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## THE ROLE OF AMERICAN INDIANS IN MOTION PICTURES

Rita Keshena

American Indians have played a part in motion pictures from the time the flickering light came out of the inventor's workshop in the last decade of the nineteenth century up to the present day. It is not likely that Indians will be abandoned as a source material in the future. To understand what "part" Indians played it is necessary to have some knowledge of the way in which the motion picture industry developed.

The flickering light in the darkened room moved from the experimental stage to its present state of proficiency under a variety of names: Moving Pictures, The Picture Show, Silents, Talkies, Movies, and now, more esoterically (elevated to the rarified atmosphere of an art form), Film—or, even more elitist, Cinema. But what had begun in the clinical air of the laboratory soon took to the streets and the carnival midway, where it gained instant popularity.

The response of the early audience can only be called primitive. The first reaction was characterized by open-eyed wonder, awe, fascination, and delight. The enchanted eye of the masses was not confused by any critical faculties of evaluation, selectivity, or judgment of the content of the Magic Lantern offerings. Not then.

A minority view of the new device among literate people—intellectuals and academicians—was one of disdain and disregard. Whereas such enlightened viewers might have recognized the significance of this new form of mass communication and made use of it for serious purposes, they showed no such perceptivity. Instead they remained aloof from one of the most effective means of communication ever developed by a technological society, secure in their conviction

that those dimly lighted, jerky images would remain a sideshow attraction.

### Commercial Venture

Among the less informed, however, fascination with the new medium increased. The initial childlike response of excitement was heightened with every offering of the peep show, and people everywhere demonstrated an insatiable appetite to be entertained. The time was ripe for the entrepreneur. As a result, The Picture Show became a commercial venture pandering to public demand as evidenced by box-office receipts, devoting its efforts almost entirely to fanciful flights from reality in order to satisfy the need to be entertained.

What was it that satisfied the paying customers and brought them back again and again, eager for more? From its inception the motion-picture industry of this country capitalized on the naiveté of the majority society. In a frenzied rush, movie makers began to give the public what it wanted. Comedy, romance, drama, action, violence, brutality, pathos, sex, savagery, and history were combined in varying proportions to give each plot a slightly different twist and lure the customers back to their nickel-and-dime dreams. The demand soon focused on the re-creation of a past that never existed and on a future in which good triumphed and everyone lived happily ever after. Always there emerged the dominance, righteousness, and supremacy of the Anglo American—the white man.

Nowhere did the necessary ingredients for commercially successful movies come together with greater impact, action, pageantry, and excitement than in the motion-picture history of the American West: the vast expanse of the rugged land, the hardy pioneer spirit of the early settlers, the massed defenders in cavalry blue, the lone defender in the white Stetson hat—the epitome of strength, goodness, and all-American masculinity—the cowboy; and the savages, the uncivilized red niggers, the embodiment of all that was evil. The formula was worked and reworked. Audiences clapped and cheered as the cowboys triumphed and the Redskins died.

The market for the new medium and its representations of Indians and Indian life did not diminish over the years; indeed, the public's appetite could not be satisfied. Every

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This article is the first in a series of two by the author. The second, "American Indians in and on Film—Another Way" will appear in the next issue of the Journal.



aspect of human experience was painted red, topped with a braided wig, and rushed out to the distributors.

## Stereotypes

Records of the film industry reveal that thousands of films have been made about American Indians. The part that the Indian played was clearly defined. Stereotypes were established and constantly reinforced, reel after reel, year after year. Movie makers focused on the tribes of the Sioux and the Apache, who thus became the white man's Indian, molded and cast in the white man's mind as he wanted them to be, but projected before the viewer's eye as convincingly authentic. Indians from all tribes were cast in the image of a rearranged reality. The prototype of the Hollywood Indian was treacherous, vicious, cruel, lazy, stupid, dirty, speaking in ughs and grunts, and often quite drunk.

The stories for movies were always written by white men, produced and directed by white men, and almost always performed by white men covered by Max Factor's Indian Tan. There is truth to the story that some non-Indians have played Indians so often in the movies that they have moved into the Indian community with their assumed Indian identities and become outspoken experts for the Indian world. A sadder truth is that had American Indians been employed in all the movies ever made about Indians, poverty among Indians would have disappeared. Movie makers have even complained that they are unable to find any "real" Indians to fit the movie parts. But in making this complaint, Hollywood denies the fact that it is the "parts" and not the Indians that are unreal. In the important creative and production areas of the motion-picture industry, American Indians have been excluded entirely.

