

Celluloid Indians

Native Americans and Film

Jacquelyn Kilpatrick

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

Introduction

In undertaking an exploration of Native American representation in film, it is tempting to get caught up in questions of “correctness”—political and otherwise—“authenticity,” and “historical accuracy.” These are appropriate questions because the history and the cultures of Native Americans have been miscommunicated in films, and the distortions have been accepted as truth, with sometimes disastrous results. Most of the studies of Native Americans in film have therefore focused on an analysis of stereotypes, in terms of their characterological, sociological, and historical plausibility. Given the misuses to which Native American images have been put, these studies tend to have an irritated if not genuinely angry tone. They also have an understandable preoccupation with realism in the interest of correcting errors and distortions. This desire to set the record straight is true for publications from a hundred years ago and for current articles and reviews on films such as Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995) and Michael Mann’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1993), where the focus is generally a heated defense of a particular version of reality.

This book also deals extensively with questions of historical and sociological “reality” in the depiction of Native Americans in film; it must do so because the distortions have been both incredibly blatant and generally unquestioned by reviewers of the day as well as viewing audiences. However, this study places those pseudo-realities in the historical and social context within which they were devised and consumed.

Film is more than the instrument of a representation; it is also the object of representation. It is not a reflection or a refraction of the “real”; instead, it is like a photograph of the mirrored reflection of a painted image. The image perceived by a film’s audience has passed through layers of interpretation and representation. To understand the “Hollywood Indian,” it is necessary to peel back these layers and place them in perspective. This requires a delicate balancing act when evaluating de-

pictions of Native Americans in over a hundred years of film history. The films must be viewed as art, and art is a social, historical, cultural artifact—a socially situated utterance, a reflection of the film's time of birth and the social and political milieu into which it was born.¹ At the same time, Native Americans were and *are* living human beings, not evanescent avatars of alterity, and therefore questions of appropriate depiction must be addressed.

Film, like texts of all sorts, must enter what Mikhail Bakhtin called a "dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment."² Like all forms of utterance, films engage in a political struggle for supremacy, and for those cultures defined and represented in film, it would seem that the struggle is one with a medium that strives, intentionally or unintentionally, for the status of authoritative discourse, for the final word on what one can expect from, in this case, Native cultures.

For a dialogue to truly exist, the represented subject must be able to talk back. An important question considered here is, do Native Americans have a space within mainstream Hollywood films to utter a response? The final section of this book will discuss an important attempt to "talk back" found in recent films and documentaries written, directed, and/or acted by Native Americans.

So What Exactly Are the Stereotypes?

This book examines the layers of social, ideological, and political construction that have resulted in seemingly simple stereotypes of Native Americans. It is important that the idea of the stereotype not be limited by such uncluttered definers as simple, erroneous, secondhand, or unchanging. Therefore, the descriptions of the term *stereotype* below are meant to be thumbnail sketches of complex representations of Native Americans that will become more fully developed later.

Sociologist Theresa Perkins states that "[s]tereotypes are evaluative concepts about status and role and as such are central to interpreting and evaluating social groups, including one's own."³ In the building of a new American national mythology, we see this self-identification by a dominant (Euro-American) group emerge as primary in importance, largely because American identity, like all national identities, is determined by its relationships to other cultures. For an immigrant nation where the Euro-American is anything but homogenous, the Native became a clearly definable Other.

One way to see how a group defines itself—to itself as well as to Others—is to look at those it makes its heroes. The self-definition at

stake in most films with a Native American presence has been that of a Euro-American westering male. When we look at the writing of James Fenimore Cooper or the films of John Ford, we see this American self-definition repeatedly reinforced by its juxtaposition to the image of Native Americans. In that way, the challenge presented by the "savages" can be interpreted as a confirmation of the dominant value structure.

The stereotypes of Native Americans in film can be divided into three categories: mental, sexual, and spiritual, the most meaningful of which is probably the mental.

Although the actual words *stupid* or *dumb* are seldom seen in descriptions of Natives—perhaps because fighting a stupid enemy or having a dumb sidekick is not especially flattering—Native peoples have been firmly placed in the lower echelons of intelligence by many Euro-Americans since first contact was made. Benevolent terms such as "innocent," "primitive," or "unsaved" indicate a lesser intelligence, and the more antagonistic descriptors certainly point to comparative dimness. For instance, while the word *stupid* does not imply lack of cleanliness, the word *dirty* does imply stupidity, and we are all familiar with the terms *dirty redskin*, *filthy heathen*, and so forth. This follows the pattern of stereotype development Perkins notes: "The most important and the *common* feature of the stereotypes of the major structural groups relates to their mental abilities. In each case the oppressed group is characterized as innately less intelligent."⁴ As we will see, these ideas about Native intelligence took visible form in film—mental acuity has not generally been the celluloid Indian's strong suit.

The presumed lack of mental prowess may have something to do with the image of the Native American as intensely sexual—more creature than human, more bestial than celestial. Sexuality has historically constituted an important dimension of Hollywood Indians, both male and female, producing a very scary character. We repeatedly see the lustful savage attacking the white woman, requiring that he be killed immediately. And we have the lovely "Indian princess" who is enormously attractive but must die before any real damage is done to the purity of the gene pool. Miscegenation has historically been a taboo for the Hollywood Indian.

The "spirituality" of Native Americans is brushed off as primitive or heathen in many run-of-the-mill westerns. Paradoxically, the perception of an inherent native closeness to the earth has led some to endow Native peoples with a certain nature-based nobility and spirituality—the Noble Savage, the alter ego of the Bloodthirsty Savage, on and off

the screen. This presumed spirituality and closeness to the earth has spurred in recent years the creation of a related stereotype, the Natural Ecologist.

It would be impossible to discuss, even marginally, all the films made during the last hundred years that have in one way or another made use of Indians, real or imagined. This study includes only a small percentage of them, and they are presented in roughly chronological order. A complete analysis of each film is not the purpose of this book; the films have been chosen because they are examples of stereotype development, or use, or because they show deconstructions of the stereotype, or because they markedly reflect mainstream American society's perception at a specific point in history. Plot lines have been included only as far as is necessary to ensure understanding for viewers who may not have seen the film lately or at all. Some films are dealt with in depth; others have been mentioned only for a particular element that explicates the depiction of American Indians in film.

3

The Cowboy Talkies of
the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s

I tell the bus driver
but he doesn't hear,
"Keep to the hills
and avoid America
if you can.
I'm a fugitive
from bad, futureless dreams
in Southern California."

—Simon J. Ortiz, "East of San Diego"

The most important development in the film industry after the invention of the first camera and projector was sound. Careers took immediate turns as audiences first began to hear their idols' voices, and a new set of considerations developed for the directors. Not only were the words of more importance—so was the diegetic noise (coming from within the scene) and nondiegetic noise (such as a voice-over). With sound, the nuances of story lines became more accessible, and the melodramatic form of the silents appeared unsophisticated by comparison.

