Making the White Man's Indian

Native Americans and Hollywood Movies

Angela Aleiss

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In Memory of Rudy E. Martin (Navajo-Tewa-Apache) (1952–1993)

Composer, Playwright, Entertainer, and Public Relations Director
of the American Indian Community House, New York City.

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Foreword

Redskin Raiders was one of the first films I bought as a schoolboy film collector. The title was irresistible. Indians attack a wagon train, the wagons form a circle, and soldiers and settlers wipe out the Sioux. The film only lasted two minutes, but all my friends wanted to see it, and I ran it to death. It turned out to be an extract from a 1936 picture called *The Glory Trail.* (In those days, studios duplicated short scenes from feature films and sold them to individual collectors.) When I acquired Westerns from a decade earlier, I saw where the makers had got their history from. They took it not so much from the record as from other films. We are now told that only one wagon train ever formed that classic circle under an Indian attack.

History was at the heart of these films, however, and similar events were within living memory. In the 1930s, you could still have met people who had crossed the continent in covered wagons who might have told you terrifying tales of Indian attacks.

And there were Native Americans who had risked their lives to defend their land, just as the Founding Fathers had fought, a century before, for theirs. The advance of the white race must have seemed as threatening to the Indians as that of the Panzers to Russian peasants in World War II. The settlers may have been less heavily armed, but behind them came the cavalry and the unstoppable march of progress, with the McCormick Reaper in the van!

In the early days of cinema, attitudes towards Indians were sharply divided between hostility and admiration. Theodore

Roosevelt, with his pleas for conservation, aroused the nation to the plight of the Indian, and film companies reflected this with "Noble Red Man" scenarios. Sometimes the same filmmaker would express both points of view, as with D. W. Griffith, who must hold the record for sympathetic Indian portrayals and yet who made *America* in 1924, with its scenes of Indian atrocities in the Mohawk Valley during the Revolutionary War.

Incredibly, the legendary Buffalo Bill Cody made *The Indian Wars* (1914), a film about Wounded Knee, with the involvement of former Indian fighters, including veterans of the Seventh Cavalry. They presented the tragedy as a battle rather than as a massacre, but their attitude had clearly undergone a significant change. A reporter on the location kept hearing the phrase, "When did the white men or the government ever keep a treaty with the Indians?"

The period in which these early films were made was undeniably racist. One might even say cheerfully racist. Vaudeville comics made jokes at everyone's expense—Irish, Jew, Pole. In one sense, this was healthy, for with everyone fair game, prejudices were on the surface. The dark side was the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members would happily have exterminated anything on two legs that failed to resemble them. (A surprise of this book is that a celebrated Indian actor tried to join the Ku Klux Klan since he regarded himself as 100 percent American.)

I recall that one of the most despised figures on the silent screen was the half-breed (although Aleiss argues otherwise). I found it ironic to think that the full-blooded Indian was regarded as the Noble Savage in those days, but the moment that the Noble Savage procreated with a white woman, the offspring became a vicious character, addicted to redeye and lurking at the back of saloons, ready to commit foul deeds, and usually played by one of the screen's stock villains, Frank Lackteen. When Douglas Fairbanks played the title role in *The Half-Breed* (1916), the movie's director, Allan Dwan, later told me that the actor's wife insisted he'd be shown diving naked into a river in case anyone mistook him for a dirty half-breed.

With such prejudice, why was the Indian so deeply admired that outsiders posed as red men? When I was writing *The War, the West and the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1978), I devoted a section to silent films about Native Americans. And I highlighted those players who claimed Indian origin. Several have since been

shown to be impostors: Mona Darkfeather, whom original references listed as a Seminole (real name Josephine Workman!) and Buffalo Child Long Lance. There was even an Indian director, James Young Deer—now there is doubt even about him. In my research, I sought advice from an "authentic Indian," Iron Eyes Cody, who had played in nearly a hundred films and was the iconic American Indian in the antipollution commercials. He received me in his Hollywood home, which was decorated with the brilliantly colored headdresses and robes that marked him out as a true authority.

