional frontier of the American West, but is converted into the battlefield of the Vietnam War or the urban cityscape of modern New York (Mortimer 2).

The captivity narrative tradition is once again employed by John Ford in his 1956 movie The Searchers, in which the captivated white female Debbie initially refused to be saved by Ethan Edwards played by John Wayne. By staging the drama of refutation this film attempts to reappraise the captivity narrative as a legitimate and sanitized convention to erase the tension and problems behind it. One kind of tension that might cause trouble in the captivity narrative is the scenario that the female captive might develop intimate relationship with the captor, usually an Indian, thus diminishing the white Americans’ cultural superiority and confidence. Another crisis the captivity narrative has to cope with is a sense of cultural self-questioning generated by the captivity experience. As Barbara Mortimer illustrates: “Captivity narratives raise challenging questions: Are racial and cultural identity linked? Is cultural identity a choice? If so, is Anglo-American culture the best one”(5)? One might speculate that the earliest captivity narrative definitely tends to consolidate the white supremacy. But even in Mary Rowlandson’s case, her accounts are scattered with her amazement in the Indian’s resilience and strength which outshines the English Army. The fact that from its inception the captivity narrative tradition buries the seed of self-doubt and questioning foreshadows the later captivity narratives raising more controversies to re-examine the exceptionalness of American cultural identity.

John Cawelti in Six-Gun Mystique asserts that every Western has similar plot and story, that the hero is torn between civilization and savagery, that there is always a revenge hero who at first is opposed to the pacifistic ideals of the townspeople, but eventually realizes that he is actually committed to their way of life (74). Such bipolar dichotomy oversimplifies and ignores the important issues the captivity narratives
touch upon. Therefore, only when such Westerns as The Searchers are read in the framework of the captivity narrative tradition can its ambiguous and contradictory moments become illuminatingly readable (Barbara 11). In these Hollywood films one can discern a common theme which challenges the rescuing hero’s narrative authority and demonstrates the captive’s implicit and schizophrenic urge to resist the hero’s rescue and would rather choose to undergo another kind of cultural transformation. These captives pose a threat to the stability and self-complacency of American culture, raising such issues as how to cultivate a more tolerant and multi-cultural society.

In The Searchers for example, Ethan’s burning desire for revenge is fueled by his blind hatred for Comanches while the year 1956 when The Searchers was released roughly coincides with the announcement of the Brown Decision which caused a stir among the white society and provoked a resistance against this order in the American South. Yet The Searchers, though at first characterizes Ethan as a Indian hater, with whom many pro-segregation viewers might identify themselves, later changes the course to show that Ethan’s attitude and behavior won’t work; the director intends Martin to be the new hero in place of Ethan as a symbol of outmoded society, thus reconfirming his intention to nurture a tolerant and multi-racial mindset.

By 1976, director Martin Scorsese keeps questioning the captivity narrative tradition. Setting its location in urban New York, Scorsese goes even further to deconstruct the identity and integrity of the hero and the captive. As Barbara Mortimer argues: “Taxi Driver documents a contemporary awareness of the provisional, mediated nature of identity, the cultural pastiche on which subjectivity depends” (112). In The Searchers, even though the moment Ethan first found Debbie, she refused to go with him, yet later she admitted that she hoped that they would find her. Thus her status as a captive is never really questioned. While in Taxi Driver, however, the captive is Iris, a teen prostitute who only becomes the captive waiting to be rescued by Travis in his self-insulated, imaginary world. The greatest irony takes place when after a shooting spree Travis is shown as a hero on the newspaper headline because in actuality he is a Vietnam veteran who can only live by odd jobs and nourishes morbid thoughts and obsessions. Eventually as a social outcast he is relegated to his solipsistic world, and nowhere else is this sense of despair and isolation more poignantly articulated than in the following passage: “Loneliness has followed me my whole life. Everywhere in bars, in cars, sidewalks, stores, everywhere; there is no escape. I’m God’s lonely man” (qtd in A World in Chaos 103), as if the search for self-identity becomes self-defeating and elusive.
With the release of Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* comes an effort to walk out of the specter of self-doubt and trauma caused by the Vietnam War through the forging of a new sense of heroic identity, exemplified in the character Michael, played by Robert DeNiro. The film again utilizes the captivity narrative tradition; though the character Michael is elevated to a heroic mythic status, his final failure to rescue his buddy Nick speaks out his limitations. Barbara Mortimer designates this film as a “conservative return to *The Searchers*, eliminating the challenging investigation of the hero’s racism” (140). The North Vietnamese is depicted as a totally intractable and culturally alien people that it is impossible to bring about any kind of accommodation and intermingling from them.