Cinematic Language

As previously noted, in the early sound films stereotypes of Native Americans were conveyed to a large degree by language or, perhaps more importantly, the lack of language. The signs that accompanied the Indians of the silent film, the scowling face and rigid body, were carried over to the sound western as the "natural" pose of a Native American. Rarely were Indians heard, and when they were, they were depressingly devoid of humor, although humor was often directed at them. Most had little to say beyond the ubiquitous grunt, which could

mean anything from "I'm pleased" to "Scalp him, kill him, and then tie him over an anthill."

Aside from the obvious boundaries of language difference—the differences between English and Navajo for instance—there exists a stratification within languages. Differences between generations, professions, races, genders, politics, time, space, and innumerable other classifications produce differences in speech. The human voice holds within it a "code" that humans read almost instinctively, and when language is missing, the instinct is generally to place the voiceless into the margins, which is exactly where most filmic minorities have historically resided.¹

But it was not much better when directors and script writers gave their Indians voices in the early westerns. Since all voices in film come equipped with an accent and an intonation, a voice can make a comment that is very different from the words spoken. For instance, if an Indian says, "White man speaks with forked tongue," he is doing more than simply dropping the articles. A command of English has been written out of the script already; in addition, the delivery of such a line was usually either ponderously slow or angry, a translation into voice of the stoic, stone-faced "bloodthirsty redskin" in silent movies, which effectively perpetuated the stereotypes of Native Americans as dim-witted or violent, or possibly both.

Use of an alien-sounding language that was rarely a genuine native language also contributed to the distancing and Othering of Native Americans for mainstream audiences. Hollywood had its own ideas of what an Indian sounded like, and the industry went to fairly extreme lengths to get the "authentic" sound. In *Scouts to the Rescue* (1939), for instance, the Indians were given a Hollywood Indian dialect by running their normal English dialogue backwards. By printing the picture in reverse, a perfect lip sync was maintained, and a new "Indian" language was born.²

As in silent films, body language continued to be an important form of communication. Audiences were already accustomed to the "classic" poses of cinematic Indians and the melodramatic sweep of gestures. But the talkies, as an audiovisual medium, were able to combine words with gestures, facial expressions with body movements to create more complex meanings. This discursive sum allowed for greater character development, since one message (I love you) could be rendered in body language while a contradictory message (I hate you) was deliv-

ered orally. Many romantic comedies depended on this push-me/pull-you communication, but the same idea worked in slightly more subtle but extremely effective ways in the early westerns. "Me friend to white-eyes," could be delivered by a very dignified and obviously powerful chief, but his language was a clue that he was a part of the past, not a part of the audience's world. Since a number of lawmakers, educators, and even Hollywood producers placed as the test of cultural survival the ability to assimilate, many in the audience presumed that the chief was an anachronism at best, linguistically and perhaps mentally deficient, and bound to lose/die/vanish.

A form of language in film that is rarely addressed is the written word. Whether a newspaper headline, a signpost, or a subtitle, written language can play an important part in a film. Subtitles were not often used in the earlier Hollywood westerns, partly because they would have looked old-fashioned to audiences who remembered the silent era. But more importantly, subtitles were generally unnecessary because the words and thoughts of Indians were not particularly important to most scripts. Genuine Native languages were rarely used, and when a white hero learned to speak an Indian language, the script conveniently reproduced it in English, as in *Broken Arrow* (1950) and hundreds of other films. There have, of course, been a few exceptions; a fairly recent one is *Dances With Wolves* (1990), in which the Lakota language was spoken with a fair degree of accuracy, and subtitles were used. The effect was one of privileging a Native language, and therefore culture, in a manner that Hollywood movies have rarely attempted.

Music and noise also function as languages in film. The lyrics on soundtracks can often transfer information and emotion even more effectively than dialogue. They communicate with an audience on a level that adds to the visceral impact of melody and tone. But even without words, music can generate lyrics within the consciousness of the viewer. (Robert Stam cites as an example Kubrick's use of the melody without words to "Try a Little Tenderness" during a visual image of nuclear bombs dropping in *Dr. Strangelove* [1963].)³

As noted before, the "tom-tom" beat of drums signal to an American audience that Indians are about to appear. Actual Native forms of music are rarely heard, probably because they are so different from what mainstream audiences would expect. In the rare instances in which Indian music and dance are presented, as in the later film, *A Man Called Horse* (1970), they are generally portrayed as simultaneously primitive and exotic. The wild drumming, movements, and costumes,

in addition to the hero's near-delirium, produce a chaotic image closely resembling a Dionysian orgy. Purpose and beauty are absent from the scene.

Noises are not without purpose either. Whether an obvious sound such as that of a knife being sharpened or one "lost" in the background like crickets in a forest, noise communicates place, time, and circumstance in definite though generally subconscious ways. When a character in a western appears and the noise in the background is a low rattle, the audience makes an obvious association between the character and a rattlesnake and identifies him as the dangerous and sneaky villain.

There is also the language of the camera itself. For instance, a director can position a camera to "look up to" a character—John Wayne was most often filmed from a low angle, giving him a superior position appropriate to his role as hero. It can also "overlook" a person or place, such as the positioning of camera angles to "look down on" Indian camps or women of any race.

The "Frontier"

The most common motifs in the western genre owe their genesis to the ideas articulated by Fredrick Jackson Turner in 1893. In a paper delivered to the American Historical Association, he presented his "Frontier Thesis." It was based on prevalent ideas of the late nineteenth century regarding social progress and evolution in which the Native American was presented as an obstacle to the civilizing of the continent, a stage in the evolution of human society that preceded agrarian development, which in turn would lead to full-fledged urban civilization.⁴

Turner described the settling of the West as the experience that, more than any other, formed American identity. It was the proving ground where civilization met the wilderness and overcame it with courage, ingenuity, and self-reliance. This idea of what the frontier represented was so pervasive that it found itself naturally at home in history textbooks across the nation for much of the twentieth century. For most Americans, the frontier was cherished as a locus of ultimate challenge, a right of passage through which the civilized white American male earned his superior position on the continent and in the world. This is at least part of the reason westerns have historically been most popular when poverty and unemployment were at their worst.⁵ During the Depression, for example, the landless, moneyless, and hopeless could lose themselves in a fantasy of a time when all it took to "make it" was hard work and courage.

Turner's thesis represents a set of values that did not take into consideration the very real and fundamental differences in the American—white and Indian—experience and landscape. The Turneresque nature of the western genre in novels and film clearly positions the American Indian as the savage (bloodthirsty or otherwise) who is part of the wilderness that civilization must overcome in order to bring order to a wild continent.

Social historians have begun to rethink this view and to define the term *frontier* not as the last outpost of civilization but rather as the shifting point of contact between cultures. As Alfonso Ortiz notes, "we must remind each new generation that one culture's frontier may be another culture's backwater or backyard."⁶

Given the pervasiveness of the frontier mythos, it is likely that the western films of the first half of the twentieth century would lack accuracy and subtlety in their portrayal of Native peoples. The fundamental importance of that misportrayal is that it is tied to the formulation of the American myth and the development of the all-American hero.