The history of Indian people in the motion-picture industry is analogous to the larger history of the American West—indeed, to that of the entire continent—a long chronicle of exploitation, distortion, denigration, debasement, denial, and deceit. When the public delighted in the representation of Indian people as savages, movie makers obliged and collected their profits. When the public mood became more conciliatory, under the threats and acts of violence from some seg-

ments of minority communities, motion pictures began to give different representations of ethnic peoples, and American Indians were suddenly made in another image: nobility and injustice became dominant themes, and film makers rushed once again to give the customers what they want.

The white-liberal colony of Hollywood pounced on this new cause. Moreover, World War II and television changed the habits of a lot of people, who stopped going to movies so often. Besides, many of the old formulas simply didn't work anymore. It was time to change. So Jeff Chandler immortalized Cochise. John Ford, Hollywood's great Indian killer of epic proportions, eulogized the Cheyenne with the help of Sal Mineo. Richard Harris, elegant and aristocratic, was stolen by the Sioux. But what a lucky catch! He showed the Sioux how a real leader runs the show, before riding back to civilization. Candy Bergen writhed across the West to expose, among other things, the brutality of the cavalry, as naked Chicano women, cast as Indians, splattered across the screen.

In an interview, Arthur Penn told how he had entered into the Indian mind in order to create the definitive Indian film, *Little Big Man*. His prancing, mincing, homosexual character came straight from the plains of Hollywood Boulevard. The cultural patterns and sacred beliefs of the Cheyenne were traded in for low comedy and cheap laughs. "Sometimes the magic doesn't work." Crow women were characterized as depraved and perverted.

An alienated, impressionable audience swarmed in to see *Billy Jack* do his leg work and defy the establishment. All the necessary ingredients again combined to ensure box-office appeal. In an earlier time, Billy would have been cast in the face and figure of James Dean, another romanticized rebel with whom young dissident whites could identify. But Indians are, you know, like, in, and uprising. It may be of some interest to note, that, since Billy never mentions his tribe, he apparently does not know where he belongs, and is, therefore, undeniably illegitimate.

A Norman Jewison production, *Billy Two Hats*, starred Gregory Peck and was shot on location in Israel, with Jews playing Indians. Somehow no one was ever able to work the bugs out of that one, and it disappeared soon after release. A look at part of the background



of this ill-fated film is illustrative of the way Hollywood handles the majority of motion pictures concerning American Indians. In the pre-production stage, the director, Ted Kotcheff, a Canadian Jew, was approached about the possibility of using an American Indian consultant to authenticate the Indian aspects of the film. Discussions with Kotcheff revealed that the script was in the final stages, with shooting scheduled to begin in three weeks in Israel. After briefly outlining the plot, Kotcheff said he did not know the time period ("about 1895 or so"), the setting ("somewhere in the southwest, yes, the desert"), or the tribe ("ah, yes, well, probably Apache for the woman, and of course, her older son is Cree"). The script made no reference to these things. The script did include, however, a story line at total variance with any history, tribal or white. American Indians were presented in complete distortion.

### Exploitation

Because of budget limitations, Kotcheff refused to consider an American Indian consultant and then noted that he was hiring several Indian actors, who could serve in the dual capacities of performing and advising. The clear exploitation of such an arrangement was not pointed out to Kotcheff at the time, but it was suggested to him that the reality of film making does not permit extras to question or differ with the director, provided that they want to keep on working. Furthermore, it was highly unlikely in any event that Indians, whether actors or not, would intrude in and interfere with the actual process of film making even if they did know something was inaccurate. Certainly no film director was going to check out all the Indian aspects in every scene with some Indian extras. To obtain any degree of accuracy and authenticity, the easiest solution would have been to engage an American Indian for script consultation at the outset.

The reaction of Kotcheff can only be likened to the histrionics of a Grade B Quickie, probably a musical, *circa* 1948, in the scene where the theatrical genius asserts his authority. The dialogue began on a disappointingly dated note.

Kotcheff [*heatedly, increasingly agitated*]: How dare you come in here and take up my valuable time to tell me that I don't know Indians and infer that I lack sensitivity or awareness about minorities. How dare . . .