The final film to tackle with is Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves*, which readdresses the theme of the white man finding his cultural recognition in Indians. It chronicles the protagonist John Dunbar’s gradual cultural transformation by becoming a member of a Lakota Indian tribe. One of the most touching scene happens when caught by white soldiers, Dunbar still refuses to reveal his real name, thus testifying to his true amalgamation into the Indians. By viewing and examining these four films in detail, one can see how the captivity narrative tradition is constantly employed to examine and address the American social condition, especially its treatment of the clash between two cultures. Traditionally, it is always the white American culture that assumes cultural supremacy, yet through the debate and reexamination in these films it is hoped that the myth of the American cultural superiority can be challenged and reappraised.

John Ford’s 1956 Western *The Searchers* is a classical Western in that it employs the frontier hero as the protagonist to fight against the Indians stereotypically depicted as the obstacle and evil forces in the way of the pioneer’s expansion in the West. But beneath the traditional genre and façade intimates a subverting message that subtly corresponds to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, an act which decrees that segregation in the public schools as unconstitutional (Mortimer 29). For the final stance John Ford takes is a modified, moderate ameliorated approach in dealing with the relationships between white people and the Indians, which mirrors the American society’s attitude toward racial tolerance and integration.

The stereotypical characterization of a Western hero presupposes that he is the personification of civilization and justice in juxtaposition to the Indian as the incarnation of evil, and the most important mission for the hero to accomplish is to eradicate the Indian. Behind this argument lies the idea of Manifest Destiny, which,
according to the definition by Wikipedia, signifies an ideology, a historical inevitability that White Americans will conquer the west frontier as a sacred obligation dictated by God, with Indians as the savages standing in the way of American expansion. Yet the earlier accounts of white captives intentionally ignore the fact that most returned captives have difficulties in adjusting themselves to the white society. Besides, many accounts of white captives also fail to register the fact that many New England captives have become accustomed to Indian culture and refused to return to the puritan society (Mortimer 14). Given the above ambiguity and anxiety implicit within the captivity narrative, it can be inferred that the myth of manifest Destiny is dampened, and a new possible form of communication is needed to bridge the gap between the two different cultures.

John Ford’s *The Searchers* diverts from the conventional narrative of Western films through the implementing of the captivity narrative as the central framework, thus throwing many hitherto approved ideas and values into doubt. Barbara Mortimer points out that *The Searchers* is not so much a Western as an elegy for it because by the end of the film the audience is gradually led to accommodate a new attitude and viewpoint exemplified in the character of Martin Pawley, who harbors a more moderate and tolerant attitude toward the Indian culture. In the very beginning of the film we witness Ethan Edwards, the Confederate veteran who just returns to reunite with his brother Aaron and his family. It has been three years since the Civil War ended. But Ethan still wears his military uniform, a gesture that he still pledges allegiance to the South tradition, refusing to fit in the new society. Right after the reunion scene comes the brutal and bloody scene of massacre caused by the raid launched by the Comanche chief Scar. The attack on the Aaron family kills Aaron and his wife Martha, while their daughters Lucy and Debbie are abducted by the Indians led by Scar. Later we find that only Debbie survives and becomes one of Scar’s wives. Enraged by the atrocity, Ethan’s deep-rooted hatred for Indians is kindled. Soon he assumes the role of the avenger whose mission is to find Debbie and brings her home.

