

Chapter Five

Native Americans and American Film



In fostering a national identity for America, the first European settlers were faced with an immediate and concrete dilemma: numerous indigenous people already lived on the land. By most accounts, when Columbus first landed, there were over 500 different groups or nations of people living in the “Americas,” many with their own cultures, customs, religions, and languages. In most cases, Europeans considered the native people of North and South America to be less than human. They were “godless heathens” to Europeans who were searching for a new Christian Eden, and thought to be vicious animals by those who wanted the riches of the land for themselves. In creating such impressions of America’s first inhabitants, European settlers could justify to themselves the many crimes and cruelties that were launched against Native Americans. Just as white slave owners argued that blacks were more like animals than they were human in order to justify slavery, so did the first settlers of the New World deny the very humanity of Native American people.

Indian was the term most commonly used to describe Native Americans until the 1970s, and it is still used by many people today, even though it drastically reduces and essentializes different groups of people to a single, simplified label. The term is also a historical misnomer. Christopher Columbus had been searching for a water route to India (to further trade between Europe and India) when he accidentally discovered “the New World” instead, and mistook its inhabitants for Indians. Actually, as many people have more recently pointed out, the people living in the

Americas knew where they were and didn’t need to be “discovered” or named. This incident is an excellent example of what has come to be called **Eurocentrism** – the process of understanding the world and all of its cultures and ideas from a (conquering) white European perspective. The very name “America” is itself a European derivative from the name of Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian explorer who first mapped some of what is today known as South America. After Columbus and Vespucci, subsequent European peoples renamed all the lands of the Western hemisphere and eventually colonized it in order to extract its riches. The indigenous people of the Western hemisphere were often slaughtered when they failed to assimilate to European demands.

As the British colonies became an independent country, the newly formed United States needed to define what it meant to be American. Following the formula of **Othering** described in chapter 3, some defined American identity as “not British,” but even more quickly and repeatedly, American national identity was conceived of as “not Indian.” Despite their presence long before European settlers arrived, it was not until 1924 that the United States officially granted Native Americans citizenship; until that time they were considered foreigners or aliens. Hence, a sense of “what America stands for” has been strongly tied to images of Native Americans as the **Other** to European Americans.

All sorts of cultural texts – made by and for non-Native audiences – have represented and reinforced notions of what Native Americans were allegedly like. Books, plays, paintings, games, and songs all contributed to white attitudes regarding Native Americans, and cinema would inherit many of those conventions, including basic **stereotypes** and the dramatic narrative of American settlers needing to battle Indians in order to form a great country. As this chapter will show, Native Americans were strongly associated with one of Hollywood’s most prolific genres, the Western, which usually replayed that basic narrative over and over. By relegating **representations** of Native Americans almost exclusively to this one genre, American film reinforced stereotypes and ideological assumptions that had been circulating for generations. And although the Western as a film genre is no longer a popular type of film in America, the ideas and ideologies embedded in it have had devastating effects upon the cultural representations and subsequent understanding and treatment of Native Americans.

The American “Indian” Before Film

Soon after Columbus and other explorers returned to Europe, accounts of Native Americans began to proliferate. In published journals, novels, and adventure stories, writers of European descent constructed an image of Native Americans that suited their own needs, disregarding anything that might complicate matters. Two basic stereotypes evolved in this literature (whether fictional or not): the Indian as either a marauding, bloodthirsty savage or a more benign and helpful noble savage.

The **bloodthirsty savage** view constructed Native Americans as violent, aggressive, and demonic, bent on destroying innocent white settlers, including women and children. Lurid stories and paintings of Indian raiders kidnapping and raping white women were consistently popular during this period. While Native warriors definitely did attack white settlements on numerous occasions, most Eurocentric narratives softened or denied altogether the European aggression that had caused indigenous people to fight back. In other stories, Native Americans were regarded as **noble savages**, primitive and childlike rather than threatening and violent. According to this stereotype, Native Americans, lacking in European customs, supposedly maintained purer instincts about nature and the world around them. These links to the natural world gave Native Americans a certain majesty or nobility in the Eurocentric imagination, and that "nobility" was further enhanced when Native Americans aided and abetted white settlers. Examples of the noble-savage character type include "Indian princesses" such as Pocahontas and Sacajawea, or the title character of James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans*. While the image of the noble savage may seem the opposite of the bloodthirsty savage, both still conceive of Native Americans as barely one step above animals, guided by instinct rather than complex thought, and without their own cultures or civilizations.

The stereotypes of the bloodthirsty and the noble savage were in place long before the American Revolution, and they continued to be used in popular cultural artifacts throughout the nineteenth century, when **Manifest Destiny** became a prevailing political philosophy in the United States. Under the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, many Americans felt that it was their God-given right (and indeed duty) to settle throughout North America, bringing democracy, Christianity, and the American way of life to new lands and new people. Manifest Destiny was thus the ideological platform used to justify US expansionism (or **imperialism**) into the Western territories, as well as into the Pacific Islands, Central America, and the Caribbean. In most places, indigenous people were converted through assimilation into the American, Christian way of life, or, failing that, eradicated through violent means so that whites could settle the land.

Genocide, which means the deliberate destruction of an entire cultural group of people, is a very strong word, but one that in recent years has been applied to official (and not-so-official) US policies toward Native Americans during the nineteenth century. For example, under policies that aimed to relocate Native Americans onto reservations and contain them there, the United States forcibly drove many Indian tribes into desolate arid lands where they starved to death. The US government made outright war upon those Native Americans who would not allow themselves to be relocated. Those conflicts between the US Cavalry and various Native American nations became known as the **Indian Wars**; they lasted roughly from 1850 to 1900. Other violent tactics against Native American people were less obvious, such as delivering smallpox-infected blankets to various tribes under the guise of charity, or hunting the buffalo to near extinction as a means of destroying the Plains Indians, whose means of living depended upon their use of the buffalo. Many other abuses and historical atrocities have been documented, but rarely came to light in white

middle-class America until the second half of the twentieth century. History is written by those in power, and it was (and still is) not unusual for American historians to overlook facts and events that would have reflected badly upon America's national image.

