

POST-SECONDARY ASPIRATIONS

NATIVE AMERICANS IN FILM: AN IMAGE CREATED, AN IMAGE REMEMBERED

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ABSTRACT: Film is an effective medium within society for communicating thoughts, visions, fantasies, and images. For decades it has been an acceptable means of pure entertainment with little or no concern toward what messages it may be unconsciously sending. If the image evoked proved positive then film has not only entertained us, but also enlightened us. But far too often what we see is either exaggerated, biased, stereotypical, or inaccurate. This is when film becomes damaging for it formulates an image on screen built out of ignorance that may be retained in the mind of the viewer as truth.

This "ignorant imaging" poses a genuine threat and is of utmost concern for films involving Native Americans. For many years the only view the world saw of Native Americans was one of uncivilized savage warriors out to destroy the white man. Not until recently have we begun to realize the embedded prejudices and falsehoods these types of films have created and have thus gradually started to attempt to change this negative image into a positive one.

In this paper I will analyze a few recent and widely-seen films involving Native Americans and discuss to what extent cultural authenticity and historical accuracy have been maintained. I will also look at how filmmakers are handling the previously neglected concept of place--an extremely important concept for the Native American which has a dominant effect on shaping their culture. Finally I will discuss what measures are being taken to ensure an overall accurate portrayal of our native people.

"I am thinking...of a startling photo I saw of President Reagan in a European paper in the mid 1980s--startling because Reagan's expression was so untypical, so horrific, so menacing: here certainly was a man more beast than man. 'It's not accurate,' I objected; 'he's never shown this way in the United States.'

'This shows the real Reagan!' my host retorted.

But of course every photo of Reagan showed 'the real Reagan.' The choice of photo was a choice of which reality to emphasize, of which story to tell."¹

----Tag Gallagher 29:69

Film is an effective medium for communicating society's thoughts, visions, fantasies, and images. For decades it has been an acceptable means of pure diversion with little or no concern toward what messages it may be unconsciously sending. "Although all narrative art reflects the society in which the artist lives, mass media art has the additional problem of being a product as well. It is the end result of a vast and complex industry which must turn a profit as well as produce a 'reflection of life'" (Parks, 1982). Thus, Parks states, "the so-called 'popular entertainments' of film...shape their content

according to the nature and scope of their unique form" (Parks, 1982). If the image evoked proved positive, then film has not only entertained us, but also enlightened us. But far too often what we see is exaggerated, biased, stereotypical, or inaccurate. This is when film becomes damaging for it formulates an image on screen built out of ignorance which may be retained as truth in the mind of the viewer.

This "ignorant imaging" poses a genuine threat and is of utmost concern for films involving Native Americans. For many years, the only view the general public saw of Native Americans was one of uncivilized, savage warriors out to destroy the white man. Not until recently have we begun to realize the embedded prejudices and falsehoods these types of films have created and have thus gradually attempted to change this negative image into a positive one.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The process of changing an image is a slow and formidable task. Bruce Baird (1981) believes that it is difficult to pin down

any one factor that contributed to the onslaught of change. He believes that the turmoil of Indian activism in the late 60's and early 70's played a major part in exposing Native peoples to the role of the media and how it could be used to advantage. He states that "accuracy" and "relevance" became by-words and "by-for-and-about" became the criteria for which everything about Indians was to be judged (Weatherford, 1981).

Dances With Wolves: A Change for the Better?

The process of change has met with mixed reviews. A recent attempt is Kevin Costner's "Dances With Wolves." "Dances With Wolves" is the biggest motion picture to portray the Lakota² people since the 1970's "Man Called Horse." Overall, the depiction of the Lakota is a vast amelioration, with its focus being sensitivity toward the plight of the Native American. The script, however, lacks any real depth in its explanation of Lakota culture, for to do so would mean relegating Lieutenant Dunbar³, played by Kevin Costner to a secondary role. The facet that made this film unique is its portrayal of the Native American. The Native Americans are no longer feral and uncivilized, but rather amiable and kind. In other words, this time around, ..."the Indians are the cowboys and the cowboys are the Indians (Seals, 1991). David Seals (1991) has coined this approach to Native American portrayal as the "The New Custerism." This approach involves simply portraying Native American life at its best to achieve a desired emotion. Although this approach may be positive, it still kills their culture by creating a new stereotyped image. Seals stresses that in this high-tech world of instant global telecommunications, a culture's image is as important in the perception of it, as whatever lies in the actual truth of that culture.

