

The Last of the Mohicans, directed by Michael Mann (1992)
Film Workshop by Caryn Cline

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(This workshop assumes students have read the James Fenimore Cooper novel.)

A film director faces different choices than a novelist and has to make different choices than a novelist. He must present the narrative visually and aurally, because these are the media of film. He must present the film in its own narrative time, and also attract a contemporary audience. He or she uses the tools at his/her disposal. . .the camera, audio recording devices, lighting, costuming, casting, location selection (on the production end), set design. . .and in post-production, editing the film together, incorporating special visual and sound effects, and recording the musical score.

How does a director mount an epic situated at a time in the past? He (or she) can choose to be historically detailed or present a stylized, a-historical setting. Mann chooses to be historically detailed and “accurate” within the limits of artistry. He turned to the work of so-called Hudson River School, a group of landscape painters who worked in the middle of the 19th century, 100 years after the historical time depicted in the film. I brought a book of these paintings for you to look at, if we have time. If not, I will give them to Brian and Matt, who can perhaps put them on reserve.

Michael Mann sees the film as taking place within three concentric spheres: the geographical, the historical/political, and the personal. Thus the landscape is an important part of the story. As in many great American films about the frontier--and in 1757 the western part of New York was still the frontier--landscape becomes a character.

The historical/political situation is depicted here in some complexity. The English and the French have each gained allegiance from certain native tribes, whose own animosities drive these allegiances. Just as the English commander Munro and the French commander face off, so do Nathaniel and Magua. Both raised by tribes not their own, Magua and Nathaniel have very different ideas about where their loyalties belong. The English are presented in a negative light here, for the most part, although Heywood redeems himself in the end.

At the heart of the film is the love story, literally. In a significant change from the book, Nathaniel and Cora fall in love, while Uncas is attracted to Alice. There are several scenes of passion and conversation between Nathaniel and Cora, while the Uncas/Alice courtship is told almost entirely visually.

To Mann's list I would add another dimension: the mythic. The American myth of the white child adopted by Indians has been a persistent one. Mann has changed the character of Natty Bumppo significantly, with a late 20th century audience in mind. Natty Bumppo becomes Nathaniel Poe (a deliberate allusion to Edgar Allen). Nathaniel is the spiritual cousin of the character played by Natalie Wood in *The Searchers*, Dustin Hoffman in *Little Big Man*, or Mary MacDonnel in *Dances with Wolves*. We could add others to this list. We might call *The Last of the Mohicans* a "revisionist" western. It belongs with other films about the frontier which critique or romanticize the historical relationship between European Americans and American Indians. Beginning in the 1950s (and, as some critics have suggested, paralleling the civil rights movement and, later, the anti-Vietnam war movement) these films include *The Searchers*, *Broken Arrow*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, *Soldier Blue*.

Questions about the film:

We read the credits over a misty mountain landscape to which we will return at the end of the film. The film takes us through several startling natural locations--forests, glades, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, mountains. We begin deep in the forest (the opening scene) and end up high in the mountains. How does the landscape reflect the narrative tensions of the film? In many westerns, the landscape itself is a character. Is that true of this film? Cite some scenes as examples.

The story opens with Nathaniel, his adoptive father and brother, Chingachgook and Uncas, running through the forest. We expect that they are taking part in the war we've just read about in the opening credits, (and which we hear in the martial drumbeat on the soundtrack), but at the end of the scene their mission may surprise us. Why do you think Mann chose to introduce them in this way? What does their mission tell us about them and their relationship to the imperial war?

Mann made changes in the character of Natty Bumppo and his circumstances. Discuss what these changes are and why you think they were made.

The theme of the tensions between nature and culture are expressed in the opening scenes, where the various spheres are introduced: the forest, where Nathaniel, his father and brother live, the homestead where the Camerons live, their village, and Albany, Duncan's destination. Discuss what you see as the characteristics of each of these locations.

Duncan Heywood is introduced following a shot that presents a man-made bridge in perfect symmetry with its reflection. Where do you first see him? How is he being transported? Compare his introduction with Nathaniel's. A few scenes later, Duncan proposes to Cora. He will try to rival Nathaniel for Cora's affections. He will also antagonize Nathaniel in other ways--how?

How would you describe the military tactics used by the English? the French? the Huron?

How would you characterize Magua? What is the source of his anger? How does he

How are the women portrayed in the film, and how are these characters different from those in the novel? What kind of woman is Cora, in the film? Does she fit your impressions of aristocratic women of the pre-revolutionary

period? How do Nathaniel and Cora “court”? What about Uncas and Alice? How is their courtship developed in the film?