Simultaneous with the Indian Wars, depictions of white male heroism and derring-do in the West became wildly popular in the United States and Europe. Before long, the stories had been told and retold so many times that they codified into a relatively coherent **genre**: the **Western**. As was discussed in chapter 2, one of the ways a genre can be identified is by its iconography and its thematic myth. The Western's **iconography** (its sights and sounds) include cowboys, Indians, six-shooters, tumbleweeds, horses, saloons, cattle drives, etc. Its **thematic myth** (the issues and ideas, themes, and meanings upon which it focuses) might be understood to be about bringing civilization to the Western wilderness. Often, this is embodied by a strong individual (almost always a straight white male) standing "tall in the saddle" and using righteous violence (his gun) to protect the expanding American community from those who would harm it. In the Western genre, Native Americans are posited as part of "the wilderness" that must be tamed and thus, many (but not all) Western artifacts represent indigenous people as a threat to the expansion of American civilization. More than most genres, the Western is closely tied to actual issues and events in American history, and has been influential in helping to create a sense of national identity. It is often said that the Western is the "most American" of genres.

Even before the invention of cinema, the iconography and thematic myth of the Western were disseminated through a variety of nineteenth-century media. Woodcuts, sketches, sculptures, and paintings captured the look of the Old West. **Dime novels**, cheaply made books filled with high adventure, told stories of Western heroes conquering the land and proving the superiority of white American masculinity. Often these Western stories were based on actual people, a fact that created an aura of truth around the fantastic exploits (as well as the stereotypes) that they depicted. Buffalo Bill Cody was one such man, immortalized in a series of dime novels. Buffalo Bill (who allegedly earned his name for killing so many buffalo, itself an indirect attack on the Plains Indians) was also instrumental in popularizing another form of Western entertainment, the **Wild West show**. This was a combination circus, rodeo, and vaudeville performance that was performed for Eastern American and European audiences. It featured trick shooters, cattle roping, riding demonstrations, and frequently a fictionalized vignette dramatizing a battle between innocent white settlers and villainous Indians. Buffalo Bill's Wild West show is also notable for briefly headlining the captured Native American leader Sitting Bull, who was put on display for white patrons, exhibited almost as a side-show freak.

These art works, novels, plays, and shows presented stereotypical Indians to Eastern audiences, many of whom had never encountered a Native American before. While some of these artifacts attempted to take a scientific tone, describing the "innate" features of the "Red Man" (skin tone, skull shape, musculature) and his "primitive"

lifestyle, most of these works overtly demonized Native Americans in order to justify the nation's genocidal policies. For centuries, many white Americans were taught that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," a catch phrase that could still be heard on the lips of adults as well as children throughout the twentieth century. It was a sentiment that the Hollywood Western did little to alter.

Ethnographic Films and the Rise of the Hollywood Western

The birth of cinema coincides with cultural announcements signaling "the close of the American frontier." By the end of the nineteenth century, the US Cavalry had decisively won the Indian Wars. Many Indian nations had been decimated, relocated, or eradicated altogether. However, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny continued unabated. The Western genre, arguably a justification for Manifest Destiny, continued to be popular in literature, painting, and theater. It took a few years for American film to adapt the Western into cinematic form, since the earliest motion pictures were little more than simply shot, one-take scenes devoid of much narrative action. **Actualities**, as these first films were sometimes called, were short "slices of life" that displayed foreign lands, famous people, or important events. A number of actualities focused on other cultures, and thus a tradition of **ethnographic films** (films that record another culture's way of life) emerged. Native Americans were among the most common subjects for these early ethnographic films, as in the Edison film *Sioux Ghost Dance* (1896). This film ostensibly allowed white viewers to see a sacred tribal ritual, but it is actually a fictionalized account, concocted by white filmmakers to make Native Americans seem more exotic and foreign. Actualities, as the name implies, were generally accepted by the public as non-fiction works, and thus they helped to legitimate and naturalize certain stereotypes of Native Americans, even before the development of the cinematic Western.

Similar problems of authenticity and documentary veracity surrounded ethnographic films for many years. One of the most famous ethnographic films ever made, *Nanook of the North* (1922), also involved the staging of Native American life by a white filmmaker. Director Robert Flaherty did film actual Inuit people – but he requested that they revert to "traditional" Inuit living so he could film them as romanticized primitives, noble savages for 1920s audiences. Flaherty also staged certain scenes, such as the seal hunt, a sequence that was praised for its realism by many critics. Also, as a white filmmaker assuming a white audience, Flaherty used film techniques to "Other" his Eskimo subjects. He inserted subtitles that claim that they are fascinated with how a gramophone works, suggesting that they have never seen such a device before. He also cut back and forth between Inuit people eating and a dog pack snarling hungrily, thus making a formal association between the dogs and the "animalistic" tendencies of these people. Under the claim of scientific veracity, such ethnographic accounts of Native Americans often served up the same stereotypical representations as did fictional films.

The early actualities were soon eclipsed in popularity by narrative films – films that told fictional stories. As storytelling in cinema developed, film genres evolved in fits and starts. Many film historians refer to *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) as the first Western film, and its enormous success ensured imitators. However, the film (which was shot in New Jersey) features no Native Americans, although it does involve a chase on horseback and a climactic gun battle. Arguably, an even earlier film, one from 1894, entitled *Parade of Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, might be considered to be the first Western. Although, as an actuality, the film contained no narrative battle between whites and Indians (needed to express the genre's thematic myth), it did convey the genre's iconography. All of these early films with Western motifs might be thought of as **experimental Westerns** – in that they were trying out various visual and narrative formulas that would soon become codified into the **classical Western**. Many experimental Westerns made use of pre-existing forms such as the Wild West show, simply by filming their novelty acts and fictional vignettes. In fact, many Wild West show performers also found work in the movies. Film production companies such as Bison 101 and Essanay were formed from Wild West show stock companies, complete with Native American actors and a catalogue of dramatic scenarios (gunfights, stagecoach rescues, fort attacks, etc.) that could be enacted before the camera.

