

Cowboy Birdwatchers:
The Act of Listening in Howard Hawks' Film *Red River*

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Introduction

It's the opening scene of Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948). Thomas Dunson and Nadine Groot crouch under a covered wagon. Guns in hand, back to back so they can scan the widest angle possible. Each strains his ears to the deep, worrisome night, listening for some signal, some sign of the event that will determine their fate: a surprise attack by Indian warriors they know haunt the looming darkness. But the repetitive chirp of riverside frogs is the only sound to be heard.



Then, suddenly, the night's background chirrup is disturbed by a soft, sweet song. Not at all the war cry Dunson expected, it's the muted chant of a small bird, followed by another, then another. Like us, the audience, the cowboys listen to a bird and hear its musical attributes, but, unlike us, who hear it simply as birdsong, they recognise in it communicating Comanches, and understand the terrible danger the seemingly innocent melody represents.

If John Wayne and Walter Brennan are the cowboys and we their spectators, identifying with them as characters, it will be they who are going to

inform how we listen. Our cowboy birdwatchers will cause we spectators to become aware of the links between the thresholds of the four escalating modes of sound perception—hear, listen, recognize, understand. Links which resemble so many other kinds of frontiers, such as aesthetic, cultural and geopolitical ones.

This is a critical moment for the film and even more so for the cowboys. If what they hear and listen to does not correspond to what they recognise and understand, it is because they occupy a territory which doesn't belong to them yet. If they are able, the many difficulties they confront aside, to understand these profound discords, then they have already developed some sensibility capable of understanding cultural difference.

What I proposed here is that we trace and analyse the two cowboy's methods and modes of hearing. But first let's take a look at and listen to this scene from *Red River*.

Birds and Indians of North America: a Hearing Problem

This sequence has posed a lot of questions, some of which we should attempt to answer. Let's start with this one: Do the Indians of North America imitate birds? Under what circumstances and for what reasons? *Red River* is obviously not documentary but fiction, mythic fiction, a Western, yet it is one in which, like all the films of this genre, we always find within the story some authentic representation of American economics and geopolitics—in this case the progressive colonization of the continental US. Considered on the evidence, *Red River* also possesses much anthropological material that will determine, in fundamental ways, subsequent representations of the North American Indian in all media.

This anthropological material enters into the description of the landscapes, into the narrative of events and into the portrayal of the characters, lending to each aspect the legitimacy and depth of a true style yet at the same time the quality of a complete and utter fantasy. In consequence, the questions related to “birdwatching” that we have just asked do not have as their goal the verification of the level of realism of the film's directing. No, these questions are to be used instead to measure what the habits and practices and customs of

the Indians can teach us about, by virtue of showing how they are displayed, suggested, masked and/or erased themselves.

The anthropological material does not function, like most other materials used to create the film, as a support to and proof of realism. Instead, its function is problematic: the script writers, film director and sound designers make use of the Indian's astute ornithological observations and exceptional skill at imitating the birds they know so well to instead ask several aesthetic questions about cowboys, questions about the rights of the pioneers, and questions of what comprises American identity.

It goes without saying that North American native peoples imitated the songs of birds and that they imitated them primarily during the hunt, to catch and kill them. It appears, also, that when they were on the warpath, certain tribes would use bird call imitations either to communicate with each other, or to cover up the sound of the warrior's movements as they made their clandestine advance toward the enemy. The tone here must remain hypothetical since there exists no exhaustive anthropological study of the relationship between North American natives and the birds in their environment, and there is even less factual information on the bird call techniques and technologies they used to either communicate with these birds or to camouflage their human presence.

To outline a strategy for tackling this issue we must, like all those before us, including anthropologists, fall back on a study by John R. Swanton, who, himself, though an active ornithologist, could only cite the work of the Indian Agent James Adair's *The History of the American Indians*, published for the first time in 1775 by a London Press. From what we can understand of him, he was an Anglo-Irish immigrant, a merchant who, from 1735 to 1768 traded with the Cherokee of South Carolina. So what can this man tell us? A lot of things.