National Policy in the Early Twentieth Century

While Hollywood was inventing and reinventing the celluloid Indian, Native peoples were experiencing the effects of a series of changes in U.S. federal policy. In 1924 the Indian Citizenship Act gave U.S. citizenship to every Native American born on U.S. property. In 1928 the Institute for Government Research (Brookings Institution) published the Meriam Report, which for over twenty years was regarded by lawmakers as a trustworthy description of the Indian situation. One of the major tenets of the report was that American Indians "wish to remain Indians, to preserve what they have inherited from their fathers. . . . In this desire they are supported by intelligent, liberal whites who find real merit in their art, music, religion, form of government, and other things which may be covered by the broad term *culture*."⁷

During the Roosevelt administration, Collier became Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and he promoted his own views of what the American Indian needed. He battled Congress, the bureaucrats, the missionaries, and even the Native Americans who disagreed with his liberal though paternalistic ideas. He and his supporters developed one of the most important pieces of legislation to pass in Congress during the first four decades of the twentieth century, the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934, also known as the Indian Reorganization Act. The result of a long fight, this act reversed the policy of allotment and

encouraged tribal organization. In his *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* in 1934, Collier referred to the act as "repair work" and pointed out that "Congress and the President recognized that the cumulative loss of land brought about by the allotment system, a loss reaching ninety million acres—two-thirds of the land heritage of the Indian race in 1887—had robbed the Indians in large part of the necessary basis for self-support."⁸ The Wheeler-Howard Act provided the mechanisms for tribal governments to organize and interact with state and federal governments and was a significant step forward in Native American self-rule.

That the Wheeler-Howard Act made its way into law, given the conflicted attitudes about American Indians during the 1920s, can be partially explained by the Depression. Great numbers of Euro-Americans found themselves in an economic no-man's-land or worse, and this engendered more sympathy for the disenfranchised Native Americans. In addition, it seemed that the American ideals of individualism and the power of civilized, industrial society had failed, and the preconceptions held of the noble savage began to make a kind of sense.

Still, the 1934 Indian Congress (called by Collier to explain the Wheeler-Howard Act) met with biased news reporting that must have had an impact on public attitudes. Journalism historian Mary Ann Weston noted that when the three-day meeting was distilled into a short report in *Time*, for example, "the delegates became relics of the past who 'shuffled' into Rapid City, made camp 'not in clay-painted buffalo hide wickiups, but in closed government school buildings' and met 'not crouched around council fires but seated in armchairs in an oak-paneled room.'" That article goes on to report that "[t]hree hundred years of suspicion stared from his copper-skinned listeners' eyes' as Collier urged the Indians to support the New Deal. Collier was quoted at length, but the Indians were not."⁹

It would appear that in the 1930s, views of Native Americans continued to be distorted and mutable, ranging from sympathetic or empathetic to hostile. If articles like the one in *Time* are any indication, the general public still thought of Native Americans as shuffling, red-skinned primitives more at home in a tent than a house. At best they were looked on nostalgically, as relics of the past. In 1933 *Parents Magazine* printed an article advising parents to let their children "play Indian" because the values of Indian life were good ones, but the entire article was written referring to the American Indian in the past tense. The same year *Scientific American* ran an article entitled "The Disap-

pearance of the Red Man's Culture" which sadly reported that "the Indian is now a creature of the past, who can be studied mostly in books and museums."¹⁰

A Question of Real Estate

In *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Limerick wrote, "If Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate. John Wayne would have been neither a gunfighter nor a sheriff, but a surveyor, speculator, or claims lawyer." She makes the point that the intersection of races and the allocation of property unified Western history, since that history has been an "ongoing competition for legitimacy—for the right to claim for oneself and sometimes for one's group the status of legitimate beneficiary of Western resources."¹¹

The quest for land was from the first a primary motivation for immigration to the continent, and it is the idea that everyone can own a piece of America that has made the American national identity so unique. In the western movie, the necessary obstacle against which the hero struggles in the acquisition of his "rightful" place is the American Indian, who happened to have been keeping the seat warm for twenty thousand years or so. The western movie accurately if unintentionally displays the mental gymnastics the settlers and pioneers had to perform in order to declare the land their own.

The first requirement for validation of land seizure is that the land be empty. That was no problem, since a large portion of the western United States was inhabited by nomadic tribes that followed the buffalo in portable housing. That Indians in the Southwest had been successful agrarians for thousands of years was perhaps the most difficult fact to rationalize, but the tribes in the East and Southeast had also been settled farmers, so there was precedence at least. Native groups had complex cultural traditions, but they were oral-based, so Natives were perceived by many as effectively having no history at all. The land they lived on was thus a historyless land, and therefore the white settlers could give the land not only purpose but also historical ties—in short, civilization.

Allegheny Uprising (1939)

Though impressive, the land depicted in westerns is often arid or wild and therefore of little value as "raw" land. The value, then, lies in the sacrifice and hard work poured into the land by the settlers. In films

such as William Seiter's *Allegheny Uprising*, starring John Wayne, the appropriation of the land is justified by the labor invested by the settler who has made the uncharted wilderness his home and assumed his position as the "natural" proprietor. The land becomes the fruit of his labor, and his physical and emotional investments give him a moral right to it.

In Seiter's film, the uprising in the Allegheny Mountains at first appears to be an Indian uprising. The hero and his sidekick have been captured by Indians and have been living with them as "blood brothers" for three years while the English and French battle each other for the new land. On the hero's return, we find that he is the finest Indian fighter of them all, that he refers to his "blood brothers" as painted devils, and that he echoes the disdain of his friend, who says the only trustworthy Indian is a dead Indian. When the local Indians make their only appearance in the film—after we hear they have killed a whole settlement and scalped a schoolroom full of children—the hero leads the chase. The white pursuers paint their faces and chests with bear grease and charcoal, smear some ridiculous looking war paint over that, and don some scarves to cover their heads. Looking more like pirates than Indians, off they go to rescue two captive children. The Indians in this film are not very intelligent, and as they wade along knee deep in the river, the hero and his band jump them from trees in what looks like a parody of Cooper's Stupid Indian Tricks. That is the last we see of the Indians.

Again, the white hero is able to "out-Indian" the Indians, becoming a superior form of native fighter and supplanting the "vanishing" Indian. In *Allegheny Uprising*, the Indians serve to present a real danger, are firmly placed as inferior, savage beings undeserving of the land, and then conveniently disappear while the community fights its own allies, the British, for control of the land.

Allegheny Uprising is an interesting display of colonialism at work. The heroic settlers are colonists and imperialists, but they are fighting the representatives of the mother country, which also presents them as the colonized. The historical layers of colonialism are transparent, as are the early to mid-twentieth century attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes woven through the film.