The participation of Native Americans in these early films may have had an effect on the types of stories being produced. Films such as *Hiawatha* (1910), *Indian Justice* (1911), and *A Squaw's Love* (1911) focused squarely on Native Americans as people, and not simply as barbaric heathens. Some film historians classify these films as belonging to an **Indian Story** genre, related to but separate from classical Westerns because they don't oppose white heroes to bloodthirsty savages. Some of these early films were even written and directed by Native Americans. **James Young Deer** created films such as *Red Wing's Gratitude* (1909), *White Fawn's Devotion* (1910), *The Red Girl and the Child* (1910), and *A Cheyenne Brave* (1910). His films dealt with relations between Native Americans and whites in a more complex manner than most classic Westerns. *White Fawn's Devotion*, for example, acknowledges "mixed-race" relationships, a topic that other Indian films of this period also explored. Many of them, such as *Ramona* (1910, directed by D. W. Griffith), showed interracial coupling as leading to tragedy, while others, such as *Flaming Arrow* (1913, from Bison 101) did end happily.

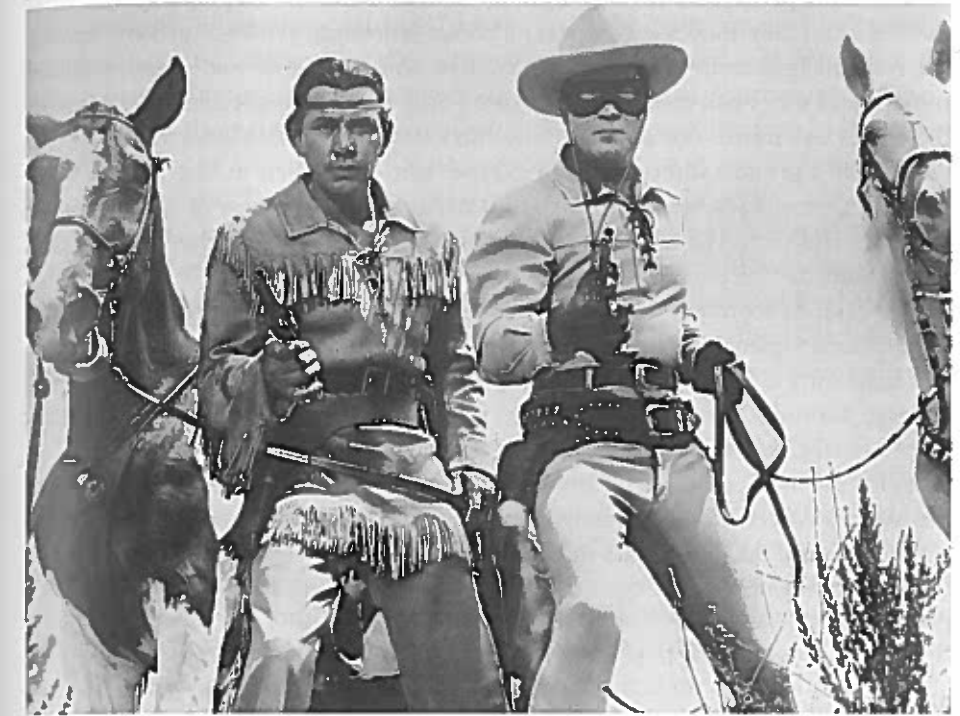
As did early ethnographic films, films of the Indian Story genre often misrepresented actual Native American customs to create exotic appeal for white audiences. However, the films' sympathetic attitude marks them as different from the usual Hollywood Western, which increasingly centered on the plights of white settlers forced to battle crazed "Injuns." D. W. Griffith's *Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913) is a good example of an early film that looks a lot like the classical Hollywood Western. It depicts a full-scale Indian attack against a white encampment. However, just when things look darkest for the settlers, the US Cavalry comes to the rescue – bugles blowing, horses racing, guns blazing – in a scene that becomes emblematic of the genre during its classical period. (It also recalls the charge of the Ku Klux Klan in

another Griffith film, *The Birth of a Nation* [1915], a film that substituted marauding African Americans for marauding Indians.) Within the narrative pattern of the classical Hollywood Western, Native Americans are structured as part of the wild and woolly environment that needs to be subdued, to be brought under the control of a benevolent white patriarchal civilization. Furthermore, unlike in the Indian Story films, Native Americans in the classical Hollywood Western are rarely given basic character motivation. For example, in many classical Hollywood films the real-life Native American leader Geronimo is depicted as a bloodthirsty savage bent on destroying white civilization. Yet the fact that his wife, mother, and children were all killed by white people in unprovoked attacks is a detail that most Hollywood Westerns fail to mention.

By the mid-1910s, the Western film genre had been formed and its popularity eclipsed the Indian Story altogether, often by focusing on charismatic white male cowboy heroes such as William S. Hart. The few possibilities for Native Americans to be writers and directors evaporated, and by the 1920s, James Young Deer could only find work directing films in Great Britain. Native American actors were forced to accept smaller and increasingly stereotyped roles. Hollywood also began to hire more and more white actors to play larger Indian parts, a practice of "redface" makeup that continued well into the 1960s. Thus, for most classical Hollywood filmmakers (and their audiences), the **Hollywood Indian** became a readily identifiable composite stereotype, one that drew traits from a variety of Native American cultures. He carried a bow and arrows, wore a feathered headdress and moccasins, slept in a teepee, and smoked a peace pipe. Not surprisingly, whenever Hollywood Westerns *did* distinguish specific Indian nations, they tended to name and depict tribes that had fought back against white encroachment with fierce determination. In this way, the Sioux and Apache tribes became synonymous in Hollywood films with the bloodthirsty savage stereotype.