First and foremost, Indians that have gone on the warpath do not enter the forest without also entering a world of silence. Mute, secure in the knowledge that "their ears may be quick to inform them of danger", they hike for days without ever making a sound. Later on, at the same time they approach the enemy encampment, they split up, but their degree of separation is defined by auditory parameters. They never disperse so much as to get beyond earshot of each other, thus remaining capable of constantly receiving and transmitting

their “travelling signals”. These signals consist, to a great degree, of birdsong imitations, more precisely the songs of those birds that nest or hunt within the countryside Indians travel through. However, like all techniques and tools of war, improper handling can prove disastrous to the user. Though these native warriors are extremely prudent, with their constant analysis of what they hear and the carefully faked calls they put out, it is not uncommon for the imposter to be trapped by their very own impersonation.

This leaves one convinced that the film *Red River* took its own, unique view of the small collection of extent anthropological material, the hypothesis being that like in so many other westerns, it of course employs this resource with the goal of flattering its own conceits and of validating itself. But it goes beyond that, also attempting, with no small degree of insight, to explore the anthropological observation’s various meanings. The film re-examines the anthropological material, with the implication that: 1) It contributes to the enrichment of this material, constructing, with it, a phenomenological reality, the basic precept of good story telling; 2) It is in itself, in its own way, a verification of this material. The character’s actions and the story’s plot are used to “field test” it, to set in place the proof of its circumstance; 3) It explores the various meanings of this material, and we discover its aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions.

Finally, most important for us, it accomplishes all this by questioning the ways and means of how we listen, for the legendary silence of the Indian—hidden somewhere within *Red River*’s sonic backdrop—becomes a continual, almost mechanical pulse, a presence that is larger and all the more real because there is nothing to perceive. We learn, from *Red River*, that the silence of the Indians is a thing heard. Heard in the mind like a rumour, a forgotten anecdote. This, their implicit presence, is an overpowering presence. In each of the subtle modulations of nature’s background mutter we wait to discover, or think we discover, or are disappointed we don’t discover, a conduit that will allow our awareness access to this clandestine void, the enigmatic emptiness that is Indian’s representation.

It’s not the Natives that have disappeared, it’s the cowboys that can no longer hear them or who aren’t able to listen for or recognize them within the sonic backdrop’s inert solidity. The cowboys will always be the ones straining to hear. As a consequence of the impassable frontier within their physiology—

beyond which the world of the native begins, a world which their hearing discovers only after the warriors strike—the cowboy identifies the Indian not as something he heard, but something he should have heard, a something already there yet imperceptible that, once understood, rendered real, wins over their deafness.



What to think now about these sonic mutations, about the various sham tactics that compose the Indian's strategy. To communicate between themselves, the Comanches in *Red River* imitate birds that, in strictly ornithological terms, are at ease in their natural habitat, birds that have the habit of singing at the end of the day or during the night. But what the film makes obvious is the multifaceted cultural inferences present in all the imitations and their contribution to a geopolitic of the West. By accurately imitating the birds, the Indians immediately ascend above the monotonous night sounds and make themselves conspicuous. Yet, by virtue of their imitation's perfection, at exactly the same instant they disappear into the landscape. This sudden appearance that just as suddenly disappears is something the listening cowboys may finally recognise or deduce as their human enemy's presence. It is not a human voice that speaks or cries but a bird's song, a bird that is a logical component of the surrounding natural world precisely by virtue of the fact that it is an integral part of these surroundings. A component of it that can by virtue of its vocal force, rearrange certain elements of the landscape's surface features yet remain an integral part of it. Dunson and Groot, intelligent as they may be, are, at first, cultural chauvinists. They can't stretch their minds far enough to figure out that the Indian is not separate from the landscape, but part of it and that each bird's