There followed a long recitation of his impeccable credentials of involvement with social causes and prominent liberals, stopping just short of the banks of the Fish-In in Washington state. Emphasis was made that in this film injustice would be presented as universal in its application, since there are, in actuality, no ethnic differences in people, there is only the shared human experience. And—

Kotcheff [*icily*]: You have taken up enough of my time. My lunch is waiting. Get out.

*The End.*

The critical and commercial failure of this film may or may not have been determined by the manner in which the American Indian segment was handled. Nor is it only incidental to note that Ted Kotcheff is a Canadian Jew who learned his craft with the BBC in London: after the abysmal failure of *Billy Two Hats*, Kotcheff went on to make a film about a young Jewish hustler from Montreal that has received wide critical acclaim. The inference cannot be mistaken. One can only wonder at the response had someone suggested that an American Indian make the Montreal film—with or without a Jewish advisor.

In all the films that have been made and are being made by the film industry, issue cannot be taken with the presentation of stereotypes and historical inaccuracies alone. Motion pictures are guilty of almost total distortion of American Indians and their culture, the presentation of which has contributed harm beyond calculation to the concepts, attitudes, and beliefs that Indian people have about themselves. What may seem to some people only an innocent, entertaining motion-picture show is for American Indians a destructive weapon in the continuing War of Termination being waged against them.

### Profit-Making

The profit-making and exploitative aspects of the industry cannot be overemphasized. How familiar the announcement by major producers, directors, and writers sounds, whenever a high-budget, star-studded production about American Indians is in the planning stage. Research, authentic re-creation, and the use of "real" Indians are to be incorporated into the project. Despite these preproduction announcements, the indisputable evidence of deceit is projected in the final product.



Such "lip service" is neither incidental nor a result of scholarly or humanitarian motivations. It is another aspect of the industry: publicity. In the fiercely competitive business of movie making and selling, the "art" of selling appears to have outdistanced the creation of movies. Firmly rooted in the marsh of fickle fantasy, the industry takes every precaution to protect its investment and show a profit. Cinema has never quite risen above the sweaty smell of the midway and the sound of the honky-tonk spielers. "Step right up" has given way to press conferences and announcements, premieres and previews, awards and film festivals. Ballyhoo and come-ons have been laundered and placed behind paneled walls and doors marked "Public Relations." But it's the same old baloney. And the continuing interest in the American Indian as a film subject is unmercifully exploited in order to heighten box-office appeal. "The End"—on and off screen—remains unchanged. Another Redskin bites the dust. Buried with him are truth, accuracy, and reproduction promises.

## Hollywood

The continuing story of Hollywood and the Indians has taken a new turn with a recent announcement by Marlon Brando. (Certainly no one denies that Brando has shown concern with issues and problems in the Indian world. However ill-advised, he has attempted to focus attention on the exploitation of American Indians by the film industry. Nevertheless, it was predictable, and ironic, that his effort to that end at the Academy Awards ceremony in 1973 resulted in attacks of a personal and professional nature by his peers. The truth of his advocacy was drowned in

a cacophony of catcalls.) Brando will play the role of a lawyer in a proposed new film based on the current happenings at Wounded Knee. The script is being written by Abby Mann, a Jewish writer with impressive credentials, including an Academy Award for *Judgment at Nuremberg*. But when questioned about the proposed film by the *New York Post*, Abby Mann said, "Marlon called me. I knew nothing about Indians. I was totally ignorant about them . . ."

The *New York Times* has reported that Brando is chairman of a newly formed organization, the American Indian Development Association, which will sponsor self-help projects for Indians. Proceeds from the proposed Wounded Knee film will be donated to this organization. Brando's plan is more than commendable: it is unique. For the first time, someone in the motion-picture industry plans to enter into profit-sharing with the Indian community.

As American Indians, however, we cannot look to others to change the distorted image that has been projected for the past eighty years by a money-hungry industry. Real change will come only when Indian people become knowledgeable in the methodology of film and television. We must step out of the role that Hollywood has given us and take up positions in the important areas of creativity and production. Only then will we be able to control the way in which we are presented on film.

Given the chance to learn the required skills and techniques of the visual media, as well as the means to transfer the Indian experience into a filmic one, American Indians would be able to offer an alternative to the Hollywood Indian.