The Western genre became so popular during the 1920s and 1930s – some film historians estimate that up to 25 percent of all classical Hollywood films might be considered Westerns – that it developed various subdivisions, or **subgenres**, plus a wide array of Western film stars. There were silent Western epics such as *The Iron Horse* (1924) and *Tumbleweeds* (1925), escapist kiddie-fare like the films of Tom Mix, and even a series of singing cowboys movies starring Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and Singing Sandy (played by **John Wayne** before he became a major star). The Western was also popular on the radio: *The Lone Ranger* began airing in 1933 and eventually became a long running television show (ABC-TV, 1949–57, plus an even longer life in syndication). Like the **black and white buddy** formula discussed in the last chapter, *The Lone Ranger* attempted to draw the white man and the Indian together as a team that fought injustice. Yet **Tonto**, the Native American half of the team, was always clearly subservient to the Lone Ranger (and in fact, Tonto means "crazy" in Spanish). Tonto is a good example of the Indian as noble savage stereotype, playing helpful sidekick to white men and white culture.

By the 1930s, most Westerns were considered unimportant, low-budget films. However, the genre was revitalized in 1939 when **John Ford** directed John Wayne



In the TV series *The Lone Ranger*, the hero (Clayton Moore) was accompanied by his loyal sidekick Tonto (Jay Silverheels) – an example of the noble savage stereotype.
The Lone Ranger, copyright © 1949–1957, ABC-TV

in *Stagecoach*. The high point of the film, an Indian attack on the titular vehicle, provides another good example of how Native Americans were presented in classical Hollywood Westerns. Before they even appear onscreen, the audience is alerted to them by the sound of ominous (and now clichéd) war drums in the background music. Although the sequence begins with a few close-ups of Indians on a high plateau looking down threateningly at the stagecoach, the rest of the sequence gives close-ups only to the white characters (who are, of course, the central characters in the film). In this way, the film positions the spectator to view the attack from the perspective of the white travelers. The white characters' various reactions to the battle are individuated, while the Indians are kept in long shot, figured as one large, frightening mass. And while the Indians are certainly constructed as threatening, white superiority is still maintained. The dozens of Indians aiming directly at the stagecoach manage to kill only one man and wound two others. On the other hand, the whites are sure shots, and at one point John Wayne's character seems to bring down two Indians (and their horses) with one bullet! As in Griffith's *Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, one of the men plans to shoot a female passenger when it seems that all will be lost (to save her the horror of being raped by an Indian), but true to form, the Cavalry rushes in to save the day.

Stagecoach, perhaps more than any other film, cemented in the public's mind what the classical Hollywood Western was all about – thrilling action sequences among the breathtaking scenery of the Old West in which a white male hero defeated Indians and other bad guys. Director John Ford, who had made silent Westerns in the 1910s, continued to make them into the 1960s; he has been valorized as one of Hollywood's greatest directors. John Wayne, who had toiled in low-budget films for most of the 1930s, was catapulted into stardom by the success of *Stagecoach*; he became a Hollywood icon as the pre-eminent American hero. Whether he was fighting Indians on the plains or battling the Japanese in World War II movies, John Wayne came to represent the spirit of the nation: masculine individuality, strength, and justified violence in the name of God and country. The fact that that violence was frequently exerted against Native American populations was simply part of the Western formula. Ford once noted that in his films he had "killed more Indians than [actual US Cavalry officers] Custer, Beecher, and Chivington put together." A balm for the historical crimes of the nation against indigenous peoples, the classical Hollywood Western was ultimately one of the most racist of American film genres. It was not until the **civil rights movement** of the postwar era that some American filmmakers began to challenge the assumptions and implications of the form.

The Evolving Western

In the post-World War II era, the Hollywood **social problem film** became briefly popular. As part of this trend, a few Westerns were produced that attempted to treat Native Americans with more care and respect. The formation in 1950 of an advocacy group, the National Film Committee of the Association on American Indian Affairs, also helped to foment change in Hollywood by lobbying for better representations. There was also at least one film produced during this era that chronicled the life of a *contemporary* Native American, Olympic and baseball star *Jim Thorpe, All American* (1951). (Note how the very title of the film stresses his assimilation into white national culture.) Yet, as is still true of Hollywood today, historical films about Indians, that is, Westerns, were much more likely to be produced than were films centering on contemporary Native American lives. Nonetheless, the Westerns of the 1950s and 1960s continued to evolve, sometimes in bizarre ways. By the 1970s, a few films even dared to celebrate Native American cultures and indict white racism.

Two of the first social problem Westerns of the immediate postwar era were *Devil's Doorway* (1950) and *Broken Arrow* (1950). In the former, an Indian who has fought for the Union during the Civil War returns home to find prejudice and injustice in his supposedly free home town. In *Broken Arrow*, Jimmy Stewart plays a Civil War veteran who falls in love with an Indian maiden; however, true to another Hollywood formula, their marriage ends in tragedy. (It is interesting to note that *Broken Arrow* was written by then-blacklisted Albert Maltz; along with the film's pleas for non-violent racial tolerance one can also discern a subtle critique of mob

