



The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures

Author(s): John A. Price

Source: *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring, 1973), pp. 153-171

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/481668>

Accessed: 12/02/2010 11:03

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ethnohistory*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE STEREOTYPING OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS IN MOTION PICTURES

by

John A. Price
York University

ABSTRACT

The portrayal of Indians in motion pictures has been roughly twenty-two years in the formation of negative stereotypes in the days of silent films (1908-1929), eighteen years of the use of extremely negative stereotypes, especially in serials (1930-1947), and then over twenty-five years of breaking down the stereotypes (after 1948). The popular image projected was that of a horse-riding tribal warrior of the Plains and Southwest in the late 1800's harassing the white settlers. There has been a turn toward a more sympathetic understanding of Indians, a greater use of Indian actors, and an increase in the production of documentary movies.

Introduction

In the past sixty-five years the American motion picture industry has elaborated a body of ethnic stereotypes about North American Indians. They are usually characterized as riding horses, hunting buffalos with bows and arrows or guns, and wearing tailored leather clothing and feathers in their hair or in headdresses. They are seen as having been consistently cheated by whites and therefore as consistently against whites. They are portrayed as persistently involved with warfare, fighting as tribal units under a chief, and taking the scalps of their enemies as war trophies. In more racist terms they are stereotyped as sexually desiring white women and therefore abducting them, being more adversely affected by alcohol than whites, and being humorless, taciturn, and speaking simple languages.

Some of these characterizations, such as the use of elaborate feather headdresses, are correct for about two dozen Plains tribes in the late 1800's, but they are false for the remaining over 500 other Native societies in North

America. As a predominant feature in their way of life, most Indians did not regularly ride horses, hunt large game, wear tailored hide clothing, or wear feathers in their hair. By population, more Indians lived in agricultural chiefdoms and states than in the simple hunting tribes of the movie stereotypes. Instead they were fishermen and farmers. They wore robes of woven bark in the populous North Pacific Coast and of cotton cloth in the agricultural Southeast, Southwest, and in southern Mexico. This other rich and diverse North American cultural heritage should not be displaced or demeaned through such biased and narrow portrayals.

We cannot dismiss the stereotypes as unimportant film portrayals because hundreds of millions of people the world over have acquired their beliefs about North American Indians through motion pictures. They were created as entertainment, but they cumulatively built a separate reality about Native cultures. The belief that there is an essence of general truth about Indians in these portrayals is pervasive and persistent in modern North America. They are, for example, difficult stereotypes to correct in university courses on American Indians. Even modern American Indians draw heavily from these films in constructing their *own* views of their cultural heritage.

This is a history of distortions in the portrayal of North American Indians and Eskimos. Concluding discussions touch on such topics as the handling of inter-racial sex relations, the need for Indian actors, the need to portray Native societies outside the Plains, and the need to promote documentary films.

Many of the basic film stereotypes of Indians were formed in the period of silent movies. The movie story was told by white American producers and directors to a white North American audience, assuming and building the plot from anti-Indian attitudes and prejudices. Indian life was seen as savage and at an earlier stage of development, and therefore rightly vanishing as Indians are exterminated or assimilated into white society. The central figures were usually whites while Indians were used for local color, to provide action sequences, and as villains. Cawelti (1971:38) writes, "The Western formula seems to prescribe that the Indian be a part of the setting to a greater extent than he is ever a character in his own right." This sharpens the moral issues and dramatic conflicts for the white principals. Also, "... if the Indian represented a significant way of life rather than a declining savagery, it would be far more difficult to resolve the story with a reaffirmation of the values of modern society."

As western movies became a part of the culture, writers and directors built their stories with symbols that had been established in earlier motion pictures. The genre became gradually removed from real history to become a kind of allegorical history. The western became a milieu of fictional history with symbols for such frontier concepts as freedom, pragmatism, equality,

agrarianism, and brutalization. These ideas were commonly expressed in the popular wild west literature of the nineteenth century and were then expressed cinematographically in the early twentieth century. Because the film stereotypes were still forming during the silent era there was some diversity in kinds of Indian societies portrayed and the roles of Indians in the stories. The costuming was often more authentic than in later years and there were occasional pro-Indian movies in the earliest silents.

The Wild West Shows of Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill Cody, with their Indian actors, were included in the variety show acts that were filmed by the earliest kinoscope motion pictures in 1894. Geronimo and Sitting Bull actually participated in some of these shows, the latter even selling autographed photos of himself for one dollar each (Friar 1970:17). D. W. Griffith's second picture was an Indian melodrama called *The Red Man and the Child*, although this was not an important film because, like others at the time, it was so rapidly and poorly made. He shot the film on the Passaic River in New Jersey in 1908, taking about one week to make it (Fulton 1960).

Indians were leading figures on the side of right in such 1911 films as *An Indian Wife's Devotion*, *A Squaw's Love*, and *Red Wing's Gratitude*. In 1913 there was the moderately pro-Indian movie *Heart of an Indian*. The setting of these pro-Indian movies was usually among the eastern agricultural tribes. *Ramona*, a strongly pro-Indian story set among the Mission Indians of Southern California, was filmed at least four times. Later silents shifted more toward a villainous Indian image, as in *In the Days of Buffalo Bill* (1921), *The Vanishing American* (1925), and *Redskin* (1928).