Richard Grenier (1991) agrees with Seals' theory by believing that Costner simply omitted everything from period Native American life that modern film audiences would find repugnant in order to demonstrate that Native Americans were not inferior but, in fact, superior to the white man. He stressed on what he considered to be the strong point: Native Americans lived in harmony with nature and were environmentally responsible. So overlooked were actual cultural accuracies that there was no concern toward costumes. Grenier acknowledges that the Native American costumes are beautiful although there is little resemblance to the way the Lakota appear in early photographs. He sees a closer resemblance to the way Indians dress in the imagination of a successful fashion designer.

Grenier does identify one of the few authentic references to Lakota culture which occurs early in the film. Dunbar encounters a Sioux woman who appears to have injured herself and is bleeding. It emerges that she is a young widow who, in mourning for her late husband, is gashing her legs in grief. Movie audiences, however, have no way of discerning that the woman is slashing her legs deliberately and can only assume she has had an accident or is attempting suicide.

"Dances With Wolves" also falls short on historical accuracies. The film supposedly is set during the middle of the Civil War. Some historians recall that one of the most savage and bloody Indian uprising

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in history occurred during this time period (Utley, Washburn, 1991). Grenier finds it therefore unlikely that any officer of the Union Army would befriend a Sioux during such a volatile time.

Grenier also points out the misrepresentation of the Pawnee⁴ in the film. During the 45 years from 1830 to 1875 the Pawnee population dropped from approximately 12,000 to slightly over 2,000 due to fatalities from battles with the Sioux. Grenier suggests this may be the reason the Pawnee did such an otherwise repellant act of scouting against the Sioux for the U.S. Cavalry. In "Dances With Wolves," however, the Pawnee are the antithesis of the Lakota; they are feared, malicious villains.

Native American castmembers are all too aware of inaccuracies in the film. Dave Bald Eagle explains that throughout the film, the men generally speak Lakota in the feminine form. The screenplay's dialogue was translated by the primary linguistic coach who obviously was not amply knowledgeable of Lakota grammar. Although this may seem a trivial aspect, it again points out the obvious neglect of cultural detail (Seals, 1991). Marvin Clifford⁵, co-founder of the Native American Film Commission⁶, suggests that in the first scene of the movie, Costner clearly borrows from Lakota warrior Crazy Horse as he rides in front of

Confederate soldiers eluding bullets. It was this same type of bravery and skill that earned Crazy Horse his name. Clifford states that this is reminiscent of "Man Called Horse," a film which he feels reversed the roles of the white man and the Native American. Dave Chief recalls that requests were made that the Pipe⁷, a sacred Lakota object, not be represented in the film. The request was ignored and the Pipe was smoked (Seals, 1991).

Despite the 150 million dollar profits, "Dances With Wolves" has not much improved the Native Americans' situation. Most Native Americans involved were ignorant as to how the film could hurt their people and were involved only for a chance to make a little extra money. Dave Bald Eagle stated that he was eager to get a job on the set because of economic necessity, but also saw the foolishness of the situation. He joked about how he always tried to stay in the background in the crowd scenes, hoping no one would notice him (Seals, 1991). In the end, such movies only help pay a few bills temporarily, and most Native Americans still remain in poverty. For example, the cinemagraphically perfect village of tepees shown at one point in "Dances With Wolves" is perched on the Belle Fourch River that is currently undrinkable, polluted from gold mine tailings (Seals, 1991).

Although a very progressive film, "Dances With Wolves" still perfectly fits into the old western genre that we are so desperately trying to shed. As stated by Gale McGee in the initial issue of The American West:

"There is no area of the country with a history more interesting and more distorted in the public mind than the American West. The struggles of the pioneer American to conquer the last frontier have caught and retained the imagination of the public to such an extent that a veritable mythology has developed around the Old West until dreams and reality have become all but indistinguishable..."
(McGee, 1964)

Furthermore, Lt. Dunbar is just another example of the typical western hero that Parks describes as:

"...generally a loner. He is, however, a man in command of things, persons, and events, handling them skillfully but with a certain aloofness that preserves his integrity. He is a man of a mysterious and frequently melancholy past; his future is tenuous

and foreboding. He is almost always a man with one foot in the wilderness and the other in civilization, moving through life belonging to neither world."

(Parks, 1982)

"Dances With Wolves" greatest achievement was that it woke up a generation of people who are ready and able to deal with Native American issues. As Marvin Clifford expressed, "Next time Costner better bring his checkbook" (1993). All in all, "Dances With Wolves" is essentially a love story that is still based on white savior mentality, with the main focus being the experiences of the white man himself Lt. Dunbar, not on the Lakota culture.