Yet the story does not follow the conventional captivity mode in that at the moment when Debbie is found, she refuses to go with Martin and Ethan. Despite her eventual acquiescence to Ethan’s rescue, her initial response of resistance distinguishes her from the former female captives in the traditional captivity stories in which the female victims are for the most part silent, passive and vulnerable, whose redemption entirely rests on the male hero’s rescue. Therefore Mortimer avers that such act of resistance “poses an implicit challenge to American cultural self-confidence” (31). Deeply perplexed by Debbie’s unexpected refusal, Ethan
collides with Martin over the destiny of Debbie. Martin insists that despite her captivity and assimilation into Indian culture, she is still her beloved sister, while Ethan’s resentment and indignation deepens upon the thought of her living with an Indian. With a beautiful landscape as its background, this scene of reunion portends an ominous conflict between Ethan and Martin. As Debbie approaches Martin from the dune, then stands face to face with Martin; to the audience’s astonishment, the first word she utters to warn Martin is in Comanche. As for Martin, he is so excited and exuberant when he sees Debbie again after years of separation. He tries to renew the bond between them by appealing to their childhood memories they share. The following dialogue between Martin and Debbie aptly conveys Martin’s eagerness to recapture the long lost emotional bond between them:

Debbie? Don’t you remember? Do you remember how I used to let you ride my Horse, and tell you stories? Aw, don’t you remember, Debbie?

DEBBIE: I remember, from always. At first I prayed to you, come and get me.

You didn’t come.

MARTIN: But I’ve come now, Debbie.

DEBBIE: These are my people. Ontamaya. Go. Go Martin, please.

Of course Debbie remembers the precious moment Martin and her spent together. But now she is also a member of her tribe. She is trapped in a morass of identity, confused and unable to decide to make a further move. The only thing she can do is to warn Martin against the Indians chasing after him. It is in such moment of bewilderment and hestation that Ethan arrives, pulling his gun and threatening to kill her. But Martin steps in to stand in front of Debbie so that Ethan cannot hurt her. Such standoff between Ethan and Martin remains until the Indians arrive and wound Ethan. What this scene intimates is a sense of deep-seated antagonism Ethan entertains against the Indians. Even Debbie, the once beloved niece, is now in his eyes an Indian, who must be eliminated. What Ethan embodies is a sentiment that lies deep in the American psyche and forms an important part of the Myth of Conquest (Jose Prats 59), a mindset that presumes that in the course of the American history the Indian is doomed to become an invisible absence. And this helps explain why Ethan always evinces a hostility toward the Indians. In his mind, Debbie’s captivity by the Indians implies a traspassing of racial boundary and this act of defilement is nothing less than a sin and crime as represented by miscegenation, which can only be purged by extermination of these “perpetrators.”
Ethan’s Indian hating can be traced back to James Fenimore Cooper’s Hawkeye, “whose knowledge of Indians engenders profound and undying hatred rather than sympathetic understanding” (*Gunfighter nation* 462). Part of the reason for Ethan’s unabashed abhorrence and revulsion of Indians can be explained by the mutilation of his beloved Martha. In the earlier scene when Ethan returns to Aaron’s home, the audience can discern an attachment between Ethan and Martha. But given his respect for his brother, he can only keep it as a secret. Ethan’s search, therefore, is not so much a rescue mission as a revenge for Martha’s death. Back to 1950s, according to Mortimer, the white attitudes toward race is tinged with racism and segregationism while the purpose of the Brown v. Board of Education decision is to help promote a more magnanimous ambience in the hope that people with pro-segregation posture might soften their racist thinking to form a tolerant, multi-racial and multi-cultural society (37). But Melissa Faye Greene demonstrates that in 1956 there is a survey conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion which indicates that 90% of white southerners defy against the Brown decision (149). It is not a coincidence that *The Searchers* is released in this moment of intolerance. Through this film John Ford endeavours to blaze a trail of reconciliation by orchestrates a scenario where Ethan’s code of behavior is mildly chastised and rendered obsolete, to be superceded by a new type of hero. Over the course of the film’s narrative the audience is gradually guided to identify with Martin Pawley. Ethan’s heroism is thrown into doubt the moment he tries to kill debbie for his conduct violates his own conviction about white kinship and racial identity. His status as a frontier hero is constantly challenged throughout the film. One of his traits that annoys other characters most is his concept of racial identity, based on a strict and narrow definition of race. That is why he even denies Martin as his nephew simply because he is one-eighth Cherokee. As the film progresses, we find that Ethan gradually loses his privilege as a frontier hero because Martin possesses the same wilderness skills and the knowledge of Indian culture. Sometimes he even exhibits a better instinct and hunch in tracking Indians.