D. W. Griffith filmed *Ramona* in 1910 when he moved to Southern California for the advantages of more sunny days for shooting outdoor movies. But even Griffith was ethnocentric about Indians. In *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913) Griffith showed the Indians' preparations before they attacked the settlers. The preparations included an emotional war dance and the eating of dogs, obviously uncivilized practices to a white audience. An early story of the problems of Indian-white miscengenation in old Wyoming was *The Squaw Man* (1913) by Cecil B. DeMille. This story of a white man who loved an Indian girl was so popular that DeMille remade the film twice, in 1918 and 1931.

DeMille's *Call of the North* (1914) had Indians wearing a realistic mix of Native and white clothing. William S. Hart, who had lived among the Sioux, is noted for his struggle for realism, even playing a halfbreed Indian chief who tried to bring white education to his people in *The Dawn Maker* (1916). Colonel Tim McCoy, as an Indian Agent to the Wind River Shoshone, was an advisor to James Cruz on his use of the tribe in the first epic western, *The Covered Wagon* (1923). McCoy later became a prominent actor who influenced film making with his knowledge of Indian history and customs. If

this early tradition of authenticity had continued there could have been a flourescence of great films of lasting value on the ethnography and history of the American Indian.

The classic western movie with frontiersmen and pioneers struggling against the difficulties of the elements of nature, lawlessness, and the Indians was developed in the silent era. It was in turn derived from the popular Wild West literature of the nineteenth century. This form was particularly emphasized in the serials, along with melodramas and slapstick comedies (Barbour 1970). The serials used a technique of steadily building suspense to climaxes through speed, action, and "crosscutting" from one scene of action to the next. It was in these that a band of horse-riding Indians was used to attack the settlers in order to introduce the elements of threat and action to the routine story. Extensive dialogue was unnecessary because the threat and the action were easy to portray through the pictures, so the story captions remained extremely simple. These were easy to make because they involved little writing or dramatic entanglement. Movements could somewhat replace acting, the story pattern was easy, stock footage from past films could be incorporated, and sets were inexpensive. All shots involving a given set or a key actor were filmed at the same time, although this often confused the actors because the scenes were out of sequence and they might not know to which circumstances they were supposed to be reacting.

Indians were usually portrayed as villainous, but in the silent days they were often individualistic, intelligent, and culturally diverse adversaries. "Under the influence of a mystical Indian drug beautiful Ann Little is prepared to do as she is told by Indians, but rescue by *Lightning Bryce* (1919) is imminent." At least they were assumed to have the intellectual ability to use devious methods like drugs when abducting beautiful white women. The *Moonriders* (1920) used Pueblo Indian ruins for one setting rather than the usual Plains tipi setting. Frank Lackteen played individualistic Indian villains in *White Eagle* (1922) and *Leather Stocking* (1924). By the time of *Hawk of the Hills* (1927), it was Plains tipis and costumes as the Indians catch the beautiful white girl.

The Sound Serials

When sound movies were developed, the serials continued to be popular and the major American studios shot 235 serials, all with from ten to fifteen episodes, between 1930 and 1956. Some forty of these, or seventeen percent of the total, can be classified as westerns. These often used two or even three directors each specializing on different elements of the same film: one on

drama and dialogues, one on action scenes such as fights, and a third on second-unit locations, such as car chases and Indian-cavalry encounters. Thus the dialogue man did not worry about Indian dialogue. If the Indians spoke at all that was handled by the Indian-cavalry specialist, who was more interested in the photographic portrayal of action.

The director of B-westerns acutally had more artistic freedom than other directors because his product was not important or expensive enough for close supervision from the studio's management. He was given a great deal of freedom as long as his product was saleable, on time, and within the budget, but his budget was so low and his production schedule was so tight that very little creativity or historical accuracy were achieved.

Tim McCoy fought Indians in a film that was made in both silent and sound versions, *The Indians are Coming* (1930). That was the first talking serial of any kind. It had poor pacing and synchronization and no musical score. Gradually these sound features were improved as each major studio began to produce about one western serial every year or two, reaching peak production in 1938 and 1939. The western serials and B-western movies tended to use the same writers, directors, and leading characters. They were inexpensive to produce, the interior sets were cheap to make and appropriate exterior scenes were readily available in Southern California. The following are the western serials produced by major American studios between 1930 and 1956 (Barbour 1970):

Western Sound Serials

Date Titles

- 1930 The Indians Are Coming, The Lone Defender, Phantom of the West
- 1931 Battling With Buffalo Bill
- 1932 The Last of the Mohicans, The Last Frontier
- 1933 Clancy of the Mounted, Fighting with Kit Carson
- 1934 The Red Rider, The Phantom Empire
- 1935 The Roaring West, The Miracle Rider
- 1936 The Phantom Rider, Custer's Last Stand
- 1937 Wild West Days, The Painted Stallion, Zorro Rides Again
- 1938 Flaming Frontiers, Hawk of the Wilderness, The Lone Ranger, Wild Bill Hickok
- 1939 The Lone Ranger Rides Again, Overland With Kit Carson, The Oregon Trail
- 1940 Adventures of Red Ryder, Winners of the West