rule and witch hunting as it was then occurring in **Red-Scared** Hollywood.) The producers of *Broken Arrow* solicited Native American input for the film's various tribal scenes, and while many allegedly authentic details were still fabricated, the film at least *attempted* to acknowledge and accurately depict Apache culture. However, most of these films still featured white actors playing the lead Indian roles: Burt Lancaster in *Jim Thorpe, All American*, Robert Taylor in *Devil's Doorway*, and Jeff Chandler and Debra Paget in *Broken Arrow*. As in the 1930s, actual Native American actors were relegated to bit parts or were employed as extras. Two such actors of the era were Iron Eyes Cody and Jay Silverheels, both of whom appear (uncredited) in small roles in *Broken Arrow*. Cody was perhaps best known for his appearance as a weeping Native American on the famous 1970s "Keep America Beautiful" TV public service announcement, while Silverheels became famous playing Tonto on *The Lone Ranger*.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the so-called **adult Western** began to deal in more complex ways with the genre's thematic issues. Whether or not gunfighters make good role models for small boys was a question asked by *Shane* (1953). The Westerns of director Anthony Mann often figured their white heroes as obsessed neurotics, and the inherent racism of the Western hero was questioned in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). In it, a character played by John Wayne becomes so pathological in his hatred for Indians that the audience fears he will kill his cousin (Natalie Wood) because she was raised by them. The violent and myth-making capacity of the genre was also explored in Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Toward the end of his career, John Ford even attempted to make a pro-Indian movie, or at least a film that depicted the plight of a specific Native tribe forced by the Cavalry to relocate. Titled *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), the film is a bloated epic that interrupts its tale of resettlement with a grotesque "comic interlude" that attempts to play the genre's violence and brutality for easy laughs. It too failed to cast Native American actors in leading Cheyenne roles, instead drawing on Hispanic actors such as Dolores Del Rio and Gilbert Roland. Furthermore, it should be noted that on most of Ford's Western films, the production staff maintained segregated restrooms for white and non-white performers. Such was the baseline racism of the era.

As the civil rights struggles of the 1960s became more pronounced, the **American Indian Movement (AIM)**, founded by Russell Means, added its voice to the growing countercultural call for social justice and equal opportunity for all Americans. Hollywood began to realize that their simple-minded Indian stereotypes were out of date, and for a time in the 1960s, Hollywood Westerns tended to pit white heroes against Mexican bandits instead of bloodthirsty savages. The war in Vietnam was also sensitizing Americans to issues of US imperialism and warfare against non-white people, and many countercultural critics began drawing comparisons between American jingoism and the violent thematics of the cinematic Western. As if to confirm that theory, when John Wayne made his controversial pro-Vietnam-war movie *The Green Berets* (1968), he staged it like a classical Hollywood Western, with marauding non-white Others storming the army camp, a type of warfare that did not occur in Vietnam. (Allegedly Wayne had enlisted the



Latino actors Gilbert Roland and Dolores Del Rio were hired to play Native American characters in John Ford's apologetic Western, *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).
Cheyenne Autumn, copyright © 1964, Warner Bros. Photo: Kobal Collection

aid of John Ford in making this film, but even that failed to correct the many inaccuracies that the film depicts, including most infamously a shot where the sun sets into the East.) As the 1960s wore on, the Western became increasingly apocalyptic, with films like *The Wild Bunch* (1969) killing off its exhausted heroes in a barrage of slow-motion bullets and blood. Western heroes of the 1960s, best embodied by the violent and cynical Clint Eastwood character in the spaghetti Westerns (so-called because they were made in Italy), no longer upheld American ideals. Now they were violent, greedy, petty criminals who ruthlessly murdered others before they themselves were killed by equally cynical gunfighters.

As the counterculture mocked and disparaged the traditional Western hero as embodied by John Wayne, it also began to embrace aspects of Native American

culture. As part of a larger quest to find meaning, value, and spirituality in American life, some members of the counterculture adopted Native clothing and studied Native customs. Environmentalists upheld Native cultures as exemplars of ecological harmony between human beings and nature. While some of this appropriation could be seen as a different version of white interest in exotic Others, American youth's interest in Native American cultures radically challenged the traditional Western's notions of who was "the good guy" and who was "the bad guy." A strong sign of how the image of the Native American came to symbolize countercultural rejections of traditional American society came during the Academy Awards in 1973. Marlon Brando won and then refused his Best Actor Oscar for *The Godfather* (1972), and sent Native American actress Sacheen Littlefeather to the stage to protest Hollywood's (and the nation's) mistreatment of Native American people.

By the early 1970s, a few films, including Arthur Penn's satire *Little Big Man* (1970), attempted to rework the Western genre into a more pro-Indian formula and actually critique white expansionism. *Little Big Man* was also understood as an anti-Vietnam-war film, as its depiction of an Indian massacre appeared to be an allegorical representation of the recent real-life massacre in My Lai, Vietnam. *Little Big Man*'s central character, a white man played by Dustin Hoffman, spends much of the film moving between Native American societies and white frontier towns. Through this character the viewer is invited to compare the two cultures, and the film makes its points fairly explicitly: Native Americans were peaceful, respectful people while whites were cruel, violent, and even insane. *Little Big Man* was also important in that it featured a Native American actor in an important role, and Chief Dan George became the first Native American nominated for an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. *Little Big Man* attempted to upset and rework the tenets of the classical Hollywood Western, yet the film also upholds usual Hollywood narrative form by focusing these issues through the character of a straight white male.

Also released in 1970, *A Man Called Horse* claimed to be an accurate representation of a historical Native American culture. True yet again to the Hollywood formula, the film starred white actor Richard Harris, as an Englishman captured by a tribe of Sioux Indians. Most of the film is about his experience within the Native culture and how he eventually learns to respect and honor it. However, the film's historical accuracy has been challenged on many accounts, and it too features non-Native actors in lead Indian roles. The film was a success at the box office, but perhaps that was due to its infamous "sun vow" ritual scenes, in which the Englishman is strung up by his pectoral muscles and left to hang in the heat. While the ritual depicted was based on an actual practice (but one followed by the Mandan Indians, not the Sioux), it is more than possible that this gory, sadomasochistic sequence is what attracted audiences to the box office, and not the cultural uplift of learning about Sioux culture. The film was so popular that it spawned two sequels, *Return of a Man Called Horse* (1976) and *Triumphs of a Man Called Horse* (1983).