Black Robe: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

"Black Robe" is another film with a Native American theme that is highly regarded among many historians. "Black Robe" depicts the Iroquois and Huron⁸ tribal groups of the Northeast United States and Canada. Although Lakota, Marvin Clifford did not hesitate in calling this film "the most ridiculous movie I had ever seen." (1993) He points out that the common stereotypes of savageness and primitiveness are evident in the film. Clifford explains two scenes which best express the basic attitude found throughout the film. The first involves the film's main character, a Jesuit monk, that enters a tepee shared by several Native Americans for the night. One of the occupants immediately begins to rummage through the monk's belongings; the perception being that Native Americans have no respect for other people's belongings. The monk then lays down to rest next to a Native American who is shuffling for space and who rather shamelessly relieves himself; the perception being that Native Americans have no respect for other people's space. In a later scene, taking place in the same confined tepee, the monk is confronted by two Native Americans engaging in a rather aggressive intimate act; the perception being that Native Americans have no respect for intimacy nor for the other people in the tepee. Despite this film's otherwise good cinematography and historical accuracies, these two scenes are embarrassingly fallacious and unfortunately, very memorable. While this film gives the impression of being a conscientious portrayal, Clifford believes it is ultimately self serving to the church and to white consciousness.

THE MISSING LINKS

Film often slights how Native Americans would like themselves to be portrayed. Marvin Clifford sees the major problem being that people do not understand the substance of culture beyond the obvious aspects, i.e. meals, holidays. Most people think that Native American cultures are extinct since most films are period films about 18th or 19th centuries. Clifford emphasizes however, that his own grandmother--just one generation away--lived through the same type of struggle these films depict. Clifford compares the Native American struggle for cultural survival to current minority issues and would like to use film as an informative tool for survival.

Another neglected point according to Clifford is the failure to show that the Native Americans were actually already highly developed peoples at the time of first contact with Europeans. A lack of developed technology or architecture did not necessarily yield ignorance. Such progressive innovations were certainly within their capacity, however, they were aware of the social and environmental problems caused by them. Clifford believes that they knew that the earth alone does not deny the necessities of life to anyone; that exploitation is not necessary, yet in contrast, white people think they can provide the necessities of life better than the earth. Instead of a stone castle, for example, the Lakota chose the tepee, which for all intents and purposes, is the perfect shelter according to Clifford. The tepee is biodegradable, cool in summer, warm in winter, it can withstand 200 miles per hour winds and can be disassembled in two minutes and transported by dogs; undoubtedly high technology.

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The Question of Place

The concept of place is an important notion absent in most Native American films. Place is the chief dictator of the lives of most Native Americans. The necessities of food, shelter, and clothing are what govern our lives. The underlying core philosophy of most tribes is similar, but what makes each tribe unique is how they acquire and adapt to the necessities of life as governed by their geographic location. For example, the Iroquois longhouses in New York would not hold up as well as the Lakota tepees in the central plains and Lakota tepees would not offer as much comfort as a Hopi pueblo in an Arizona desert. The Lakota would have a difficult time finding their staple diet of buffalo in the Seminole marshlands of Florida and the Inuit of Alaska would find deer, not seal, in the Lenape woodlands of Pennsylvania. Each tribe developed different forms of worship for offering thanks for those necessities of life; hence, tribe uniqueness differentiated by place. Yet despite this obvious cultural evolution, filmmakers fuse most Native Americans into either one of two categories: a "roaming-the-prairies-on-horseback-hunting-buffalo" tribe or a "tomahawk-in-hand-sporting-a-mohawk-ready-to-kill-someone" tribe.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Clifford believes concerned people should attack this problem by first making historically and culturally accurate films dealing with early history to reestablish the honor of Native Americans. Once we have accurately portrayed that time period, we should then begin making films about today's issues. Many people may be familiar with Native American history, but too few are aware of their current situation. George Eager, Assistant Director of the Museum of the American Indian states that..." a large body of materials, produced for documentary or scientific use, remains virtually unknown to the general public; the best of this material, together with the best of the commercial productions, provides invaluable insight into Native American history and culture--as it was, and as it is. The truth, as is usually the case, it more inspiring and satisfying than a fiction" (Weatherford, 1981).

Problems arise when we continue to mythologize history. We begin to blur the distinction between fact and fiction in the constant retelling of the story of the United States (Parks, 1982). We need to keep in mind that not all films are and never will be true representations of culture, but rather re-creations of them. As Ann Fienup-Riordan (1988) suggests, most Native American films will not represent the traditional Native American way of life any more accurately or inaccurately than "Road Warrior" represents modern American culture. Rather, like most modern American films, it will re-present it, complete with strategic omissions and additions. She states that although it may provoke the pursuit, it is valid in its own right. Thus, geographers teaching cultural and historical geography should necessarily discuss Native American history and myth as both shapers and products of the American experience. "Such an examination can help to assess the roles played by historic fact and artistic imagination in the development of the American character..."(Parks, 1982).