By repudiating the value and doctrine Ethan adheres to, the film establishes a new paradigm as represented by what Martin behaves. In the course of the rescue mission Martin acts as a level-headed young man who always monitors Ethan and intervenes to stop him from irrational outburst. In one scene they happen to encounter a herd of buffalos, and Ethan instinctively begins shooting the buffalos one by one. Martin tries to stop him, only to be told that he shoots these buffalos so that they “won’t be feeding any Comanche this winter.” Such outburst of frenzied and hysterical rampage attests to the fact that Ethan is severely eroded by the paranoid
hatred for the Indians. That is, he is driven by such an insatiable obsession of rage and revenge that his act is reduced to sheer violence and psychosis, changing him into an instable and temperamental person, thus his status and credibility as a western frontier hero is heavily compromised and tarnished. In one of Martin’s letters for his fiancée Laurie he mentions he and Ethan once came to an army post to see whether Debbie is among the returned captives. There they met two girls, who crouched in a corner, muttering some words that are difficult to identify. One of the girls holds Debbie’s doll but neither of them can recognize it or Martin. Instead of exhibiting sympathy toward the disturbed girls, Ethan accuses them of being assimilated by Comanches. Their disorientation and derangement symbolizes the deprivation of their Anglo-American identity, yet they also fail to adopt a Native American identity. The shock and trauma brought about by the captivity experience have permanently and irrevocably changed their lives.

Mortimer suggests that one of the most conspicuous features that distinguish Martin from Ethan is his cultivation of a more widened vision of what constitutes a white person which will take the cultural and emotional element into account. The white kinship is further expanded to include someone who is not born white but adopted by a white family (44). Acting on the principle of an ethic of love rather than revenge, acceptance rather than intolerance, Martin finds a balance between pledging strict allegiance to pure white society and incorporating non-whites into its society. But eventually he still “preserves the borders of white society,” embodying a view of American society that is ever more inclusive without relinquishing white domination (44). As for Debbie she is not merely a female captive who is eventually rescued and returns to white society. Her status as a captive performs a more complex function in alerting the mainstream American society to take heed of its self-assured cultural pride and superiority. When Martin first finds Debbie, she expresses a reluctance to be rescued by saying that “these are my people.” She has crossed the racial boundary to become a half Indian. Mortimer even argues that she becomes a “more radical mediator between the white race and the red” (45), implying the power of cultural integration in surpassing racial segregation. Mortimer further elucidates Debbie’s subverting power, arguing that by switching her status from a passive victim to an active character who exerts a certain kind of influence, the film affirms her contribution as a ”potential agent of action who can undermine the male heroes’ shared agenda” (45). Debbie as a problematic captive really neutralizes the security of the conventional captivity narrative logic. By the end of the film, however, we witness the reversal of Debbie and Ethan’s initial attitudes respectively. Later when Martin
creeps into the Comanche camp to try to save Debbie again, Debbie suddenly agrees to be rescued. The second time when Ethan sees Debbie, he has the chance to kill her; but to our surprise, this time he lifts her up in her arms, whispering in her ears: “Let’s go home, Debbie,” as if he tries to turn Debbie back to the little girl, a time long before the Indians launched the attack and captured her. But Debbie can never go back to her former self nor can she return to her original home. Now even though she finally acquiesces to Ethan’s rescue, she can only go to Jorgensen’s family to be adopted by them. From this perspective, Debbie is just like Ethan, who is destined to become an outsider, Ethan’s true descendant (Mortimer 47). Toward the end of the film the audience is led to witness a terrible scene in which Ethan scalps Scar, yet it is exactly this act of scalping that throws Ethan’s racial identity into severe doubt. Through this ritualistic brutal and savage way Ethan hopes to get his revenge. But it only achieves the opposite goal. Rather than purge him of Indianness, it leaves an indelible Indianness on his psyche. Just like Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who incurs the punishment by violating the tender reciprocity between nature and him, is doomed to carry the albatross around his neck as a symbol of shame and ominous burden.