Also very popular with audiences during this era were the "Billy Jack" films: *Born Losers* (1967), *Billy Jack* (1971), *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974), and *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977). Somewhat analogous in narrative construction to the



Tom Laughlin as Billy Jack (1971), a half-Indian karate expert who battled small minds and social prejudices in a series of popular films.

Billy Jack, copyright © 1971, Warner Bros.

blaxploitation films, these films might be thought of as a sort of "Indian-ploitation." In each film, Billy Jack (played by writer-director Tom Laughlin), who is identified in the films as a "half-breed" (half Native American and half white), encounters corruption and prejudice at the core of the American system. Although Billy Jack just wants to find peace and justice, he (like a blaxploitation hero) is usually called upon to battle his oppressors in increasingly violent ways. Cheaply made and sensationalistic, the "Billy Jack" films may have provided a cathartic experience for some Native American moviegoers, even as they reinforced values of violent machismo.

In 1976, iconoclastic film director Robert Altman (who had exposed some of the Western genre's mythic clichés in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* in 1971), returned to the genre with a highly satiric Western. *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (which was based on Arthur Kopit's play *Indians*) starred Paul Newman as Buffalo Bill and Frank Kaquitts as Sitting Bull. In the film, the mythic Buffalo Bill is debunked as a hammy stage actor who impersonates an American hero in his Wild West show. Bill is revealed to be an alcoholic, a coward, a poor shot, a terrible tracker, and an ignorant racist. When he "acquires" the imprisoned Sitting Bull from a federal prison as a side-show attraction, the differences between the two men and

the cultures they represent are highlighted and explored. Eventually Sitting Bull is killed and Bill goes back to playing the Western hero. In many ways the film is a powerful criticism not only of the American Western's thematic myth, but also of a contemporary, media-saturated America that all too often believes that the fantasy images of its fictional entertainments are more real than reality itself. In 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, the film failed miserably with US audiences who were in no mood to see cherished American icons and beliefs tarnished.

A Kinder, Gentler America?

By the 1980s and 1990s, the sheer number of Hollywood representations of Native Americans had declined a great deal since the classical period, primarily because the Western film genre was no longer very popular. The nation's evolution throughout the 1960s and 1970s had made the Western's thematic myth outmoded, and new attitudes toward Native Americans made it difficult to continue to figure them as the opposition to white progress. This new awareness of and respect for Native American cultures sometimes challenged lingering stereotypes. Recently, sports teams such as the Atlanta Braves and the Washington Redskins have come under attack for their use and exploitation of outmoded images, many of which carry negative connotations for Native Americans.

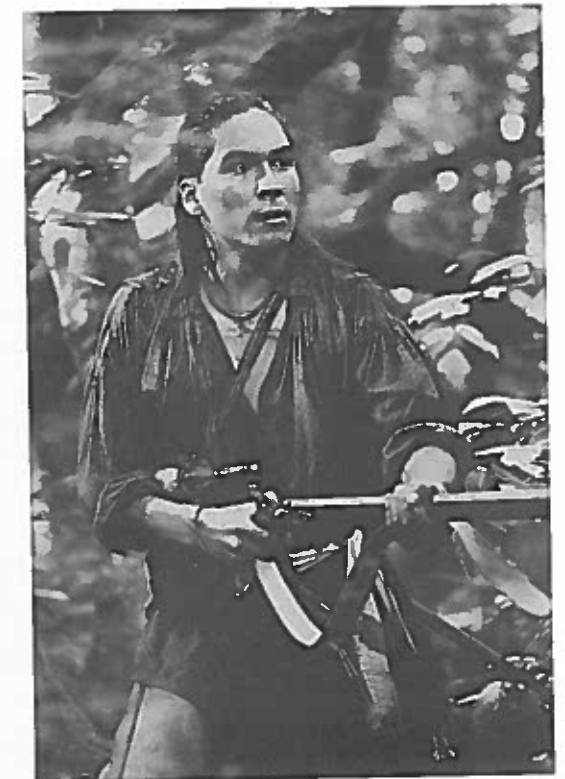
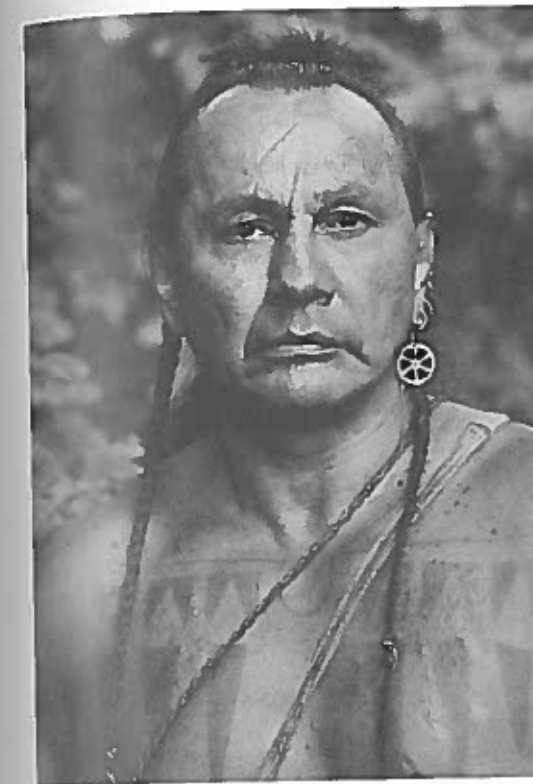
Yet, if the bloodthirsty savage stereotype was slowly fading away, a reworking of the noble savage stereotype became increasingly prevalent: the Indian as holder of divine, transcendental spirituality. In the 1980s and 1990s, many white Americans embraced what they believed to be a simpler, nobler, "new-age" type of spirituality, frequently derived from Native American customs and culture. This new use and function of Native Americans can be seen in films as diverse as *The Doors* (1991), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995). This softer, gentler version of cultural stereotyping was also prevalent in the few American Westerns of the era. Care was taken during the production of most of these films to consult Native American historians, cultural experts, and advisors. Yet the Hollywood formulas still at work within these films complicated their messages of cultural respect. In many, the Indian experience is still refracted through the eyes of white people, and usually a white male. For example, the film *Windwalker* (1980) took care to employ Native American languages (Cheyenne and Crow), but then placed British actor Trevor Howard in "redface" makeup in the main Indian role.