- 1941 Riders of Death Valley
- 1942 King of the Mounties, Perils of the Royal Mounted
- 1944 Black Arrow
- 1945 The Royal Mounted Rides Again
- 1947 Tex Granger, Jesse James Rides Again
- 1948 Dangers of the Canadian Mounted
- 1949 The Ghost of Zorro
- 1950 Cody of the Pony Express
- 1952 Blackhawk, Son of Geronimo
- 1954 Riding With Buffalo Bill
- 1956 Blazing the Overland Trail

The serials had come primarily out of pulp fiction, although a few of the later ones came from comic strips to movie serials, such as *Red Ryder* (1940) and *King of the Mounties* (1942). In the early 1940's there was a total of forty-four different western pulp magazines, none of them Indian-oriented. The B-western Zorro series is considered to be an ancestral form to the Lone Ranger, an Americanized version of the Spanish California Zorro. Paralleling these movie serials were the B-western movies, an occasional big budget or A-western, and the radio adventure series, so there was an interchange among the different forms of mass media. The Lone Ranger was on radio, in two film serials and three B-westerns, and then in a television series and in comic books.

This material was rapidly developed for television when it initially flourished in the 1950's. Thus the serials died out in motion pictures and radio, but flourished for about fifteen years on television with fifty-one different western serials, including such titles as *Hopalong Cassidy* (1947), *The Lone Ranger* (1948), *Gunsmoke* (1955), and *Bonanza* (1959). Again, none were particularly Indian oriented.

The 1930's and 1940's

When sound came in, Indians were rarely given speaking lines, even in some mock-Indian language, such as Tonto's use of *kim-o-sabe* with the Lone Ranger. In one serial of the mid-1930's (*Scouts to the Rescue*) the Indians were given a language by running their normal English dialogue backwards. By keeping them relatively motionless when they spoke the picture could be printed in reverse and a perfect lipsync maintained.

Another feature of sound is that the character of individual heroes and villains could be more subtly developed and were less expensive to employ than massed warring Indians. This led to some decrease in the use of Indians. The stereotype had developed that Indians always fought as a tribe and that individually they were disinterested in white concerns or just too dumb to be believable villains. So the western villain was usually a crooked white gambler, major, banker, or rancher and his gang.

The Plainsman (1937) was one of the first movies to use an Indian chief by name as the tribal leader, Yellow Hand in this case. Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, and Buffalo Bill are all in this film fighting Indians. The standard use of Indians for excitement occurred in *Union Pacific* (1939) and *Stagecoach* (1939) when they attacked the train or stagecoach, as usual without historical accuracy or even sufficient fictional explanation. Indians were simply held as hostile to whites. *The North West Mounted Police* (1940) was an important full color fictional account of the Riel Rebellion of the Canadian Metis. Cecil B. DeMille produced and directed *The Plainsman*, *Union Pacific*, *North West Mounted Police*, and *Unconquered* (1947) (Ringgold and Bodeen 1969). The latter, set in the American Colonies, includes Indians torturing a white woman, an Indian massacre of colonists, and an attack on a fort. It was about the last fully anti-Indian movie and ironically was by one of the first men to make Indian movies (DeMille began in 1913). In World War II the Nazi, Fascists, and Japanese were the major villains, but still *Geronimo* (1940) was one of the first Indian chief biographies, portrayed unsympathetically as a naturally violent man. *They Died With Their Boots On* (1942) portrayed the Battle of the Little Big Horn with some historical accuracy, but was sympathetic to General George Custer and unsympathetic to Chief Crazy Horse.

The Shift Toward Pro-Indian Movies

John Ford directed the important trilogy on cavalry life in the 1880's of *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950). These films viewed Indians through the eyes of a sympathetic white, like the lead actor John Wayne in *Fort Apache*. The constant striving for mutual understanding between the Indians and at least certain whites is a constant theme in the three films. The true villain now tends to be a white: a martinet colonel, a trader who sells liquor and guns to the Indians, etc. The names of Indian chiefs, bands, and tribes and the Apachean dress are accurate. You get to see glimpses of the Indian women, as well as the usual masses of male warriors. John Ford directed over two hundred feature films,

mostly outdoor pictures, and his Indian westerns have consistently been more authentic portrayals than those of other directors at the time, but he never portrayed a Native culture from the inside until *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).

Kitses (1969:13) discussed the history of the Ford's westerns in terms of changes of Ford's personal philosophy. "The peak comes in the forties where Ford's works are bright monuments to his vision of the trek of the faithful to the Promised Land, the populist hope of an ideal community . . . But as the years slip by the darker side of Ford's romanticism comes to the foreground . . . we find a regret for the past, a bitterness at the larger role of Washington . . . The Indians of *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *Stagecoach*, devilish marauders that threaten the hardy pioneers, suffer a sea-change as Ford's hopes wane, until with *Cheyenne Autumn*, they are a civilized, tragic people at the mercy of a savage community." Another explanation could be that Ford gradually acquired a more sophisticated understanding of Indian-white relations.