The Euro-American Hero and "American" Land

John Wayne is one of America's favorite heroes, well recognized as the quintessential American male during the whole of his long career. His



2. From William Seiter's *Allegheny Uprising* (1939). Photo Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive; courtesy of RKO Radio Pictures, Inc.

on-screen persona made him a hero, and that persona was initially developed in the western. As Louis Owens has commented, “[t]he essential truth about the great American hero, however, is its falseness. And that falseness is illuminated brilliantly in the shape-shifting that allowed a young Iowan named Marion Morrison [John Wayne] to journey into the mythical American West and become something grand and new and strangely pure.”¹²

This new American hero was idolized, suggesting he embodied the values mainstream America held most dear, and his attitudes, including those regarding American Indians, were generally indicative of the attitudes of the majority of white citizens. His attitude toward American Indians can be summed up in his own words during a *Playboy* interview: “I don’t feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from them. There were great numbers of people who needed new land, and

the Indians were selfishly trying to keep it for themselves.”¹³ This is an interesting attitude for a man, or a nation, that feels not only a right but a duty to protect *his/its* ownership of the land.

For many Euro-Americans, land that was not in some way used was wasted. To use land properly, one should invest oneself in that land, make something of it, as did the settlers in *Allegheny Uprising*. Here, the mainstream idealization of the private family farm is presented as obviously superior to the Indian attitude toward land, where all was held communally. The general assumption was that the Indian was not using the land properly and therefore dispossession was not only inevitable but also righteous.

The concept of land as property is one of the fundamental ideas upon which the American ideal of freedom is based. If one *owns* the land one lives upon, security is nearly absolute. Since American Indians had not generally adhered to the principles of individual ownership, their claims were easily ignored and the settling of the West became a heroic enterprise. As Virginia Wexman points out,

[T]he Western understands possession of the land as an integral part of its theme of dynastic progression, for land is seen both as a place that binds the family together as a physical unit and a source of wealth that binds them together as an economic unit. Significantly, the production of Westerns languished during the 1930s, when the ideal of the family on the land was seriously endangered by the economic hardship to farmers brought about by the Depression. By contrast, the heyday of the sound Western occurred during the 1950s, when the development of suburbia was fed by the nostalgic fantasy of the family on the land that the Western promoted.¹⁴

Since land was imperative to the settlers, and since that land was not actually empty but occupied by hundreds of different peoples, it was necessary, not only in the actual westward movement but also in the depiction of that movement in the western film, to provide some way of exculpating the ambitions of those settlers. From the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a theory that helped support that exculpation was “scientific racism.”

Scientific Racism

This view divided the people of the world into three separate and distinct “races” according to those phenotypical appearances observable to the naked eye. The three races were dubbed Caucasian (white), Ne-

groid (black), and Mongoloid (red, yellow, and brown), and use of these divisions replaced the cumbersome and often vexing problems associated with differences—Otherness—due to religion, culture, and environment. Differences that appeared biological and natural were much easier to distinguish and manipulate.¹⁵

The “scientific” basis of this approach downplayed the historical role of ambition and greed as motivating factors and provided a seemingly empirical foundation to the nostalgic views of many Americans. Instead of approaching the American Indian relativistically as another ethnicity or culture, the more “scientific” term, *race*, explained differences and helped vindicate Darwinistic ranking. According to Social Darwinism, the fittest survive, and those who do not survive become extinct because they are incapable of evolving, and even Francis Parkman once believed the Indian unchangeable. He said,

[S]ome races of men seem molded in wax, soft and melting, at once plastic and feeble. Some races, like some metals, combine the greatest flexibility with the greatest strength. But the Indian is hewn of rock. You cannot change the form without destruction of the substance. Such, at least, has too often proved the case. Races of inferior energy have possessed a power of expansion and assimilation to which he is a stranger; and it is this fixed and rigid quality which has proved his ruin. He will not learn the arts of civilization, and he and his forest must perish together.”¹⁶

Almost one hundred years after Parkman’s lament many Americans, if they weren’t convinced that Natives had indeed perished, saw them as immutable, forever stuck in the nineteenth century.

A vast majority of the Mexican population is *mestizo*, of mixed Spanish and Indian blood,¹⁷ and therefore they, too, were classified as Mongoloid. Attitudes toward Mexicans and Indians were often similar, as exemplified in the testimony of a Los Angeles Sheriff’s deputy during a 1943 murder trial, recounted by Wexman: “The Sheriff’s deputy identified the Mexican defendants as Indian and went on to state that ‘the Indian, from Alaska to Patagonia, is evidently oriental in background. At least he shows many of the oriental characteristics, especially so in his utter disregard for the value of life.’ He concluded that such qualities were ‘biological—one cannot change the spots of a leopard.’”¹⁸

One could make a good case for this attitude resulting as much from exposure to western films as exposure to scientific racism, and it is difficult to determine when or if this view produced the western, or west-

erns began producing this view. In either case, by the time sound films became the norm, Indians had almost completely ceased to be depicted as mistreated, noble savages. With the sound western came an onslaught of celluloid Indian attacks that reinforced the attitudes of viewers such as the Los Angeles sheriff’s deputy.

Owens makes the point that the dominant culture (in this case the white filmmaker) has had no way of really knowing the Native Other and is “not capable of sincerely questioning the epistemological foundations of the dominant cultural center . . . and simply cannot comprehend that ‘other’ way of knowing.”¹⁹ This is the problem with most western films from the first half of the twentieth century. There was little or no in depth questioning of the rectitude of Euro-American national identity, the stereotypes it manufactures for its Others, or the effects of its inventions. The Indian is defeated before the film begins because Indian and white are allowed to connect, usually violently, but never overlap. Such is the requirement and effects of manifest destiny and the cultural frontier. The celluloid Indians could not be allowed to win. They had to remain consciously Other, and they had to in one or many ways be held as inferior. As Churchill quotes film director Stephan Feraca saying in 1964, “Now those movie Indians wearing all those feathers can’t come out as human beings. They’re not expected to come out as human beings because I think the American people do not regard them as wholly human. We must remember that many, many American children believe that feathers grow out of Indian heads.”²⁰

Frozen Time and Pseudo-History

Most films made in America that portray Indians are set in the nineteenth century. Virtually all westerns take place between 1825 and 1880, a period of fifty-five years, a minute part of a history that goes back thousands of years. There is no pre-white world in these films, and, conversely, rarely a “modern” Indian.

The “pseudo-history” of American Indians is, as Alfonso Ortiz has stated, “so at odds with the facts that Indians often simply ignore it.”²¹ Ignoring it has been the response until the recent past because Native Americans have had few opportunities to give voice to a counterdiscourse of liberation.

The stereotypes fueling this pseudo-history were so ludicrous that most Native American actors of the early westerns found them humorous. In 1944 Twentieth Century Fox made the movie *Buffalo Bill*, and Navajos were brought from Tuba City, Arizona, to the Utah

mountains to play Cheyennes and Sioux. In a 1944 review, James Denton reported on their activities:

The Indians lined up before the wardrobe tent, and costumes were handed out. They had to be shown how to wear the feathered head-dress, leather breeches, and fringed leather shirts. They didn't think this was the kind of thing to wear in that summer heat, but they put their costumes on uncomplainingly.