AND WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

Native Americans are still portrayed by the prevalent stereotype of ignorance and savageness or by a converse stereotype of sweetness and passiveness; a genre that Richard A. Maynard (1974) would describe as "revisionist" which seeks to arouse the conscience of its audience against the sins of the American past. Although this conclusion is easily hypothesized, the situation is rarely considered a "problem" and steps to rectify it are not considered seriously. We need to realize the profound repercussions that films have on society. In portraying a culture, films can contribute to the creation or destruction of a culture.

Ideally, as Tag Gallagher expresses, " A true Indian film would be one made entirely by Indians in their language and, in the sense intended here, by Indians whose sensibilities are substantially formed by pre-contact heritage" (Gallagher, 1991).

But as Bruce Baird (1991) expresses, the reality is that although Native Americans have made tremendous

strides, the technology has developed faster than their ability to make use of it and unfortunately, many Native Americans will still have to be content to be "advisors" in many cases. He states that ironically, there is money available for the production of films and videotapes about Native Americans, but, as might be expected, many non-Indians are standing in line ready to produce the **real** story of the Native people. He sees an immediate answer to be to concentrate on the production of quality films and videotapes no matter who produces them to insure that the quality is good and the contents accurately reflect Native American life. As a long term solution he believes Native Americans need to make a determined effort to get the training and expertise they need as quickly as possible until they can assume the responsibility that is rightly theirs--producing their own programs with their own people. (Weatherford, 1991)

Solutions to this problem can begin only when we start to heed the advice of the Native Americans and realize that no one understands the culture and history of a people better than the people themselves.

NOTES

1. Excerpt from "John Ford's Indians" by Tag Gallagher. See references for complete citation.
2. In traditional times, the Sioux formed three major geographical groups. The Santees, largely in Minnesota; the Yanktons, on the prairies of western Minnesota and eastern North and South Dakota; and the Teton, west of the Missouri River on the plains of North and South Dakota and Nebraska.
Each of these three groups represented a distinctive dialect of the Sioux language. The Santees and Yanktons called themselves Dakota, whereas the Tetons called themselves Lakota. We use Sioux as the designation for all these groups, Lakota for the Teton or Western Sioux (divided into seven tribes: Oglala, Brule, Minneconjou, Sans Arc, Two Kettles, Hunkpapa, and Blackfeet Lakota) and Dakota to refer generally to the Santee and Yankton groups. This is an English convention only; the Sioux themselves use the terms Dakota or Lakota, depending on the dialect of the speaker, to refer to all the Sioux groups. To differentiate the three groups, the terms Titonwan, "Teton," Tsanati, "Santee," and Ihanktohwan, "Yankton" are used (Walker, 1980).
3. Lieutenant Dunbar is the starring role played by Kevin Costner. He plays a Union Army officer who is stationed in "Indian country."
4. The Pawnee are part of the Caddoan tribal group of the Central and Southeast United States. See George E. Hyde, 1951. The Pawnee Indians, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, Oklahoma.
5. Marvin Clifford is an Oglala Lakota Sioux who at four years of age was taken from his home in South Dakota and placed in a missionary school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania where he spent most of his life learning as he put it, "one hour of math, one hour of history, and twenty-two hours of Jesus." In 1973 he was "released" and went back to a more traditional way of life. He took an interest in film and how his people are depicted. He is now co-founder of the Native American Film Commission.
6. The Native American Film Commission was established to maintain the authenticity and historical accuracy of Native American traditions and cultures. The Commission's role is one of liaison for Native Americans with the entertainment and film industry. The N.A.F.C. is a clearing house for Native American resources that include: reservation lands, traditions, artifacts, cultures and people. The Commission researches the authenticity of all materials to insure the accuracy and integrity of the information regarding the Native American culture. The Commission will interface with the entertainment/film industry and Native Americans to assure equitable contracts that are beneficial to all parties.
7. The Buffalo Calf Pipe is believed to be the first pipe brought to the Lakota people. See John L. Smith, "A Short History of the Sacred Calf Pipe of the Teton Dakota," South Dakota University, Museum News 28 (1967): 1-37.

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8. The Huron spoke one of the related languages the linguists classify as Iroquoian, a term not to be confused with Iroquois. The latter is an Algonquin word commonly used by the French and English to refer to the five nations of New York State, all of whom are Iroquoian-speaking. Like the Iroquois, whose confederacy was made up of five tribes, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca, the Huron consisted of a number of tribes, each having its own territory, councils, customs, and its own history (Trigger, 1969).

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