True authority be damned! Aleiss reveals him to be not a Native American but an Italian American. I thought there was something odd about him. He claimed to have acted in *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *The Iron Horse* (1924), but he remembered virtually nothing. I knew more of their production history than he did.

And there was the strange case of Grey Owl, who posed as an Apache Indian environmentalist. (In 1999, Richard Attenborough made the Canadian film *Grey Owl* starring Pierce Brosnan.) Years ago, I bought a biography of Grey Owl, and as soon as I saw his photograph, I recognized the face as typical of the area I come from: not the southwestern United States, but the backwaters of Sussex, England.

I would love to know how these people were able to sustain their pretenses. Did the Indians believe that these imposters could speak on their behalf more eloquently than their own people?

This fascinating history is hard on Hollywood. So bear in mind that Westerns were not made for educational purposes, but simply to make money. They had to be as entertaining as possible, and if that meant putting Sioux war bonnets on Navajo Indians, so be it. Worse mistakes were made in other movies, and producers knew that few in the audience cared.

We may still feel romantic about the U.S. Cavalry, thanks to the films of John Ford and the performances of John Wayne. Had we seen evidence of what the Cavalry did in our name—as in *Soldier Blue* (1970), a film I still cannot bring myself to look at—then those beautiful Ford films might now be repellent to our gaze.

Now that the true history of the Old West has been told, and we have learned how appallingly the Indian was treated, some of us may feel guilty at how much we enjoyed these simplistic dramas. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to follow the development of films that had such an effect on us all. Aleiss' book provides a behind-the-scenes

view on why these films were made, and while it won't change the images, it adds a new perspective of the Indians' place in Hollywood history.

Kevin Brownlow
London, England

Acknowledgments

This book took an unusual journey to publication. Initially, Cambridge University Press solicited the manuscript for a reader's comments and asked me to revise and resubmit. Alas, by the time I completed the revisions, Cambridge had ceased publishing film books (a fate since affecting several university publishers). Nevertheless, the Cambridge reader provided many valuable comments and much encouragement.

Thanks to Cambridge, the book had significantly improved by the time it found its way to Praeger Publishers. Since then, I've been extremely grateful to my editor, Eric Levy, for his guidance and suggestions. I'm also indebted to Steven Bingen, Kevin Brownlow, Annette Insdorf, Richard Koszarski, and Russell Thornton for their time and attention to this manuscript.

I owe much thanks to the numerous individuals who were especially helpful in guiding me through the maze of archival materials. Many have been supportive in my recent endeavors to expand my previous works on this subject: Sandra Taylor at the Lilly Library, Indiana University; James D'Arc at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; Howard Proutie and Jenny Romero at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Ned Comstock of the Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California; Charles Bell at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin; Scott Feiner at the Wisconsin Historical Society; and Julie Graham at the University of California, Los Angeles, Arts Library Special

Collections. Marc Wanamaker of Bison Archives provided much expertise on early silent film history.

I am indeed grateful to the Institute of American Cultures/ American Indian Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles and the Ball Brothers Foundation, Lilly Library, Indiana University for their financial support. Additionally, the Canada-U.S. Fulbright Program provided me the opportunity to study as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Toronto.

Finally, this book would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the late William K. Everson, who opened his vast collection of rare Westerns and answered my numerous telephone queries for more than a decade. The unwavering support of both Bill and his wife, Karen, extended well beyond any scholar's expectations.

Introduction

While studying for my doctorate in film history at Columbia University, I once listened to a friend of mine lament how Hollywood Westerns always showed white cowboy heroes clearing the land of its marauding Native Americans. My friend grew up on the Navajo reservation, and for reasons of which I was never clear, he was forced to stay after school and watch old Westerns. Naturally, he quickly tired of the Indian-as-obstacle formula and was able to replay the movies' dialogue line by line. I inquired whether he thought Hollywood had ever created any sympathetic images of Native Americans. But my friend responded that his school never showed any movies with "good" Indians.