When it came time to have the war paint smeared on their faces by the makeup experts from Hollywood, the Navahos [*sic*] objected at first. They thought this was a bit thick and that Hollywood was overdoing the thing. . . . They laughed and joked over their costumes. . . . When Chief Thundercloud [Cherokee actor Victor Daniels] explained a torture scene in the picture, wherein the Cheyenne proved his bravery by having his back cut, the Navahos [*sic*] laughed uproariously; they thought such action was downright nonsense. There is nothing stoic about the Navahos [*sic*]. They do not bear pain with fortitude nor do they practice self-torture as a sign of bravery.²²

John Price describes the development of the pseudo-history of white/Indian interaction as a "movie story told by white American producers and directors to a white North American audience, assuming and building the plot from anti-Indian attitudes and prejudices."²³ Native Americans became part of the landscape as the history of the West became an allegorical history, and the western became a system of symbols supporting a fictional history. The American filmmakers did what thousands of years of social evolution and the threat of white encroachment could not do; they created an homogenized Indian.²⁴

Northwest Passage (1940)

Americans of the forties and fifties rarely overtly questioned the images Hollywood provided of the American Indian, and movies with slaughters of and by Native Americans were so accepted that they were used to teach children in public schools. For instance, the 1940 film *Northwest Passage* was chosen by the Department of Secondary Teachers of the National Education Association for study because "Rogers [of Rogers' Rangers] comes to personify man's refusal to bow to physical forces, and the success of this hardy band of early pioneers symbolizes our own struggle against bitter enemies in the modern world."²⁵ The *Photoplay Studies* guide for teachers deals with the novel and its adaptation to the screen, gives some "inside scoop" on the making of the film, and

then offers suggestions for using the film in English, history, art, geography, and even in clothing and shop classes.

According to the teacher's guide, *Northwest Passage* is the story of a band of patriotic Americans as they march from Crown Point in New England to the Native village of St. Francis in Canada:

As this expedition extended from September 13, 1759, to October 31 of the same year, it covers only a very small period of the French and Indian War. However, its military importance was great. From this little Indian town yearly came those horrible attacks upon the New England settlers when so many defenseless farmers and their families were killed or captured. This victory opened the entire interior of New England and promised safety to the pioneers who settled in the rich valleys. . . . Mr. Roberts [author of *Northwest Passage*] has succeeded where so many American writers have failed, for he has more freshness and real humanity in his major characters than most chroniclers. Through his fine assortment of types among his minor characters we glimpse early American characteristics of which we are rightfully proud.²⁶

The characters that the guide suggests rightfully deserve praise are men who are in the service of their country; however, as depicted in the film, many (such as the second lead, played by Robert Young) were evidently inducted while drunk. They are attired in colored, fringed buckskin, so they obviously admire the dress if not the culture of the Native Americans enough to appropriate their identities to a large degree, and they look upon their attack on the village as a righteous act. One pioneer even finds a pair of moccasins in the ruins and puts them on his own feet with great glee and no pangs of conscience. They liberate the proverbial white woman captive, and then they burn the village to the ground.

With the exception of the inarticulate guide whom Rogers (Spencer Tracy) is trying to sober up when we first meet him, the Indians are presented as the usual bloodthirsty bunch of heathen devils who get what they deserve for attacking innocent settlers. The only other individual Indian we meet is the boy Rogers "saves" and who becomes part of the group on the trip home. The boy, of course, comes to admire his white saviors, even though he has seen them kill his relatives and burn his home.

To encourage English teachers to use the film in their classes, the *Photoplay Studies* guide quotes the author of *Northwest Passage*, Kenneth

Roberts: "I have a theory that history can be most effectively told in the form of fiction, because only in the writing of fiction that stands the test of truth do falsities come to the surface." It is small wonder that Native Americans either laughed at the images, ignored them, or sat in stunned silence. That their ancestors were used as metaphors for Hitler's Nazis, whom many Native Americans were then fighting, would do little to bolster pride in Native heritage.

In 1940 Americans were especially interested in those "American characteristics" to which the guide refers because World War II was stressing the limits of American physical, emotional, and economic resources, and patriotism and bravery were held as the ultimate American virtues.

Native Americans and World War II

American Indian heroism during the war made it more difficult to think of Native peoples as the savages of *Northwest Passage*. Men such as Major General Clarence Tinker, the Navajo code talkers, and Ira Hayes, who was photographed raising the flag with five others on Iwo Jima, elevated to heroic stature American Indian soldiers in the armed services, which numbered as many as twenty-five thousand Native men and women by the war's end. However, important dimensions of the old stereotypes still prevailed, with the negative image of the blood-thirsty savage becoming positive now that these Americans were employed in defense of the United States.

In 1944 Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes wrote an article for *Collier's* in which he reported that "[t]he Indian . . . has endurance, rhythm, a feeling for timing, co-ordination, sense perception, an uncanny ability to get over any sort of terrain at night, and better than all else, an enthusiasm for fighting."²⁷ A *Reader's Digest* article from the previous year described the American Indian soldier in similar terms: "The red soldier is tough. Usually he has lived outdoors all his life, and lived by his senses; he is a natural Ranger. He takes to Commando fighting with gusto. . . . At ambushing, scouting, signaling, sniping, [Indians are] peerless. Some can smell a snake yards away and hear the faintest movement; all endure thirst and lack of food better than the average white man."²⁸

These descriptions might have been humorous to Native Americans, especially those from Chicago or Los Angeles, unless of course they found themselves in combat under the command of an officer who believed they had *inherited* the ability to smell snakes or see in the dark.

Playing Indian

The homogenized, packaged Indian stereotypes in the films of the forties and fifties, though bearing little relation to reality, were rather interesting in their own right. Because the Plains Indians were well known as warriors, much of the Hollywood Indian's outfit was a costume designer's interpretation of what a Plains warrior would have worn.

The typical Hollywood Indian man of the forties and fifties wore a long, flowing, feathered headdress, a breech cloth (with swimming trunks underneath, of course), and moccasins, and he wielded a fierce-looking tomahawk. His sister the Indian Princess wore a long, beaded and fringed buckskin dress and a beaded headband with one feather sticking straight up in the back. They lived in a tipi, and he hunted buffalo—or settlers—and carved totem poles while she picked berries, slaved away at the buffalo hides, or fashioned pottery. A man described as Sioux might have been found wearing a Navajo blanket over his chest plate, carrying weapons from a northeastern tribe, wearing an Apache bandanna, and standing in front of a northwestern tribe's totem pole.

These individual details of the celluloid Indian were obviously not all figments of a Hollywood imagination. Most of them could be found somewhere in the five hundred separate cultures, but Hollywood was the only place where the whole simulacrum came together.

Native American actors have always had difficulty with these odd, syncretic depictions offered by Hollywood, and they have made their uneasiness known in different ways. Today's actors are often very vocal about what they will and will not do in terms of authenticity, but even in the early days, the actors at times let their feelings be known. Sometimes it was with humor, the sort that is packed with subtext. For instance, John del Valle wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 17 November 1940:

Since De Mille set the pace with his first filming in 1912-13 of "The Squaw Man"¹²⁹ as Hollywood's first feature picture, the red man has had more than his share of work. . . . This offers an anthropological aspect which might not have been anticipated; Hollywood has acquired a permanent colony of representatives of almost all tribes still extant. With the cinema as their melting pot, these expatriates are taking on the semblance of a tribe all their own—perhaps the largest tribal group not on any reservation. One among them, a stalwart of

Cherokee blood known professionally as Chief Thunder Cloud [Victor Daniels], who plays a Cree war chief in "North West Mounted Police," has taken the initiative. With a nucleus of eighteen, and an eligible list running into the hundreds, Thunder Cloud is applying to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for recognition of the "De Mille Indians" as a new tribe composed only of Indians who work for films.