These Ford films and later films usually attempted rationalization of Indian behavior, although as people they often came across as simple, childlike creatures, who spoke in short, ungrammatical sentences. *Broken Arrow* (1950) carried this theme of understanding the Indians further by trying to portray Indians as people with a legitimate culture, cases of stupidity and bigotry on both sides in cultural conflict, and the difficulties of achieving peace between the Apaches under an honorable Cochise and the whites. Delmer Daves, a writer and director who had lived among Hopi and Navaho as a youth, adapted the story from the historical novel *Blood Brother*. This film brought more realism, as well as nostalgia and sophisticated satire to the big budget western. Jeff Chandler had his first important success as Cochise in the film, taking a white man as a blood-brother and trying to make peace with the army. Audiences were now receptive to the idea of a more noble redman who had been victimized and forced into impossible situations. Indians were no longer seen as intrinsically bad or necessarily stupid. Indian heroes were often friends to the white heroes and there were both Indian and white villains. Indians were victims of circumstances created by whites and only renegade Indians caused trouble. Indians still lost, but then that was history, wasn't it?

The wave of pro-Indian movies that immediately followed *Broken Arrow* attempted to shoot the story more from the Indian point of view, but were often poorly done, such as *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954). Two Indian western serials were rushed out in 1952, *Blackhawk* and *Son of Geronimo*. Other somewhat pro-Indian films that came out within four years of *Broken Arrow* were *Devil's Doorway*, *Across the Wide Missouri*, *The Savage*, *Arrowhead*, *The Big Sky*, *Chief Crazy Horse*, *Sitting Bull*, *White Feather*, *Navajo*, *Hiawatha*, and *Jim Thorpe: All American*, an Indian athlete's biography. There was even a television series based on an Indian policeman in

New York, *Hawk. Arrowhead* (1953) had a white scout stop his Indian blood brother from a murdering rampage against whites. *Apache* (1954) attempted to show an individual renegade who tried to live alone, away from both the reservation and whites, but he was hunted and hounded by whites. *Flaming Feather* (1952) was another one in which the whites go to take back a white girl whom the Indians have. These pro-Indian films of the 1950's often dealt with the difficulties of assimilation into white society because of white prejudices, as in *Devil's Doorway* (1950), *Reprisal* (1958), and *The Unforgiven* (1960). *The Half-Breed* (1952), *Broken Lance* (1954), *The Last Wagon* (1956), *Flaming Star* (1960), and *Nevada Smith* included half-breeds who had to work out the dilemmas of their dual ancestry. Negative stereotypes were then formed about the Indian-hating, treaty-breaking cavalry officers, merchants, and Indian agents who usually ignored the Indian-wise hero.

The Unforgiven (1960) had a young Indian girl brought up as a white by whites until a stranger revealed her past, which caused conflicts among her adopted brothers and the local people. In *Flaming Star* Elvis Presley portrayed a half-breed who had to choose between his two ancestries, and an Indian hero again in *Stay Away Joe* (1966). In *McLintock* (1963) a group of Indian chiefs were released from prison to find only trouble from land hungry whites and a stupid government agent. An old chief finally begged to be given guns so that his people could die honorably in war. In *How the West Was Won* (1963) the obsessed railway man was determined to get his tracks laid across the Indian land as fast as possible, ignoring Indian burial grounds and having treaties rewritten for his own good. The Indians retaliated by stampeding a herd of buffalo into the railroad camp. The attitude then was that the white destruction of Indians was unfortunate but inevitable because of the march of technical progress. *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) was based on historical accounts of 286 Cheyenne who left their sterile reservation and tried to return to a traditional hunting range over 1,500 miles away, only to be pursued by a cavalry unit which had been ordered to return them to their reservation.

Dual at Diablo (1966) was the standard violent action picture with Plains Indians as the cardboard villainous force, but there is some view of how whites felt about Indians: a white scout is seeking revenge for the murder of his Indian wife, and a husband is an Indian-hater while his wife, who has been captured by Indians, mothered the chief's son. In the late 1960's intimate Indian-white relations became even more important. *Hombre* (1967) had a white hero who had been raised by Indians and *The Stalking Moon* (1968) had a white woman with an Indian baby. In *The Intruders* (1967), a half-breed is hassled when he gets out of jail and tries to return to his home town. A sign at the edge of town said, "No deadbeats or Indians allowed." He is refused a drink in the local saloon. They would not even bury Indians in the town graveyard.

The Recent Breaking-Down of Stereotypes

A few recent films have been particularly authentic and sympathetic, and they are breaking down the traditional film stereotypes of Indians. There has been a drastic decline in the number of Indian movies produced but the quality has improved for those that are made. *The Boy and the Eagle* (ca. 1968) was an excellent depiction of a Hopi myth. *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969) told of bigoted white justice related to conflicts in assimilation, the superior ability of a Cahuilla Indian to survive in the desert, and the eventual destruction of the Indian hero by a posse. The story is based on an historical incident in Southern California. *Little Big Man* (1970) and *A Man Called Horse* (1971) again dealt with violence in the northern Plains and repeated many cinematic clichés; but they treated the assimilation of whites into Indian cultures in a sympathetic and realistic way. *The Savage* (1952), *Pawnee* (1957), and *Hombre* (1967) had earlier portrayed white men brought up by Indians, but these more recent films were more realistic. Their commercial successes were attributed in part to a careful attention to the details of Indian life. They both give many ethnographic details on the day-to-day life in northern Plains Indian cultures by following the events in the life of a white captive. The films were still told from a white point-of-view, but did so without white moralism or attempts to devalue Indian culture. The white heroes learned to respect many Indian customs.

Little Big Man is particularly successful in showing Indian humor. To some degree this film reversed the usual situation so that the whites became stereotypes while the Indians were interesting, individualistic, and unpredictable. General Custer was played strictly for laughs and it showed that time honored theme of Indian westerns, Custer's Last Stand, from an Indian point of view. This was a western comedy.