This brief encounter motivated me to look more closely at the American Indian's image in Hollywood. Why, I wondered, have movies that perpetuate the image of Indians as civilization's obstacles—*The Plainsman* (1937) and *Stagecoach* (1939)—grown immensely popular, while those depicting the tradition and lifestyle of America's Natives—*The Silent Enemy* (1930) and *Eskimo* (1933)—faded quickly from the public's memory? From the earliest silent era to the present, motion pictures have created diverse Indian characters that have spanned the range from bloodthirsty savages or nymph-like children to a few notable portrayals of a people with their own distinct cultures and identities. Arguably, these Indian-themed films tell whites more about their own attitudes toward Indians than about Indians themselves. Regardless of Hollywood's motives (and profit was surely one of them), the studios developed Indian

characters that embodied the ideals and failures of its producers, directors, and writers. This book will show how the motion-picture industry created the Native American's screen image and why it transformed over time. Ultimately, these Indian portrayals were more ambiguous than what my initial studies led me to believe.

Previous works on Hollywood's Indian portrayals have been especially critical of the industry's seemingly endless patterns of negative stereotypes. No doubt some of Hollywood's filmmakers were blatantly racist. But "Hollywood bashing" has become, in some circles, an acceptable trend at the expense of a more serious inquiry into the industry's history. Authors Ralph and Natasha Friar, for example, castigate the movie industry for its cultural distortions and historical inaccuracies. In *The Only Good Indian ... The Hollywood Gospel* (1972), the Friars' attacks against Hollywood are matched by glaring omissions and noticeable errors regarding motion-picture history. The Friars understandably have their own political agenda, labeling Hollywood as a racist institution; their distortion of important facts, however, only weakens their main point.[1] Furthermore, the authors' generalizations overlook key films that are major exceptions to the screen's "traditional negative images" of Indians.

Many scholars have traced the American Indian's evolving screen image while offering an interesting perspective of how cultural perceptions can shape the movies' representations. Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet's *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (1980) is a compilation of previously published articles from trade papers, magazines, and journals; Michael Hilger's *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Films* (1995) traces these images chronologically through the 1990s. More recently, *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (1998; rpt. 1999; Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, eds.) offers a compilation of scholars' essays that reinterprets individual movies. Similarly, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick's *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (1999) discusses a history of Hollywood's Indians based upon excerpts from previously published materials and the movies themselves. Armando José Prats' *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western* (2002), is an interesting poststructural analysis that examines how Western movies with Indians reflect society's cultural transformations.

John E. O'Connor's *The Hollywood Indian: Stereotypes of Native Americans in Film* (1980) is the only work on this subject that examines studio production data and its relationship to the screen's

Indian portrayals. True to his profession as a historian, O'Connor delved into behind-the-scenes studio archival material and studied scripts, memoranda, financial records, and executives' correspondence relating to ten key Indian-themed films. O'Connor's "booklet," however, was written as a supplement to a 1980 exhibit at the New Jersey State Museum and contains only eighty pages. His brief work signaled that a more extensive examination of primary source materials is needed in this field. Ultimately, the studios and individual filmmakers created the Indian's screen representations, and few scholars have explored Hollywood's input into these images. One of the main goals of this book, then, is to fill that gap.

But we must remember that film is an art as well as an illusion. While the method of comparing the movies' misrepresentations and distortions to historical and cultural documentation is popular, it adds little insight into Hollywood's formation of its Indian images. A close examination of how and why Hollywood filmmakers chose to represent Indians reveals several recurring themes: (1) the movies' Indian characters have evolved in cycles over the past one hundred years instead of a consistent linear pattern; (2) stories about contemporary Indian society—from *Laughing Boy* (1934) to *Thunderheart* (1992)—continually draw low turnouts at movie theaters; (3) many non-Indian actors easily pass themselves off as Native Americans both in front of and behind the camera (conversely, Indians can pass easily in roles that demand conventional portrayals without regard to race, as in the significant *non-Indian* roles of Native American actors Wes Studi and the late Will Rogers); and (4) Hollywood has continually vacillated on the subject of Indian/white miscegenation (intermarriage). When examined at this level, these films become powerful indications of the industry's struggle to define the American Indian's identity.