Martin Scorsese, deeply influenced by John Ford’s *The Searchers*, begins to venture a new version of Western hero who, in certain aspects, resembles his predecessor Ethan Edwards. But his personality is much more complex and through this character Martin Scorsese wants to dissect the deeper and inner world of the protagonist, laying bare the absurdity, fragmentation and elusiveness behind his facade. Influenced by German Expressionism, Surrealism and Existentialism, the filmmakers after World War II are left unsatisfied by the stereotypical filmic representation of the hero’s development which unanimously winds up as a renewed and empowered person who helps restore order and stability in face of threatening evil force. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard aptly put it: “The breakdown of traditional studio power, along with transformations growing out of European influences, the 1960s counterculture, and new social movements, helped pave the way toward wider directorial freedom in many areas of filmmaking” (20). The new Hollywood auteurs such as Martin Scorsese, Mike Nichols, Arthur Penn, Stanley Kubrick, Woody Allen and Oliver Stone all begin their own odyssey to probe into the protagonists’ troubled minds under huge stress. Take Martin’s Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* as example, it depicts a Vietnam veteran Travis Bickle’s underworld journey. Against the backdrop of New York City, Travis feels alienated and disoriented. Haunted by the horror images of the Vietnam War he yearns for the consolation and the reciprocal interaction with other
people. But the desire for communication and interaction often ends with a note of misunderstanding and frustration. Travis’s act of forming the bond with the outside world culminates in the scene in which he assumes the role of John Wayne in John Ford’s *The Searchers* to rescue the child prostitute played by Jodie Foster. Yet to his despair she does not want to be saved, which deals a harsh blow upon him, making an ironic mockery of his presumptuous and futile behavior to walk out of his solipsistic ego to form meaningful dialogue with people surrounding him.