Mr. del Valle evidently saw the humor in the proposition, but the irony of legislated legitimacy for a constructed reality seems to have escaped him.

They Died With Their Boots On (1941)

When Errol Flynn starred as George Armstrong Custer in *They Died With Their Boots On* in 1941, the conventions of invention for Indians in western films were already so deeply engrained that they were virtually unquestioned. As Crazy Horse rides down upon and kills Custer, the audience sees a savage killing machine mowing down a righteous and courageous "real American."

The story was an old one that every child had learned in school—the brave General Custer and his gallant men of the Seventh Cavalry were doing their duty, making America safe for white farmers and their families, when the dastardly Sioux ambushed them and murdered every man. In the film version, low-angle shots produced an image of a Custer of mythic stature, much like the many paintings of his famous last stand. According to a written transition in the film, Custer "cleared the plains for a ruthlessly spreading civilization that spelled doom for the Red Man." The "red man" in this film is represented by Anthony Quinn—who actually is of Tarahumara ancestry—as Crazy Horse, the only individualized Indian in the film, which mainly featured hordes rushing over the Little Big Horn or standing as backdrop for the hero's actions. That Crazy Horse was given any humanity or understandable motivation was very likely done to give the hero, Custer, an adversary worthy of his attention and make his death more tragic and meaningful. The point of films such as *They Died With Their Boots On* was not to tell a new story; it was to reaffirm the righteousness of the nineteenth-century American hero and showcase his heroism against an obvious evil. That evil was conveniently represented by the American Indian because the question of who was right or who would win had been definitively answered. It was "history."

Robert Stam observed in a discussion of *Rambo* (1987) that the film is a "rightest and racist discourse designed to flatter and nourish masculine fantasies of omnipotence characteristic of an empire in crisis."³⁰ The same could be said of *They Died With Their Boots On*. It was made just before the United States entered World War II, when "masculine fantasies of omnipotence" were selling very well indeed. In November 1941 a reviewer for *Variety* described the film as a "surefire western, an escape from bombers, tanks and Gestapo . . . American to the last man." America of the 1940s was deeply immersed in the war, and filmmakers were producing movies that offered escape from that reality while defining ever more clearly what it was to be an American hero. In much the same way Buffalo Bill's *The Indian Wars* bolstered the American confidence in the righteousness and bravery of the American male entering World War I, *They Died With Their Boots On*, like *Northwest Passage*, portrayed the larger-than-life, courageous, and honorable American male for an America about to charge through another world war.

Stagecoach (1939)

The *Variety* review quoted above said that "In westerns . . . major errors in history and persons . . . mean little to producers or audiences. The test of the yarn is not its accuracy but its speed and excitement."³¹ For speed, excitement, and individual fabrication of the American myth, no one surpassed John Ford. His classic western, *Stagecoach*, is an encyclopedia of innovative filmmaking. Many of his sequences, particularly those with fast action, have been duplicated so many times by so many (generally lesser) filmmakers that they have become clichés of American cinema.

As a stagecoach races across the vast expanse of Monument Valley (Ford's all-purpose western setting that stands in for the New Mexico high desert), the scene is shot from a high angle that makes the little island of rambling humanity seem extremely vulnerable. We know that a band of cutthroat Indians is about to attack the stagecoach and that it belongs to Geronimo, because we've already seen the burned-out ranch and the dead white woman, and we've been told that "You're all going to be scalped and massacred by that old butcher, Geronimo." The Indians appear in a low-angle shot as the dangerous villains, and the tension mounts with a closeup of Geronimo (Chief White Horse). Ford's crosscutting of shots builds the tension in the scene as an arrow out of nowhere hits a passenger in the stage and the chase begins. To film the

scene, a camera was mounted on a truck that raced alongside the stagecoach at high speed, creating breathless excitement for that early audience. Shots of the speeding stage were crosscut with shots of the passengers within as the white men bravely fought off the attack. Ford's artistic use of the exterior camera was inspired; the filming of the Apaches in low-angle shots showed just how hard they were hitting the ground.

It was apparently irrelevant to audiences that the Apaches would have had to travel for miles across open country to reach the stagecoach—judging by the establishing long shot—and would have been heard long before the arrow appears out of nowhere; or that the archer—apparently the only one in the picture who doesn't have a rifle—would have had to be fairly close to hit the stage. Speed and action were important, not reality, so it was also possible for the hero to knock two Indians off their horses at the same time. The point was not to show a realistic altercation but to show the stagecoach's microcosm of civilized society (with its paradoxes and contradictions) saved by the classic western hero. Ford noted that it would not have done for the Indians to shoot the lead horses instead of firing madly into the air because, "it would have been the end of the picture,"³² and that's a hard argument to refute.

The film's hero, Ringo (John Wayne), is the ultimate westering hero who carries his own brand of justice, battles against formidable odds, and gets the girl. He has just escaped from prison, where he has been unjustly held while his brother's murderers are living it up in Lordsburg. While the tension over the impending confrontation with the murderers builds, the hero is given the opportunity to prove his worth. He is more than kind to the prostitute (Claire Trevor), whom the others shun, revealing his innocence and his egalitarian value system. During the full-scale attack, he climbs on top of the stage to kill Indians and then jumps onto the rigging between galloping horses to guide the stage, proving his selfless courage. This is all made easier by inept Apaches, who seem incapable of hitting anything except by accident, while every shot fired by a white man not only kills the Indian but knocks his horse to the ground.

Once white valor has been verified, the Indians simply disappear. The frontier having been crossed, the Indians vanish into the landscape, a part of the hostile world only the white hero can tame. While this may be an oversimplification of Ford's accomplishment in *Stagecoach*, it is a fair assessment of the use he made of the Apaches in the



3. From John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). Photo Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive; courtesy of United Artists.

film. As he stated in a 1928 essay entitled "Veteran Producer Muses," "the director who strives too hard to represent humanity by rubbing down the rough edges of racial and personal traits is likely to make his work drab and colorless."³³