Indians have usually been used as comic figures through extreme stereotyping or through a complete reversal of the stereotype. Thus in *My Little Chickadee* (1940) W.C. Fields had an Indian friend, Milton, who contrasted completely with Fields. Fields was short; Milton was tall. Fields was rubber faced with a bulbous drinker's nose while Milton was stern faced. Fields was fairly talkative while Milton just grunted. *McClintock* (1966) reversed this idea and had a young Indian who was a college graduate and smarter than the whites around him, but was still unable to get ahead because he was an Indian. In *Texas Across the River* (1966) Joey Bishop played a comedian Indian. In *The War Wagon* (1967) Howard Keel played a nonchalant Indian who lived with whites when their life was better and then went back to the Indians when they accidentally came across some gold.

The gradual elimination of stereotypes is an indication of the increasing sophistication of the viewing public. Still, the clichés die hard and Indians are

still used for violent action by savages. Indians were seen as violent by nature, not because of neurosis or criminality. They acted as tribes; they were all the same. A white villain was an individual with characteristic traits, ideas, and emotions, but an Indian could be a villain by just being an Indian. Indian chiefs were usually portrayed as representatives of a larger body, not as individuals per se. Even *Jim Thorpe: All American* (1951) was told as an Indian's successful adaptation to white society, rather than stressing the values he drew from his ancestral culture.

Billy Jack (1971) is a half-breed, Western Pueblo, ex-Green Beret, counter-culture super-hero who protects wild horses and the children of a racially mixed school on a reservation from harassment by the local white bigots. The hatred of Indians that is portrayed is extremely overstressed, particularly for the Santa Fe area where the film was shot. As in *Little Big Man*, the whites are stereotyped and, as in *Hombre*, the hero prefers his Indian heritage. With dozens of beautiful Indian ceremonials in the local Rio Grande Basin each year to incorporate into the film, the completely false Indian rituals that were contrived for the film were unnecessary. However, this film touches some contemporary Indian problems. It became a commercial success and should influence the production of more in the same vein. It does not patronize Indians, and it finds value for life today in Indian ways of living.

Two 1972 movies that were made for television are pro-Indian. *Mystery of the Green Feather* (1972) has sophisticated cattle ranching Indians, blatant hatred against Indians, whites who claim to be part Indian in order to make land claims, anti-development pleas against the railroad and for clean air, and even that phoney story about how whites taught scalping to Indians by paying for Iroquois scalps. Bounties were paid by some early European settlers for enemy scalps, but the practice was aboriginal. *Climb an Angry Mountain* (1972) ends with an excellent funeral scene in an Indian language, probably Shastan since the movie centers on Mount Shasta in northern California. An Indian, an ex-marine who is married to a white woman, escapes from police only to head toward the snow-covered Mount Shasta in the "Indian belief" that the gods will forgive those who make it to the top. The Indian is portrayed as a nice, simple guy with an unusual cultural background which eventually leads to his self-destruction.

Inter-Racial Sex Relations

DeMille handled the problem of miscegenation during the silent era in *The Squaw Man*. In this adaptation of a play the Indian wife committed suicide and the white man took their son to England. *Dual in the Sun* (1948)

had a half-breed in love with a white man. In *Broken Arrow* (1950) James Stewart portrayed a white who fell in love with an Indian woman, and *Across the Wide Missouri* (1951) was a pioneer story of love between a white man and an Indian woman. In the later film the Indian wife also died, but this time her white husband returned to her tribe to raise their son. It has usually been the Indian woman who died to provide the tragic but "inevitable" ending for a racist audience. Indian women were generally portrayed as sexually more free than white women, even being casually given to passing whites for the night, as in *The Searchers* (1956).

The reciprocal form of miscegenation, Indian man and white woman, has been less acceptable to white audiences and was not used as an acceptable arrangement until very recent films: *Dual at Diablo* (1966), *The Stalking Moon* (1968), *Little Big Man* (1970), *Billy Jack* (1971), and *Climb an Angry Mountain* (1972). In *The Searchers*, two men looked for a white woman who had been stolen by the Indians many years before. They find her happily married to a Comanche Chief. Their intent was to bring her back if possible, but if not, to kill her to save her from the completely degrading situation that they imagined she had been forced into. Something tragic almost invariably happens to these miscegenous matches so that the audience is not left with a happy mixed marriage at the end. The Indian husband is usually the one who dies, just as it was usually the Indian wife who died in the other form of inter-racial love affair.

The Need for Indian Actors

One of the problems in Indian westerns has been the use of non-Indians in acting roles as Indians, such as Anthony Quinn (*They Died With Their Boots On*), Jeff Chandler (*Broken Arrow*), Burt Lancaster (*Apache, Jim Thorpe*), Audrey Hepburn (*The Unforgiven*), Chuck Connors (*Geronimo*), and Sal Mineo, Dolores Del Rio, Ricardo Montalban, Gilbert Roland, and Victor Jory (*Cheyenne Autumn*). Most of the important Hollywood stars of the 1940's and 1950's played an Indian role at least once: Douglas Fairbanks, Boris Karloff, Robert Taylor, Yvonne de Carlo, Rhonda Fleming, Paulette Goddard, Jennifer Jones, Loretta Young, and so forth.