As a postmodern film, *Taxi Driver* does not follow the logic of the traditional narrative by refusing to endow it with a specific purpose or closure. Every thought that triggers Travis’s next move is gratuitous, and it can best be illustrated by Travis’s sudden determination to rescue Iris, a preteen prostitute from the control of the pimp named Sport. Frustrated by his wooing of Betsy, Travis redirects his anger and rage toward the presidential candidate Palantine, planning an assassination of him. But like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Travis can only fabricate an imaginary scenario. As he approaches Palantine, he hesitates, making his plan abortive. Then he remembers one night he takes Iris on his cab, hearing the arguing between her and Sport, which makes him believe she is in danger. Therefore he encourages her to get away from Sport. But in reality Iris stays with Sport because she can obtain things needed from Sport. The unrequited expectation of love returned from Iris eventually proves to be futile and vain. *Taxi Driver* is imbued with such ironic and ambiguous postmodern ambience; the character is in what Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard argue a quest of “an elusive personal integration and identity in a world overwhelmed by psychological turbulence and social meaninglessness; subjectivity is deflected or undermined at the very moment it is freed from constraints of traditionalism” (230). Based on this argument we can employ Mortimer’s idea to delve deep into the core of the film. She suggests that *Taxi Driver* not only questions Travis’s motivation for rescuing Iris but the idea of rescue itself (114). Because no character in this film except Travis regards Iris as a captive. As Travis breaks into Iris’s boarding house and bursts into a wanton shooting spree, he justifies his intention by declaring that by so doing he can release Iris from the grip of Sport. But the audience later finds that Iris does not even remember when she first meets Travis, that when Travis offers his help, she declines. The shooting ironically turns into a heroic rescue because the newspaper portrays Travis as a tabloid hero who saves the innocent girl from exploitation and slavery of prostitution. In *The Searchers*, Ethan’s neurotic longing for revenge is constantly chastised by people around him. Martin as his companion always steps in to curb Ethan’s irrational behavior. But in *Taxi Driver*, the sense of alienation between Travis
and people around him is so extreme that they completely ignore his potential psychic morbidity. When Travis talks to his fellow cabby Wizard that “I just want to go out and, you know, like really-really-really do something….I got some bad ideas in my head.” Hearing about this whining, Wizard only regards it as a harmless, crazy idea in his mind. Travis, in this moment, seems to become an Ethan without the surveillance of Martin, freely indulging in a solipsistic fulfillment of his paranoid wild fantasy, turning himself into an unpredictable time bomb, ready to explode and wreak tremendous havoc upon people around him.

Travis’s pent-up feelings and frustrations are released through the enactment of a rescue drama in his distorted psyche. It becomes a kind of compensation for his failed relationships with people in the real world. Viewed from this perspective, *Taxi Driver* and *The Searchers* resemble each other in that Ethan and Travis suffer similar pain generated by a failed romance with the female characters. In *The Searchers*, Ethan has a deep feeling for Martha, but for fear of ruining his ties with his brother Ethan suppresses his feeling. Later when Martha was murdered by the Indians, Ethan’s rage exploded, driving him to take revenge on the Indians. Mortimer therefore suggests that “Ethan’s obsessive commitment to the search for Debbie, then, is deeply connected to a failed, unfulfilled romance” (116). While in *Taxi Driver*, Travis also commits himself to forging a new self through establishing a relationship with Iris. Yet this fabricated self is only sustained by an illusion and an amalgamation of fragmented pastiche and collage randomly grabbed from popular culture. Travis’s dissatisfaction with the debased way of living forces him to leap out of this mundane world, but the only medium of detaching from the debased reality for him is to imitate the figures on TV. However, the more he identifies figures on TV, the more he senses the insurmountable gap between the fantasy world and reality. As a taxi driver, his life is dwindled into an endless repeated circle of monotonous drudgery, which is perfectly illustrated by Wizard’s comment: “A man takes a job, you know…And that job…you know, that becomes what he is…You do a thing and that’s what you are…I’ve been a cabby for seventeen years, you know. Ten years at night. I still don’t own my own cab. You know why? Cuz I don’t want to. I must be what I—what I want…. You get a job, you, you become the job.” It is out of such a strong desire to get out of such Sisyphean impasse that Travis is fascinated with the idea of assuming the role of rescuer to deliver Iris. Geoffrey Hill poignantly points out that “this twelve-and-a-half-year-old prostitute, Iris, represents to him innocence corrupted by the perpetrators of his sick world” (283). Travis’s obsessive desire for sanctifying himself as a crusader against moral degradation and corruption is echoed by his
voice-over in the very beginning of the film where he yearns for a heavy rain to wash away all the scum off the streets. But in the end true salvation never takes place, Travis is still trapped in the bubble symbolized by his cab, like the protagonist in T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” where he orchestrates many scenarios but all proven to be his inner fantasies and delusions. He is nothing but a modern Hamlet, who always procrastinates, unable to achieve a genuine identity of integrity. Mortimer’s words might encapsulate Travis’s predicament as a modern anti-hero: “The film makes clear through Travis’s struggle that identity must be understood as a series of appropriations and self-delusions rather than as a process of self-discovery” (117).