National Policy of the 1950s

For a while during the thirties and early forties, at least on the surface, it looked as if Native Americans were beginning to receive some respect from the government, if not Hollywood. However, in 1953 House Concurrent Resolution 108 passed, ushering in the Termination era. The resolution, which passed with unanimous votes in both houses, simply "terminated" all tribes within California, Florida, Texas, and New York, as well as the Flatheads of Montana, the Klamaths of Oregon, the Menominees of Wisconsin, the Potawatamies of Kansas and Nebraska, and the Chippewas from the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. The idea was that "Indians within the territorial limits of the United States should assume their full responsibilities as American citizens . . . freed from Federal supervision and control and from all disabilities and limitations specially applicable to Indians." The

resolution also terminated all agencies set up to serve these people. "[U]pon the release of such tribes and individual members thereof from such disabilities and limitation, all offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the States of California, Florida, New York and Texas and all other offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs whose primary purpose was to serve any Indian tribe or individual Indian freed from Federal supervision should be abolished."³⁴ Senator Watkins, the resolution's chief promoter, referred to it as "affirmative action." He felt that terminating the tribal unit would "free" the American Indians and likened the resolution to the Emancipation Proclamation.³⁵ The national government had effectively overturned the Wheeler-Howard Act and had reverted to the assimilationist policies of the previous century. Whereas the "good Indian" of the twenties was one in contact with the mystical and the natural, in the fifties the best Indians were those that had assimilated. As a *Christian Science Monitor* article noted, "The picturesque, beaded, feathered, and quaint American Indian has just about vanished from the lands of his ancestors. In his place stands Mr. Indian, modern American citizen. Clad in a business suit, his keen black eyes view the passing scene with growing understanding and appreciation."³⁶

Termination meant the loss of trust status for the land that went on tax rolls, and American Indian complaints that the land was theirs by right of treaty and therefore not taxable went unheeded. Therefore, much Native land eventually "reverted" to the U.S. government due to unpaid taxes. The resolution also meant the end of tribal government for the 109 tribes and bands with whom Congress terminated its relationship. Many of these tribes had high degrees of stability, tribal constitutions, and a strong desire for self-sufficiency. The aim of the termination program, assimilation into mainstream America, was antipodal to the aim of these tribes to remain cohesive cultural and legislative bodies with power to govern themselves. Matters were made worse by another 1953 law, Public Law 280, that had a tremendous impact on Native self-determination. This law extended state jurisdiction over offenses committed by or against Native Americans in "Indian country," effectively dissolving self-rule by tribes and bands.³⁷

The fifties also saw the policy of "relocation" put into effect. Seventeen to twenty thousand Native Americans from reservations were moved to urban areas in twenty different states, with Los Angeles and Chicago receiving most of the relocatees. The government paid their transportation and assisted them until they got settled. News reports of

the day ran from an "optimistic" *Saturday Evening Post* article, "Indian Reservations May Some Day Run Out of Indians," to the opposite, in which American Indians were portrayed as victims of a government plot to steal their lands.³⁸ The end result encouraged the general perception that, for better or worse, Native peoples were indeed vanishing into the melting pot. One way or the other, the effect relocation had on Native cultures and individual Native American families is difficult to overestimate.

With the "termination" of whole tribes and the assumed assimilation of the Native American peoples, it is somewhat understandable that many in the American viewing public might think of the American Indian as a relic from centuries past. The laws above probably seemed like mere Congressional housekeeping chores and the American Indians involved probably seemed like far distant relatives to the "authentic" savages of prior centuries.

The Malleable Metaphor

In post-World War II America, life was good once more. Americans were spending their \$140 billion of war-time savings on new cars and television sets (twenty thousand per day by the mid-fifties), and the new suburbs were giving individual Americans a piece of ground they could call their very own. Science and technology offered solutions to old problems like polio and poverty. Religion was a big seller, with Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* riding the crest of the best-seller list and the Reverend Billy Graham a frequent Eisenhower White House guest. Congress attached the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, and Hollywood star Jane Russell said that once you got to know God, "you find He's a Livin' Doll."³⁹ However, by the early fifties, concern about the possibility of the non-Christian Communists provoking a nuclear war was sending children scotching under desks in bomb drills, and the Cold War was on.⁴⁰

One result of the fear of Communism in America was McCarthyism, a political phenomenon that included but grew larger than the man for whom it was named, Senator Joe McCarthy. Congressional committees were set up to investigate anti-American activities, and blacklists were developed. Among the blacklisted were artists such as Lillian Hellman, Victor Navasky, Charlie Chaplin, Zero Mostel, Abraham Polonsky, and Dalton Trumbo. One result of the blacklists in Hollywood was the shock of suddenly finding oneself among the op-

pressed. Films of the fifties, therefore, ran the gamut from racist, political propaganda to a type of enlightenment not seen in Hollywood since the days of the early silent films.

As Ralph and Natasha Friar noted about Native Americans in film, "The worst ally and the best enemy the Indians could have is a sympathetic friend."⁴¹ Beginning in the fifties, that was also true of those in Hollywood who were suddenly the American Indians' "friends." As Native Americans became the all-purpose metaphor for any and all oppressed people, Native American identities and histories were buried ever more deeply.

When Hollywood found itself under attack, the film industry reacted by producing films with a startling degree of tolerance. In order to make a point about other types of humanity and their equality to those in power, the filmmakers turned once more to American Indians. It was a logical choice, since filmmakers knew their audiences expected Hollywood Indians to be bloodthirsty savages. Presenting an Indian who was also a respectable human was a good way for filmmakers to shake up preconceptions without getting blacklisted themselves. A significant depiction of this sort is Delmer Daves's *Broken Arrow*.

Broken Arrow (1950)

Consistently cited as an example of burgeoning cultural awareness in Hollywood, *Broken Arrow* was prompted in part by resistance to McCarthyism. Stereotypes were reinvestigated and cultural norms, such as the righteousness of manifest destiny, were questioned. The film even made an attempt to create multidimensional human beings who were Apaches—an unusual idea in Hollywood—but five decades of one-dimensional stereotypes still cast their shadows over *Broken Arrow*.

Jeff Chandler's Cochise is a kind, humane leader with intelligence and military talent—a startling change from the typical portrayal of an Indian chief. He speaks standard English, without "ughs" and without the characteristically rigid body language or fierce scowl. However, Tom Jeffords (James Stewart) states in a voice-over at the beginning that the story will be told in English for the benefit of the audience. Since the conversations between Jeffords and Cochise are understood to be in Apache, it is no surprise that Cochise would be articulate. What is surprising is that the white Jeffords picks up fluent Apache so easily. This is skirting dangerously close to what Bakhtin calls pseudo-poly-

phonic discourse, interpreted by Robert Stam as "one which marginalizes and disempowers certain voices and then pretends to undertake a dialogue with a puppetlike entity that has already been forced to make crucial compromises."⁴² Cochise's voice is not heard in its full force and resonance, and the interaction in *Broken Arrow* does not consist of a true polyphony, one that strives to eliminate the inequities and show cultural difference in a positive light. It does, however, at least allow an American Indian man to speak articulately, with humor, and with some force. If nothing else, Chandler's Cochise is undeniably human.

The villains in *Broken Arrow* are not the Indians, even though Geronimo (Jay Silverheels) does not want peace, as do Cochise and Jeffords. The greedy, violent white men are the bad guys in this film, and by the end of the picture, it is logical even for a Euro-American audience to think that maybe Geronimo was right, after all. The suggested change in attitude is made very clear in the film. Jeffords states at the beginning, "I learned something that day. Apache women cried over their sons and Apache men had a sense of fair play."