Indian actors were rarely ever given lead roles, although they were used occasionally as tribal members. A few of the MGM silent westerns that starred the Indian expert Tim McCoy, such as *The Covered Wagon* and *The Vanishing American*, were made on Indian reservations with Indian extras. There was even an association of Indians in silent motion pictures in Los Angeles in the 1920's called the War Paint Club. John Ford has usually used Navajos as extras since his *Stagecoach* (1939). Several of the recent films have used real Indian tribes: *Cheyenne Autumn*, *Little Big Man*, and *A Man Called Horse*.

Part of the problem is that real Indians do not behave according to the film stereotypes that have been developed about Indian behavior, so they must learn to “act Indian.” Indians, of course, are not automatically good actors, even as Indians, but whites know so little about Indian culture and behavior that even good white actors usually do a poor job portraying Indians. An Indian Actors Guild was formed in Los Angeles in 1966 to promote the use of Native people in Native roles, to promote the training of Indians in trick riding and other horseman skills, and to promote the teaching of dramatic skills to Indians. Jay Silverheels was behind this movement and helped to form an Indian Actor’s Workshop at the Los Angeles Indian Center with the help of other Indians such as Buffy Sainte-Marie, Iron Eyes Cody, and Rodd Redwing (Chissell 1968).

Chief Thundercloud was in *Wild Bill Hickok* (1938) and then played Tonto in the first serial version of the radio show *The Lone Ranger* (1938), which was an Americanized version of the Zorro stories. Tonto, the Lone Ranger’s assistant, like Zorro’s assistant, was originally considered so insignificant that the hero could be literally called the ranger who works alone. In fact, the word “tonto” means “fool” in Spanish and this pair, whether as the Zorro or the Lone Ranger team, worked in the Southwest where Spanish is spoken. Also, there is some lore about occasional “crazy” Indians who left their tribes and associated individually with whites. However, as developed by Chief Thundercloud and the show’s writers, Tonto began to emerge as a major figure in the movie series. Tonto became the first major fictional Indian film hero, particularly after Jay Silverheels played Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* (1956), television’s *Lone Ranger* (1940) series, and then in *The Lone Ranger and the Lost City of Gold* (1958). Jay Silverheels is a tall, handsome and intelligent Iroquois who has played Indian roles in over twenty-nine motion pictures, including *The Prairie* (1947), *Fury at Furnace Creek* (1948), *Broken Arrow* (1950), *War Arrow* (1953), and *Indian Paint* (1967). While many politically active Indians have since criticized Silverheels for playing a role that was clearly subservient to a white man, he in fact developed Tonto into one of the most intelligent and individualistic Indians to be portrayed on serial television.

Silverheels (1968:9) discussed the problem of recent Indian criticisms of Indian actors in comic television commercials. In one spoof selling housing insurance, six Indians attacked a peaceful suburban house. “Suddenly painted Indian riders attack the dwelling, yelling and shooting fake arrows, and throwing tomahawks at the buildings. One Indian slips on a roller skate and takes a fall. The Indians ride out of the scene, they have left a man tied. The narration accompanying this scene concerns insurance, never at any time is ridicule implied toward the Indians.” Indians in Minnesota protested that the commercial degraded the Indian image. It was withdrawn from further showing on television, and the Indian actors lost out on some of the royalties

they would have received if it had been shown. The commercial, of course, capitalized on film stereotypes about Indians, but by showing them in a ridiculous light they helped to dispel them. In another one, *Silverheels* is shown stuffing pizza rolls in his pocket. Again he was criticized. His reply was that this kind of criticism "promotes and strengthens the image that projects the Indians as being stoic, undemonstrative, incapable of showing emotion and entirely lacking a sense of humor."

Iron Eyes Cody, a Cherokee, has portrayed Indians in over thirty-five motion pictures. Rodd Redwing (a Chickasaw known for his trick gun handling), John War Eagle, and Chief Yowlachie have made many appearances. Recently, Chief Dan George came to prominence in *Little Big Man* and showed how much better a good Indian actor could do in an Indian role than most white actors have done.

The Need to Portray Societies Other than Horsemen of the Plains and Southwest

Over 2,300 feature length western films and serials had been produced by 1967 (Eyles 1967). About 400 or seventeen percent of these included significant Indian portrayals. The frequency of tribal names in the titles of motion pictures shows the predominance of the horsemen of the Plains and Southwest in Indian movies: Apache – 15, Cheyenne – 6, Comanche – 6, Navajo – 3, Mohawk – 2, Seminole – 2, Sioux – 2, Iroquois – 1, Mohican – 1, Osage – 1, Pawnee – 1, and Yaqui – 1. The Mohawk, Iroquois, Mohican, and Seminole are clearly outside the tradition of horsemen of the Plains and Southwest. The remaining eighty-five percent of the tribal names mentioned in motion picture titles are of Plains-Southwest horsemen societies. Also, one sees the predominance of Native societies with an historical reputation for violence, particularly Apache, Cheyenne, and Comanche. Societies with a more passive, non-violent reputation are almost never portrayed, such as Hopi in the Southwest, Washo or any other Great Basin society, and any sub-arctic society.