The early 1970s saw a barrage of political turmoils such as Watergate scandal and the tribulations and humiliation brought by the Vietnam War. The national morale and pride is severely battered, with the hitherto American Dream and optimism sunk to an unprecedented nadir. It is in this moment of doubt and despair that Michael Cimino produces *The Deer Hunter*, hoping to rejuvenate the vanquished American spirit through the shaping of a mythic hero Michael Vronsky, whose patriotism and bravery reincarnates the Western frontier hero. Released in 1978, *The Deer Hunter* again employs the captivity narrative in which Michael and his buddies are enlisted to serve in Vietnam and their later captivity experience unfolds a drama of search and rescue.

Though the major events take place in Vietnam, Vietnam as the frontier is mythologized into a mental journey of damnation and redemption. The real political and moral questions raised by the intervention and involvement of the United States is deliberately obliterated (Leonard Quart 159). It seems that by depicting Michael as a god-like figure to battle against the brutality of Vietcong the director recasts the film into the early American captivity narratives of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. According to Mortimer, in these narratives the Indians are portrayed as savages, downgraded as subhuman, while the Vietnamese in *The Deer Hunter* become the altered version of the Indians who are synonymous with the incarnation of evil against which the American people must defy and test themselves (138). Nowhere else is Michael’s mythic features more poignantly articulated in the hunting scene before he and his friends go to Vietnam. Here among the misty mountains, with the playing of choral music, Michael is revered as a solitary hero with divine power. He aims at the deer, holding his breath and killing it with one shot. One shot represents Michael’s unbending discipline and heroic code. Yet Michael as a solitary and unyielding character is gradually transformed into a Martin-like character who is willing to forgo some of his abiding principles and self-isolated personality to
embrace and incorporate into his community. After the hunting scene the film shifts to the scene in Vietnam, where Michael, Nick and Steven become the prisoners, and are forced to play the Russian roulette to gratify the captors’s pleasure in torturing. As their tormentors watch them point the gun at their heads, only Michael is capable of maintaining his sanity, seizing the chance to escape from the captors. The terrible experience leaves an indelible mark upon their psyche; they can never escape from the aftermath of this nightmare. Later Nick and Michael get separated; only Michael returns to America. Nick is left behind and Michael is gnawed by anxiety for nick’s safety. Michael’s failure to bring Nick home is a betrayal of his promise he makes to Nick. Michael continues his search for Nick. The next time he comes to Vietnam he learns that Nick lives as a gambler of Russian roulette. Michael sails a boat down the river to find Nick, a journey reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now*, where the protagonist sets on a journey to the deep recesses of the jungle through a river, a symbolic journey to the psychic underworld. Here Michael finally finds Nick. But what ensues is a heart-rending scene where Michael meets Nick face to face. Yet Nick is numbed by drugs and can not even recognize Michael. Unlike Debbie in *The Searchers*, who is awakened by Martin’s evocation of childhood memories, Nick is oblivious of Michael’s appealing to their shared memories; all he can remember is the word “one shot,” which forshadows his tragic suicidal death:

Michael: Do you remember the trees? Do you remember all the different ways of the trees? Do you remember that? Do you remember? Huh? The mountains? Do you remember all that?

Nick: One shot.

Michael: One shot, one shot.

Before Michael could stop Nick, he pulls the trigger and blood spurts out. The cohesive world formed by the bond between Michael and his friends totally collapses. What the captivity experience brings for them is an endless agony and damnation. As Mortimer puts it: “To live in the captor’s world, the film suggests, is to lose one’s soul. The film does not even pose the possibility of adapting to life in Vietnam. As a result of his captivity, Nick slips into madness, like the young girls returned from captivity in *The Searchers* who clutch their dolls and smile idiotically, no longer able to communicate with anyone” (144).