Production materials can help shed light on how Hollywood studios created its Indian characters. A study of the filmmakers' correspondence, writers' evolving scripts, and studio publicity materials provides clues to how the movie industry responded to the changing political climate that would ultimately shape the screen's Indian images. Reactions from industry trade papers, film critics, and Native American groups expose existing misconceptions of both American Indian images and Hollywood history. An examination of the files of the movies' self-censorship organization (formerly, the "Hays Office") shows that Indian characters were portrayed differently from their Black American contemporaries. Although these

behind-the-scenes materials are at best scanty, taken together, they open up unexplored territory and even challenge the belief that "the only good [Hollywood] Indian was a dead Indian."

Yet such an ambitious endeavor for this book contains built-in obstacles. A major problem for film historians—especially those covering a large time span—is that studio and filmmakers' production files are often inaccessible. Production materials, scripts, correspondence, and so on, are a part of a studio's corporate files, and unless otherwise stipulated, are not in the public domain. As private corporations, studios have the right to exercise discretion over who has access to their files, when, and how much.[2] Scholars of early cinema history have an especially difficult problem: from the 1890s through the late 1920s (the "silent film" era), a vast amount of production materials and the movies themselves are presumably lost.[3] Years later, many studios unfortunately discarded or destroyed their records due to a perceived lack of continuing value to the companies.

Most of this book's discussion, therefore, deals with movie material readily available to scholars. The papers of John Ford (Indiana University), Cecil B. DeMille (Brigham Young University), and David O. Selznick (University of Texas at Austin) are indexed and stored in archives open to scholars. The University of California, Los Angeles contains the Ralph Nelson Papers and many of Darryl Zanuck's script notations while he was head of production at Twentieth Century Fox. The University of Southern California provides researchers access to Warner Bros. corporate files (through 1967) as well as early scripts and correspondence of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The Wisconsin Historical Society contains the Abraham Polonsky Collection. The Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences holds the Production Code Administration files (from the late 1920s to approximately 1966) along with the Paramount Collection (although sparse during some years) and the Elliot Silverstein Collection.

Many of these archives, however, are accessible only to a certain point; studios that maintain their corporate correspondence since the late 1960s have yet to open them to scholars. For the majority of contemporary films, the only materials available are newspaper and magazine clippings as well as a few interviews with major artists. Thus, archival accessibility and the amount of available supporting materials become key factors when choosing to discuss specific movies. Other important factors include whether the film is an "A" movie (a big production budget released through a major studio) or

a "B" movie (a cheaply and quickly made movie to fill the bottom half of a double bill when double features were standard); the film's impact in terms of box-office appeal (non-Western movies with Indians typically drew poor turnouts); how well the film exemplifies a pattern of that particular era; and the specific time frame represented during the film's release. Readers should view the evidence in this book as a starting point; hopefully, in the future, studios will open additional materials for scholarly research.

Regarding my Navajo friend, he grew up (along with many of us) watching countless negative Indian images in movies sold to television. Back then, the smaller studios sold only their cheaply produced independent products, or B pictures, to TV. The sympathetic treatment of movie Indians, on the other hand, was mostly confined to the A Western. Unlike the A Westerns, the B Westerns relied upon simple formulaic plots, stock villains, recycled stunt footage, and minimal dialogue (with obvious grammatical errors). Many of their characters (including but not limited to Indians) therefore emerged as unattractive and one-dimensional. Not until the late 1950s would studios begin to sell their better quality and big-name movies—including A Westerns—to television; many, in fact, didn't air until the early 1960s. But today's wide availability of these movies on cable, video, and DVD should encourage future generations to look even more closely at Hollywood's enduring Native American images.