Probably the most significant representations of Native Americans from this period can be found in *Dances With Wolves* (1990), a revisionist Western that won numerous Oscars including Best Picture. The film is a good example of a **nostalgic Hollywood blockbuster**, attempting to update the Western's formulas for a more politically sensitive era. *Dances With Wolves* also draws on the conventions of the Hollywood social problem film, wherein a white lead character investigates a social problem, here figured as the historical situation of nineteenth-century Native

Americans. Kevin Costner, who also directed the film, stars in it as Lt. John Dunbar, a US Cavalry officer who, through a series of adventures, comes to live among the Lakota Indians. Dunbar experiences Lakota culture at first hand, and finds it to be more ecologically sound and spiritually fulfilling than his own. Much like the earlier film *Little Big Man*, in *Dances With Wolves* the brutality and ignorance of the US Cavalry is vividly dramatized, while the Lakota culture is shown to be peaceful and honorable. The complexity and humanity of those characterizations allowed them to move beyond the noble savage stereotype, but the marauding Pawnee Indians still appear as rather one-dimensional, bloodthirsty savages. And a somewhat contrived love interest also exposes the Hollywood formulas at work in the film: Mary McDonald plays another white person living among the Indians, conveniently placed there by the scriptwriter so that Dunbar may have a love interest of his own race. Still, despite its formulaic nature, the film was popular with many Native Americans, especially for its rousing spectacle of a buffalo hunt and its careful reconstruction of Lakota culture.

Dances With Wolves also gave much-needed work to Native American actors who comprised the strong supporting cast, including Oneida actor Graham Greene (who was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar), Omaha actor Rodney Grant, Lakota actor Floyd Red Crow Westerman, and Cree/Chippewa actress Tantoo Cardinal. Cherokee actor Wes Studi also appeared in *Dances With Wolves*, and he played the title role in *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), although he received fourth billing after Jason Patric, Robert Duvall, and Gene Hackman. (*Geronimo* was written and directed by John Milius and Walter Hill, two Hollywood filmmakers best known for their action films, but the film did poorly at the box office, perhaps because of its focus on Indians rather than cowboys.) Russell Means, the Oglala/Lakota Sioux activist who was the first national director of the American Indian Movement, has also become an actor in recent years: among other roles, Disney employed him for the voice of Powhatan in *Pocahontas*. These and other Native American actors continue to work in Hollywood, but almost always in supporting roles. Hollywood doesn't seem to know what to do with them: they are typecast as Indians in an era when Hollywood's version of an Indian movie (i.e. the Western) is no longer popular. And Hollywood still shies away from films that feature contemporary Native American characters or issues.

One rare film that attempted to do that, *Thunderheart* (1992), was a mystery-conspiracy-thriller set on a Sioux reservation. In it, Val Kilmer played an FBI agent of Sioux heritage investigating corruption and government abuse. The film was loosely based on the actual story of Leonard Peltier, a Native American activist who was jailed in 1975 for the murder of two FBI agents. *Thunderheart's* director, Michael Apted, also made a documentary about Leonard Peltier entitled *Incident at Oglala* (1992); the film suggests that Peltier was wrongly convicted. Other recent documentary films about Native Americans include *Imagining Indians* (1992) and *War Code: Navajo Code Talkers* (1996). The former is an exploration of the cinematic representation of Native Americans, while the latter documents the US military's use of Navajo languages as strategic communication codes during World War II.



Russell Means, founder of the AIM (American Indian Movement), later became an actor; here he appears in costume and makeup for his role as Chingachgook in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).

The Last of the Mohicans, copyright © 1992, 20th Century-Fox. Photo: Frank Connor

Eric Schweig, seen here in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), has also played more contemporary characters; in *Big Eden* (2000) he played a gay Native American who falls for an artist from New York City.

The Last of the Mohicans, copyright © 1992, 20th Century-Fox. Photo: Frank Connor

This subject was turned into the recent Hollywood blockbuster *Windtalkers* (2002), but true to form, that film starred Nicholas Cage as the white male lead and relegated Native Americans to supporting roles.

Along with documentaries, American independent film has been more able than Hollywood to represent more varied images of Native American characters and concerns. For example, one of the first successful films about contemporary Native American culture was Jonathan Wach's independently produced *Powwow Highway* (1989). In it, life upon a Cheyenne reservation is the backdrop for a story that explores personal and social identities, family ties, the role of the warrior, and friendship. Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1996), an art-house fable, was about a man (Johnny Depp) searching for meaning with the aid of an outcast Indian (Gary Farmer). *The Education of Little Tree* (1997) was a small family drama about an 8-year-old Cherokee boy growing up during the Great Depression, while *Big Eden* (2000) featured



Graham Greene in *The Education of Little Tree* (1997), an independent film that centered on an 8-year-old Cherokee boy educated by his grandparents in Native American ways.