Thus the film severely questions the self-sufficiency and the omnipotent power the traditional mythic frontier hero possesses in resisting the alien culture. But the finale Cimino arranges is a scene of reconciliation where after the terrible loss of Nick,
Michael reemerges as one of the members in commemorating the death of Nick. It seems that his intractable characteristic has softened. His distinctiveness is fading among other members sharing to prepare breakfast, which implies the possibility of reconstructing the fragmented homeland into a cohesive one again, just as Ethan and Martin eventually do in taking Debbie back to form a new family. Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* pushes the envelope in the representation of the captivity narrative. The female protagonist, Stands with a Fist, is a white woman, who is rescued by Lakota Sioux after a Pawnee raid massacres her family. But she learns the Sioux culture and totally assimilates into their society, eventually marrying a Sioux. When Dunbar played by Kevin Costner tries to rescue her, it turns out that she is in mourning for her husband. But the most subversive portrayal in *Dances with Wolves* that marks a radical departure from the conventional representation of captivity narrative is John Dunbar’s voluntary renunciation of his white identity. There is a scene which aptly depicts how Dunbar rejects the corrupt and debased white culture as represented by the brutal white soldiers. Caught and tortured by the white soldiers, Dunbar refuses to answer the questions they ask about his Lakota friends. Badly beaten by the butts of these soldiers’ rifles, Dunbar now speaks to them in Lakota, as if he were a born Indian fully in tune with its culture and language. Armando Jose Prats elucidates how Dunbar totally transforms into a Lakota by pointing out that “he others himself before these irredeemable louts who, as we are asked to believe, fully represent the race and culture that the hero must renounce. His culture, his language, his very soul itself—all are thoroughly Lakota, and his word, unintelligible as it is to these white friends, not only confirms his Indianness but the vileness of the race from whose sins he now stands exempt” (129). What *Dances with Wolves* endorses is a sympathetic understanding of the Indian culture, which proves to be one imbued with humanity and greater respect for nature in contrast to white people’s greed and exploitation. This sympathetic portrayal of the alien culture is reminiscent of another film directed by Edward Zwick, *The Last Samurai*, which also tells a story of captivity, in which the Civil War veteran Nathan Algren is hired by the Japanese emperor to wipe out the rebellious samurais led by Katsumoto. During the battle against the soldiers of Katsumoto, Nathan is captured, but during his hours of imprisonment he gradually learns and appreciates the philosophy and way of living Katsumoto represents. Roger Elbert relates this film to *Dances with Wolves* because he thinks “*The Last Samurai* breaks with the convention that the western hero is always superior to the local culture he immerses in. It has been compared to *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Dances with Wolves*, films in which westerners learn to respect Arabs.
and Indians.” He goes even further by arguing that what this film ultimately affirms is values represented by Katsumoto’s traditional society. The four films discussed here almost unanimously employ the captivity narrative as the basic framework. Yet their treatment of the captivity experience no longer provides a simple dualistic approach of subjugation and capitulation in depicting the protagonist’s mental transformation. Instead the captivity experience becomes an occasion and opportunity for developing renovated thoughts on the issues of gender, cultural and racial identity. Therefore captivity can either be defined as a metamorphosis which might help forge a new attitude and mode of behavior in the interaction with his captors and his former society or be defined as a process of initiation to identify and appreciate the alien culture. Through a detailed analysis of the captivity experience and the transformation triggered by this experience, we learn that wherever the captivity incident takes place; be it in the western frontier, Vietnam, or in urban New York City, it poses a threat both to the stability and supremacy of the white society and to the self-identity and integrity of the protagonist. Through the captivity experience, the hero also learns the valuable truth that white culture is not necessarily superior to the alien culture. Rather it is exactly through this captivity experience portrayed in these films that Americans are offered an alternative arena and space to reexamine their own culture and to nurture a deeper respect for other cultures and save them from self-assured veneration of American culture.

References