Just following the success of *Broken Arrow*, which apparently popularized the Apaches, the 1950's saw *Apache Drums* (1951), *Apache War Smoke* (1952), *Apache Country* (1952), *Battle at Apache Pass* (1952), *Apache* (1954), *Apache Ambush* (1955), *Apache Warrior* (1957), and *Apache Territory* (1958). Geronimo, an Apache, has in turn been the most frequently portrayed Indian chief, most sympathetically in *Geronimo* (1962).

In the context of long range history this particular selection of societies is ironic because the Plains Indian cultures were not fully aboriginal, did not

evolve until after whites introduced the horse, and were not similar to most other American Indians. No American Indians rode horses before Columbus and most still did not hunt from horseback in the middle 1800's. Most American Indians did not depend upon large game as their primary source of food, but were in fact agriculturalists. Most American Indians lived in permanent houses, not in temporary hide tents. Most American Indians did not wear tailored hide clothing, but woven robes. Plains-Southwest horsemen were even less typical of Indians than the frontiersmen were typical of Europeans because there was far more cultural and linguistic diversity in aboriginal North America than in Europe.

The selection of the Plains-Southwest horsemen as the source for the majority of stereotypes about Indians is understandable in the context of the vitality of those Indian cultures in recent historical times. The Indian military resistance to the occupation by force of Indian territory by white society was significant and still of recent memory in the Plains and Southwest. Cultural adjustments related to this traumatic period reverberated in both Indian and white societies for decades after. This white conquest and occupation probably had to be justified and rationalized to white society through the literature, the Wild West Shows, and finally through motion pictures. Perhaps the extreme stereotyping soothed the guilty conscience of the nation, as time and again it was shown how white, European, Christian manifest destiny must conquer the forces of paganism and barbarism. The Plains and Southwest Indian cultures themselves rebounded after the military period to become the major source of Native cultural revitalization at the same time that extremely negative stereotyping was being developed for white audiences. This was particularly true of the social and religious pan-Indian movements, such as the Ghost Dance, Sun Dance, Peyotism, and powwow dancing.

Motion pictures have ignored most of that spectacularly rich cultural diversity of some 560 different languages and societies in North America. Instead, they have portrayed over and over the same dozen or so Plains-Southwest tribes that acquired enough military prowess to give the whites a brief resistance: Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Comanche, Apache, etc. Motion pictures have virtually ignored the state societies of Mexico and Central America (Maya, Mixtec, Aztec, etc.), the agricultural chiefdoms of the Southeast (Natchez, Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, etc.), the marine chiefdoms of the Northwest Coast (Haida, Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, etc.), the agricultural pueblos of the Southwest (Hopi, Zuni, Taos, etc.), and hundreds of other interesting societies, to focus instead on elaborately fictionalized accounts of Indian military harassment of the struggling pioneers.

In fact, the whole horse-riding, buffalo-hunting complex was a brief cultural florescence that was created indirectly by whites. The horse was introduced into the New World by the Spaniards and it diffused northwards,

initially from the settlements around Santa Fe in the 1600's. This diffusion process went on through the 1700's, gradually providing more and more of the Indians of the Southwest and Plains with the great economic and military advantages of the use of horses. Societies that had gathered plants and did some hunting on foot, such as the Blackfoot and Comanche, had much greater success on horseback. The Ute decreased their plant gathering orientation and increased hunting. Some societies, such as the Arapaho, even abandoned horticulture to take up the rich complex of buffalo hunting on horseback. People could be more mobile, could carry more things, and could build bigger tipis. They could locate herds, keep up with the herds, chase down buffalo on horseback for the kill, and carry large quantities of food and skins back to camp.

This new wealth and new way of life brought on many changes in Plains Indian life, attracted peripheral societies into the Plains, promoted rapid population growth, promoted warfare and other competition between tribes, and gradually reduced the buffalo population. The whites then entered the Plains, found some brief military resistance from Indians, and added their contribution to bringing the buffalo close to extinction. The story material is as good in dozens of other areas. If the fixation on Indian-white conflicts is necessary for a sufficiently violent story there is much good material in Spanish-Indian or French-Indian conflicts in other areas. The real needs, however, are to describe Native cultures in their own terms, in time periods other than the late 1800's, and in areas outside the Plains and Southwest.

Eskimos and the Documentary Movie

Indian movies have generally been successful as popular entertainment and as financial productions, but for their quantity they have done little to advance the art or science of films. For example, they have not won Academy Awards, unless we count *How the West Was Won* (1963). Discussions about artistic creativity or the development of new techniques never seem to mention Indian films, although there have been occasional comments about their content as depictions of historical events or of frontier life. The historical judgement on the cinematographic creativity in over 2,300 westerns is that it was a mass media within which the industry learned to use the American natural landscape, learned to use apparent visual movement to build excitement, and learned to synchronize the sounds of outdoor action, such as horses' hoofbeats and gun shots.

Eskimo cultures have largely escaped the stereotyped portrayal of Indian cultures and academy awards have been won for *Eskimo* (1934) and *The Alaskan Eskimo* (1953). Films on the Eskimo are particularly noted for their creativity in the field of documentary ethno-cinematography, a tradition

that is very careful about the use of stereotypes. There seem to be several reasons for this. Eskimos retained much of their traditional culture into the modern era, making it available for direct photography. Because of the extremely different environmental setting of the Arctic, there has been much interest in the Native solutions to the problems of cultural adaptation, even in the modern period. By contrast, the life of nearly one million Indians who live on or near reservations in the United States and Canada has virtually never been portrayed in popular feature films. Eskimos were never a significant threat to whites and, like all "band" rather than "tribal" native societies, never warred against whites.