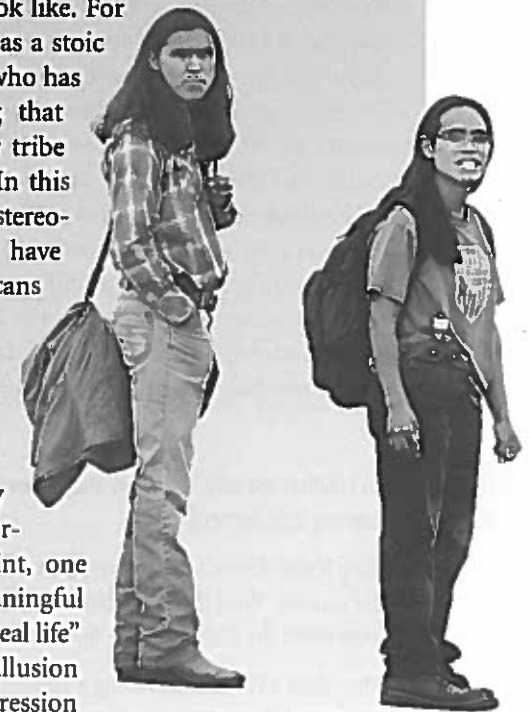
The Education of Little Tree, dir. Richard Friedenberg, copyright © 1997, Paramount. Photo: Jan Thijs

Eric Schweig as a contemporary gay Indian living in Idaho. As with the other types of social difference explored within this book, American independent filmmaking is more likely to address the issues and concerns of any given minority group, as well as provide some of the first opportunities for minority-group filmmakers to create images of themselves. Native American filmmakers have just begun to do so.

Case Study: *Smoke Signals* (1998)

Advertised as the "first feature film written, directed, and produced by Native Americans," *Smoke Signals* became an art-house hit after winning several awards at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. One of few American films to deal with contemporary Native American culture, it was based on Sherman Alexie's book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and was directed by first-time director Chris Eyre. It follows the adventures of Victor (Adam Beach) and Thomas (Evan Adams), two young friends from the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation, as they travel to Arizona to retrieve the ashes of Victor's dead father. Victor and Thomas are a rare screen couple in American cinema – fully developed and complex Native American characters. Victor is tall, athletic, quiet, and full of resentments and repressed emotions. Thomas is shorter and almost effeminate; he wears glasses, pigtails, and a three-piece suit which mark him (at least in Victor's eyes) as slightly eccentric. In one of the film's highlights, the two young men discuss just what a "real" Indian is supposed to look like. For Victor, a real Indian wears long hair and has a stoic expression – he should look like a warrior who has been killing buffalo. Comically deflating that image, Thomas notes that their particular tribe was made up of fishermen, not warriors. In this way, the film raises and gently deconstructs stereotypical ideas about Indians – ideas that have been internalized by some Native Americans themselves.

Thomas, who has been raised by his grandmother, is always telling stories that may or may not be true, and it is these stories that link the film in a direct way to the traditionally oral history of many Native American cultures. The truth or accuracy of these stories is not always the point, one learns, as fictionalized stories are also meaningful and in some ways can be more "true" than "real life" itself. Thus the film uses metaphor and allusion to address the historical conditions of oppression which have faced Native American cultures. For example, the film begins as baby Thomas's home and family are destroyed by a fire on July 4, 1976. By setting this opening event on the date of the American Bicentennial, the filmmakers subtly link America's founding day with a holocaust



Adam Beach and Evan Adams play two young men on a journey in *Smoke Signals* (1998), the first American independent film written, directed, and produced by Native Americans.

Smoke Signals, dir. Chris Eyre, copyright © 1998, Miramax. Photo: Jill Sabella

that deprives Thomas (and by extension all Native Americans) of their fathers and their cultures. That same struggle (between Native Americans and white invaders) is metaphorically depicted in a basketball game that Joseph and Victor play against two Jesuit priests. In one version of the story, Victor wins the game, overturning the historical reality spoken by the characters elsewhere, that "cowboys always win." Although it never does so in a direct or angry way (in fact the film is characterized by its gentle humor), *Smoke Signals* slyly addresses the power dynamics of historical and contemporary white culture from the perspective of its Native American characters. The film is filled with knowing allusions to Christopher Columbus, General Custer, Tom Mix, Jim Thorpe, John Wayne, *Dances With Wolves*, and TV Westerns.

Ultimately, *Smoke Signals* explores issues of memory, history, family, identity, forgiveness, and mourning. It dramatizes the day-to-day realities of contemporary life on an Indian reservation, and wryly comments on the odd mixtures of traditional Native and contemporary American cultures. The film ends with a montage of raging rivers while a narrator asks rhetorical questions about the nature of forgiveness. The audience is asked to ponder the past. How do we forgive our fathers, for what they did, or for what they *didn't* do? The film offers no easy answers to those questions, but suggests that to understand the present, we must also understand the past. That theme is also expressed in the form of the film itself. It makes extended use of flashbacks, intercutting, and framing effects that create for the spectator a unique cinematic space in which the past and present seem to commingle, forever affecting one another. Even the film's title draws attention to the theme. The signs and symbols of the past, the smoke signals historically used by Native Americans to communicate with one another, drift into the future, where they can still be decoded, hopefully before they disappear altogether.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Do children still play "Cowboys and Indians"? Where did the "rules" of such a game come from and how are they learned?
- 2 Many Native American terms were adopted by white settlers as place names of rivers, states, towns, and counties. What aspects of Native American cultures remain in your specific locale? What do you know about the Native cultures that once existed in your area?
- 3 When does a Western stop being a Western and become something else? Is a film dealing with white settlers and Native American tribes in the original 13 colonies a Western? Would a film that centered on a historical Native American culture before the arrival of whites still be considered a Western? Why or why not?

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Broken Arrow (1950)

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Little Big Man (1970)

A Man Called Horse (1970)

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Powwow Highway (1989)

Dances With Wolves (1990)

The Business of Fancysdancing (2002)

FURTHER SCREENING