Daves also presents Cochise's military skill for the audience to admire. He outfoxes the cavalry officers who have cleverly hidden soldiers in a wagon, and the company is virtually wiped out, except for General Howard, who becomes a great fan of Cochise. This is very unlike the depictions of Indians as inept fighters in previous films, films in which they could be defeated by a pack of Boy Scouts (*Scouts to the Rescue*, 1939) or even held off by a woman wielding a pea-shooter (*Bad Bascomb*, 1946). The Indians in *Broken Arrow* are a force to be reckoned with, but they can also be reasoned with.

The Apaches are seen as human and noble, but the idea of miscegenation gets the same old treatment. Tom Jeffords falls immediately in love with Sonseeahray, played by a darkened and contact-lensed Debra Paget. They are married in a ritual that includes the slicing of wrists and mixing of blood, an occurrence more likely found in children's pacts than Indian cultures, and they are deliriously happy. However, they are ambushed by villainous whites, and Sonseeahray is killed. Jeffords rides off into the sunset, alone once more. It was a touching love story, but it could not continue. The same will hold true in films made through the 1980s and even the 1990s.

The Searchers (1956)

The Ford film that many critics hold up as his most influential is *The Searchers*, made in the mid-fifties with John Wayne as the hero once



4. From Delmer Dave's *Broken Arrow* (1950). Photo Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive; courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox.

again. More than any other filmmaker, Ford was responsible for the ideas Americans had about Native Americans, and some critics see this film as Ford's first attempt to straighten out the distorted portrayal he had helped create. While it is possible to see the film that way, since it has a happy ending, more or less, it still perpetuated attitudes about Native Americans that were far from positive.

The film presents the Indians as murderers who kidnap two young white girls, not an unusual story for a western movie. The searchers are Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), the uncle of the kidnapped girls, and their mixed-blood, adopted brother, Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter). What makes this film particularly disturbing is the attitude of Wayne's character. He treats the "half-breed" with disdain for most of the

movie, and his goal throughout the film is not to bring the girls back but to save them from their dishonor by killing them. We're left to wonder whether or not he actually does kill the older girl because only he finds her, and he tells the brother not to go look for her. He says this while repeatedly thrusting his knife into the sand as though to cleanse it. The implications of the language and body language are that the Indians have raped, tortured, and killed her, but given the uncle's attitude and his actions, it is not at all certain he didn't slit her throat himself. He is the ultimate Indian-hater.

The younger girl, Debbie (played by Lana and Natalie Wood), has a chance to grow up while the search for her continues for years. These are dedicated searchers. She becomes the wife of Chief Scar (Henry Brandon), the leader of the band of Comanches, and is apparently content to be so when her "saviors" arrive. Killing the chief is a matter of course, but the brother and uncle have an altercation when the uncle wants to shoot the girl to save her from the disgrace she now bears.

Unfortunately, Wayne's character is acting according to the general mores of the day. Some film critics think this was Ford's point, that the audience is supposed to find Wayne's attitude reprehensible and that the film is actually a revisionist western that shows the negative effects of racism. The fact remains, however, that an audience who had little cinematic exposure to favorable depictions of miscegenation would be hard pressed to find anything amiss in their favorite hero's views. As Stedman notes, "Regrettably, because he is John Wayne, because he is so untiringly skillful in the pursuit, his motivation dominates in building audience attitude. Against a bigger-than-life screen figure, the less fanatical approach of the younger partner cannot offer the balance it does in the novel." Even the horror an audience feels when watching the uncle try to shoot down the terrified Natalie Wood character cannot undo the blatantly racist ideas that set up the situation. No in-depth attempt to humanize the Comanches is made in the film, so the "climax of the film says only that at the moment of truth John Wayne cannot murder a *white* girl who is also a close relative."⁴³

Miscegenation and Hollywood

Ford turned a harsh spotlight on miscegenation, a subject that from the beginning has haunted Indian and white sexual relationships in film. Laws regulating marriage between white men and Indian women were enacted as early as 1888,⁴⁴ and the issue, though generally not as blatantly addressed as in *The Searchers*, has received plenty of attention in



5. From John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Photo Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive; courtesy of Warner Brothers.

other Hollywood films. In fact, a formula of sorts was developed over the years that is only now beginning to be questioned.

Miscegenation, whether by choice or by force, was a scary proposition to audiences in the 1950s. Philip French sees films such as *The Searchers* as “expressing deep fears about the possible breakdown of American society in the face of an underlying drive toward anarchy and disintegration—a feeling that the inhabitants of America have a tenuous grasp upon their continent.”⁴⁵ At the end of his life, twenty years before the making of *The Searchers*, Standing Bear of the Sioux voiced the same idea but from the Indian perspective. He said, “The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. . . . The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. And he still hates the man who questioned his path across the continent. But

in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm.”⁴⁶

Films such as *The Searchers* posed the question of whether or not the prisoners, the white women captured by Indians, could be rehabilitated and whether or not the seekers themselves would remain the same. Would exposure to the land and its inhabitants change them? While later films came up with more palatable choices than *The Searchers* did, most films from the early fifties showed an underlying anxiety about the solidity of American national identity and a need to protect that identity. The anxiety was caused in part by the McCarthy era’s witch hunt atmosphere, which made belonging a virtue and difference a disgrace. The result was an interesting shift in the depiction of the film industry’s all-purpose Other, the American Indian. For instance, Ford’s *Two Rode Together* (1961) contains a plea for understanding for the poor unfortunates who have lived in captivity with the Indians and have been tainted by Indian life. The result is, as Stedman noted, that “*Two Rode Together* really preaches: ‘Be kind to poison victims.’ The poison itself is beyond consideration.”⁴⁷

In Hollywood’s westerns, the ultimate solution for a sexual relationship between an Indian and a white was that the Indian would have to die. If the relationship, whether or not it included love, involved an Indian male and a white female, the Indian man must die, and the woman was ruined for life—to the point that she, too, was better off dead. Rather than give in to a sexual relationship, the woman was expected to kill herself; otherwise she was either crazy or a whore and definitely not welcome in the civilized world. If she produced an offspring, the “half-breed” was proof of her lack of virtue and was treated as an outcast. That a white woman might find an Indian man attractive and worthy was beyond thought. This pretty well sums up the ideas in *The Searchers*. The women are ruined or dead, and their mixed-blood (one-eighth Cherokee) foster brother is denigrated as a “breed.”

On the other hand, if the relationship involves a white man and an Indian woman, the whole affair actually carries a romantic aura about it, although that relationship is also doomed, and the Indian woman will die, either at the hands of a villain (Indian or white) or by her own hand to save the man from death or humiliation—or sometimes simply inconvenience. In *Broken Arrow*, Sonseeahray’s death is tragic but not unexpected. This, of course, implies a gender- as well as race-based value system.

The general assumption of filmmakers for the first three-quarters of a century of filmmaking has been that the male has the dominant role in a male-female relationship, but it was unthinkable that an Indian, even though male, might have dominance over a white woman. An Indian woman—usually a “princess”—could give herself to a white man, but a white woman could never give herself willingly to an Indian man. On the other hand, a white man would be naturally dominant over any Indian or any woman, so his seduction and/or love of an Indian woman is tragically romantic and provocative, forbidden perhaps, but therefore titillating.