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1

Hollywood and the Silent American

LAISSEZ FAIRE IN THE MOVIES

A rowdy group of cowboys enters a general store. They taunt a young Indian woman and kidnap a white boy. The mother pleads in vain; the Indian woman dons trousers and a hat and leaps on a horse in hot pursuit. She follows the culprits to their campsite, shoots a guarding cowboy, and retrieves the shaken lad.

But the white villains persevere. The Indian woman scales a steep cliff and bounds across a canyon crevice, all with the child tied to her back. As her pursuers inch closer, she severs their connecting rope and sends them hurtling far below. The settlers cheer as the Indian heroine returns the boy to his grateful parents.

Back in 1908, the French motion picture company, Pathé Frères, began producing one- and two-reel films (a reel is about 1,000 feet, or ten minutes) at their new American studio facility in New Jersey. Pathé's weekly shorts of comedies, dramas, and Westerns included *The Red Girl and the Child*, released in August of 1910 and produced by James Gordon Young Deer. The filmmaker had worked briefly for several movie companies (then based on the East Coast), serving as a production assistant, writer, and actor. Young Deer boasted of his Indian heritage (although his background has since proven to be most enigmatic), and trade papers identified him as a Winnebago born in Dakota City, Nebraska. While at the Vitagraph Company of America, Young Deer earned praise for what were considered authentic portrayals of Indian people and their customs.[1]

When Pathé Frères opened its West Coast division in Los Angeles, Young Deer became one of its first producers.[2]

The Red Girl and the Child cleverly reversed gender stereotypes by portraying the Indian woman as an unconventional swashbuckling heroine. Young Deer was not alone: filmmakers adhered to a policy of laissez faire during an era in which studio monopolies and censorship organizations had yet to dictate motion picture content. The Indian as a noble hero actually preceded the cowboy star: the screen's first real Western star, G. M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson, appeared in *Broncho Billy and the Baby* in 1908, but studios like the Lubin Manufacturing Company and the Kalem Company had already portrayed sympathetic Indian characters prior to that time. Indian-themed pictures were especially popular from 1910 to 1912, when studios released approximately twelve to fifteen of them per month.[3] Some of these stories proved to be more audacious than what the standards of the time dictated. Tales of ruthless whites would parallel those of hostile warriors, lasting interracial marriages would complement the Indian/white relationships that failed, sympathetic half-breeds would occasionally offset the treacherous ones, and an Indian's heroic sacrifice might be matched by a white man's generosity. And many films delivered a sharp indictment against civilization and its unfair treatment of Native Americans.

During his productive three-year reign as Pathé's West Coast producer, Young Deer created some unusual tales. Many of his films were idyllic Indian love triangles or tragic stories of an Indian's heroic sacrifice, but others proved to be more daring and rather unconventional. When an Indian woman discovers that a Mexican rival has snatched her lover in *The Yaqui Girl* (1910), she has the man shot so that no one can ever claim him again. The white man in *For the Squaw* (1911) marries an Indian woman, has a child, but returns to his eastern sweetheart. His white fiancée instead scolds the unfaithful man and sends him back to his Indian family.[4] In *The Squaw's Mistaken Love* (1911), an Indian maiden actually makes love to a white man, but soon discovers that he is really a woman in disguise. "Surely, this is a new incident in Western pictures," remarked one dumbfounded reviewer.[5]

The early endeavors of Young Deer and his contemporaries only rarely promoted Indian assimilation into white society. Recent federal policies (post 1880s) advocating divestment of Indian land, compulsory boarding schools, and the eradication of Indian tradition and lifestyle were attempts to erase cultural differences

James Young Deer (*front, right*) with his wife Lillian St. Cyr (*left*) and the Bison Company in New Jersey, 1909–1910.

Courtesy of Bison Archives.