Another reason for the relatively realistic portrayal of Eskimos is the documentary precedent set early by Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). This was one of the most important movies ever made, setting standards that are still difficult to meet today. Flaherty was raised in northern Michigan and northern Ontario and knew many Ojibwa Indians as a youth, even learning some of the Ojibwa language (Calder-Marshall 1963). He went to Upper Canada College in Toronto, traveled extensively in northern Canada by canoe, and worked as a geologist in the Hudson Bay area. He made a film of the Eskimos in the Belcher Islands in Hudson Bay, but the negative was destroyed in a fire. He was dissatisfied with it anyway, particularly its disconnected portrayal of the Natives in one relatively unrelated scene after another.

He built continuity and integration into his next film by focusing on the annual round of activities of the head of a family, Nanook, from Port Harrison in northeastern Hudson Bay. He came into the community, became well acquainted with the Natives, worked without a script, and allowed the incidents that happened in the course of his filming to determine the content of his film. He let the story develop out of the lives of the people in their daily struggle for survival in a harsh environment: walrus hunt, harpooning a seal, visit to trading post, etc. He not only avoided building negative stereotypes by honest cinematic reporting, but through intimate portrayal he showed the humanity of the Eskimo. The film was completed in 1921 after sixteen months of filming. The word "documentary" was first written in English by a film critic in relation to *Nanook of the North*. After that, Flaherty went on to work on several other documentaries, including a picture on the Acoma Pueblo Indians in 1928 that he never completed.

Conclusion

A review of the history of the portrayal of Indians in motion pictures shows (1) the initial development of the film stereotypes of Indians in silent films; (2) the extreme emphasis on these stereotypes in the serial and B-grade

westerns of the 1930's and 1940's; and (3) then the gradual elimination of the stereotypes in big budget movies of the 1940's and 1950's. The decline of Indian stereotyping seems to have begun during World War II when the Germans, Italians, and Japanese replaced the Indians as the major villains. After World War II John Ford's more realistic westerns, *Broken Arrow*, and a host of imitators handled Indians in more sympathetic, although still fictional, ways. A few films of the 1960's and 1970's have even approached the documentary quality of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North: Cheyenne Autumn*, *The Boy and the Eagle*, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, *Little Big Man*, and *A Man Called Horse*. This same period has seen a florescence in the production of true documentaries. The best documentary and educational films on Canadian Indians are described in *Films on the Indian People of Canada*, Information Division, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa. A general catalogue that includes the best on United States and other Indians is *Films for Anthropological Teaching* by Karl G. Heider, American Anthropological Association, 1703 New Hampshire Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009. The following are the major long documentaries.

Major North American Native Documentaries

- 1922 Nanook of the North (Eskimo of Port Harrison)
- 1920's Before the White Man Came (Crow Indians)
- 1959 The Exiles (bar culture Indians in Los Angeles)
- 1960 Circle of the Sun (Blackfoot Blood Indians)
- 1962 The Annanacks (Eskimo of George River)
Basketry of the Pomo (three films)
- 1963 Totem Pole (with Kwakiutl dance and music)
- 1964 Pomo Shaman
- 1966 Tahtonka: Plains Indian Buffalo Culture
Washoe (ceremonies for girls's puberty and pinenut harvest)
- 1967 Okan, Sun Dance of the Blackfoot
Navajo Film Themselves (seven silent films)
- 1969 To Find Our Life: The Peyote Hunt of the Huichols of Mexico
- 1970 Tepoztlan and Tepoztlan in Transition
Netsilik Eskimo Series (ten parts)
- 1972 Caesar and His Bark Canoe (Cree construction)
Chenama the Trailmaker: An Indian Idyll of Old Ontario
(new release of an old silent on the Ojibwa)

REFERENCES

- Barbour, Alan G.
1970 *Days of thrills and adventure*. New York, Macmillan.
- Calder-Marshall, Arthur
1963 *The innocent eye; the life of Robert J. Flaherty*. London, W. H. Allen.
- Cawelti, John G.
1971 *The six-gun mystique*. Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Chissell, Noble "Kid"
1968 Indian actors workshop. *Indians Illustrated*, Vol. 1, no. 5 (June), pp. 6-8. Buena Park, California, Talking Leaves, Inc.
- Eyles, Allen
1967 *The Western: an illustrated guide*. London, Zwemmer; New York, A. S. Barnes.
- Friar, Ralph
1970 White man speaks with a split tongue, forked tongue, tongue of snake. *Film Library Quarterly*, Vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 16-23ff. New York, Film Library Information Council.
- Fulton, Albert R.
1960 *Motion pictures; the development of an art from silent films to the age of television*. Norman, Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press.
- Kitses, Demetrius J.
1969 *Horizons West*. London, Thames and Hudson.
- Ringgold, Gene and DeWitt Bodeen
1969 *The films of Cecil B. DeMille*. New York, Citadel Press.
- Silverheels, Jay
1968 Lo! The image of the Indian! *Indians Illustrated*, Vol. 1, no. 6 (July-August), pp. 8-9. Buena Park, California, Talking Leaves, Inc.