chant they recognise corresponds to and is a part of a tableau that sums up what nature is. By crossing this frontier of the audible from the real to imitative, the Indians immediately prove not just their possession of the landscape but the fact that the landscape possesses them. Though they are inhabitants of this territory, they do not only belong to it, but are also a component of it, one of the essential materials that comprise that selfsame territory. The avian voices nature has given them permit them to live in it as an integral component of the total floral and faunal mass. The birdsongs the landscape emits (as far as the cowboys are concerned) aren't located in an individual situated in a space but present themselves as intermittent polarisations, moving, shifting frontiers, zones of varied intensity. It's this very sonic landscape that the pioneer must cause to disappear if they are to establish themselves in the territory, exerting their rights to it and their power over it. The scenario suggests that, first of all, a shot from Dunson's gun will transform the bird into a person, an Indian warrior. At the same instant its muzzle flash will transform night into day, by giving back the eyes, the sense of sight, their full powers and transform the auditory sensation of complex though invisible movements into the visual perception of objects. Light will convert the auditory impression of this space, which could never be possessed, into a visual one that can, with, ultimately, as we know, all its natural resources too,

But via what thought experience does *Red River* let us see the other side of the coin, those dangerous times when, as previously mentioned, mismanagement or misjudgement causes the imitator to be trapped by their own imitation. To respond to this question, we have to consider the final moments of the riverside sequence. Dunson returns to stand beside Groot, who estimates he has killed all the other Indian warriors save one, when a bird's warble is recognised. "That's him" whispers Groot. "Answer him" Dunson immediately orders.

This order provokes Groot's astonishment and though he hesitates he begins to imitate, crudely at first, one of the other "birds" they have heard. Continuing his imitation as Dunson creeps out of focus, he perfects his technique and to his surprise, provokes a response. This initiates, thus, a dialogue between two species of bird, between cowboy and Indian, that is to say between two bird imitators, who exchange their sonic decoys.

It's this moment when speculation extends itself to reveal a whole set of new questions. The response to Groot's call tells us that for the moment that person out there, who we assumed is a still dangerous warrior, can hear. But, does he, by virtue of his return call, focused on Groot and like Groot, loose track of Dunson's silent movements. Can his ears be quick enough to inform him of danger? And what about Dunson? What happens to a cowboy when he adopts the dynamics of silence that permit him to pass beyond the threshold of hearing? Does he become an Indian? And when an Indian recognises the call of a bird, does he hear in it only another Indian? Or can he also hear a cowboy? Or can he hear, or know it's a cowboy who imitates an Indian? One who imitates an Indian who imitates a bird. And if, recognizing the bird, an Indian hears a cowboy, does he, like the cowboy, understand the birdsong as a possible sentence of death? Is this that one moment where they both share the same culture of listening: a place where one will go to his death because the other has better imitated an imitation?



Conclusion

If we continue our filmic exploration using these newly acquired analytical tools, we can travel downstream, leaving the work of Hawks to survey westerns in general, and discover the culture of hearing that unites certain men of the West with the Indians at the same it separates them from other characters and other personality types: in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* by John Ford (1949), the young soldier can explain his jealousy by using his ornithological expertise to frighten the young woman that he loves—"Think that's a whippoorwill?".

In Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952), the viewer is able travel side by side with frontiersmen James Stewart and Arthur Kennedy and identify with them, understand like them the Indians. This when the pioneers either don't listen to or don't recognise the birds they imitate or even worse, only hear those birds they recognise from past experience. This final *acousmatic* moment is the sad point of this essay. True, the source of *Bend of the River's* bird songs is physically invisible but the ones they hear but don't listen to because they don't recognise them, those are culturally invisible... truly distressing.

Hawk's film *Red River* represents a time of firsts: the first transcontinental railroad, the first instant message. We now live in a time of lasts: the last of an endangered species, the last speaker of a dying language. If we are to survive our own time, we must hear all the birds and learn to listen to them. Especially the ones we don't know. We must, culturally, learn to "walk a mile in the other man's moccasins".

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