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They Have Not Spoken: American Indians in Film

The American Indian has been an essential dramatic ingredient in Hollywood's epic of the West, and a key element in the vision of America and its destiny embodied there. Whether we take the Indian's role as that of the abominable id—a projection of the bestiality white culture could not face in itself—or as a stand-in for the hostile "nature" that Americans thought they could overcome, it is hardly surprising that with the turmoils, re-evaluations, and rebellions of the sixties a different image of the Indian should have begun to emerge in American films. Recent Indian films make a point of advertising their sympathy for the Indian point of view. Generally "real" Indians play all minor Indian roles and occasionally even major speaking parts. At first sight, no effort seems too great to obtain an aura of authenticity in regard to speech, music, customs, and history. Usually white guilt is admitted through the device of at least one rabid saliva-at-the-mouth racist ready to command a massacre of a sleeping village. This beast is contrasted to the dignified Indian spokesman who is invariably peace-minded. Such an approach is an improvement over the grunts and howls of an earlier period but only at the lowest level: the new films tell us very little about the Native Americans and even less about ourselves and our own history.

A MAN CALLED HORSE

On the surface, Elliot Silverstein's effort, which uses some five hundred Sioux actors, might seem the most authentic of the recent films. The Sioux language makes up 80% of the dialogue, the impressive Sun Dance ceremony is a central plot element, and all the action takes place within an Indian environment. The

headdresses, dwellings, artifacts, masks, and ceremonial paint are as genuine as research can make them. The only trouble is that all this authenticity is an illusion and a waste. The film is a fantasy from start to finish.

The year is 1825 and Lord Morgan (Richard Harris), an English aristocrat on a hunting expedition, is captured by a Sioux band led by Yellow Hand (Manu Tupou). The Englishman is not treated as a human being but as a horse. He is given to Yellow Hand's harridan mother, Buffalo Cow Head (Dame Judith Anderson) who ties him to a stake. This is all wrong. The Sioux had a tradition of hospitality toward strangers. Anyone so odd looking as the yellow-haired pale-faced Wasichu (a term for Europeans that had no racial overtones) would be treated with great curiosity and respect, much as Lewis and Clark had been treated a decade earlier. Even if the encounter had turned hostile, there would not be torture and the kind of abuse shown for that was not the Sioux way. The idea that a man should be tied up and treated as an animal is something that might have occurred to the New England Puritans but it was as far from Sioux thinking as hunting for pleasure instead of need.

The Englishman learns the ways of the Indian slowly and Silverstein comes up with an interesting device in handling the transition. The Indians speak only Sioux and Morgan/Horse speaks only English. A captive French half-breed (a European designation, by the way) supplies minimal translations and interpretations of strange acts. This de-emphasis on dialogue makes the kind of demands on a director the silent screen once made and calls attention to the Indian trappings. One almost

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wishes there was no dialogue at all for almost everything the half-breed says is nonsense.

Horse's moment to impress the Sioux comes when a group of Shoshone creep up on the camp when the warriors are absent. Horse slays the intruders and is immediately elevated to human and warrior status. This dramatic turn-about would be likely, as Sioux placed importance on what individuals did and most likely would have interpreted Horse's actions as having the favor of the spirits. That Yellow Hand's daughter, Running Deer (Corrina Tsopei) falls in love with Horse is also credible as the Sioux were a romantic people and the strange white warrior who might possess special magic would be an extremely attractive figure.

But to establish full membership in the tribe, Horse undertakes the Sun Dance Ceremony, and here the film is simply sacrilegious in terms of Indian beliefs. The Sun Dance was not designed to show individual courage to other men or to win a bride. The Sun Dance was the highest religious rite of the Sioux. In it, a man proved his humility and worthlessness to the spirits by mortifying his flesh. Elaborate purification rites were absolute prerequisites as a successful dance might bring a vision of use to the entire tribe. Skewers were fastened under a man's flesh and he attempted to pull loose by dancing. The pain was caused by his own acts and the onlookers pitied him and encouraged him with song and music, praying he would have an important vision. (Sitting Bull performed the Sun Dance before Custer's attack. He lost some sixty pieces of flesh but had a vision which foretold the coming triumph.) In *Horse* the ceremony is reduced to a primitive sadistic test of courage in which the vision is a delirious by-product.

Naturally, Morgan-now-Horse is successful in the Sun Dance and marries Running Deer. He sees this as another step toward his escape. His problem is cut short by a massive Shoshone raid. Again the film falls apart historically. The men of the plains never waged war in European fashion; small bands went out to steal horses or to fight small engagements more akin to duelling than war. The highest honor was



A MAN CALLED HORSE

to "count coup," which was to touch a living opponent still surrounded by his fighting comrades with a ceremonial stick shaped like a shepherd's staff. Killing an enemy was a less important coup. In *Horse*, the Shoshone attack like US cavalry. Horse-still-Morgan saves the day when he lines up the tribal youth in English archery rows and their arrows cut down the Shoshone who attack like the Light Brigade itself. Yellow Hand dies in the battle and tribal leadership falls to Horse. Running Deer also dies conveniently but Horse shows his sensitivity to his new post by taking the harridan Buffalo Cow Head as his own mother. She waits for spring to die so that he can have good weather for his return to England.

Rather than a tale of Indian life, *Horse* is thus really about a white nobleman proving his superiority in the wilds. Almost every detail of Indian life is incorrect. An angry Sioux writing

to the *Village Voice* complained about the treatment of the Sun Dance. He also noted that the Sioux never abandoned widows, orphans, and old people to starve and freeze as shown in the film. He points out that the cuckold husband in the film would not have lamented as shown but would have wiped out his disgrace by charging ten enemies single-handed. The writer adds that even something as simple as kissing on the lips is incorrect, for the custom did not come to the Sioux until mid-century. The list of such mistakes and inaccuracies is as long as the film itself.

Stripped of its pretensions, *Horse* parades the standard myth that the white man can do everything better than the Indian. Give him a little time and he will marry the best-looking girl (a princess of course) and will end up chief of the tribe. It is also interesting that Yellow Hand and Running Deer look very European while some of the nastier Indians are darker with flat features. Sioux features in fact did range from Nordic to Mongol and their color from white to copper red, but this case seems the usual pandering to ideas of Anglo-is-beautiful.

The Sioux were called the Vision Seekers because they placed so much importance upon receiving communications from the spirits in the form of visions. They were cheerful people very fond of jokes, games, and romance. Above all, they liked to feast, dance, and sing. None of this comes through in *Horse*. Even the use of the native language becomes a handicap for eloquence was another Sioux characteristic. Without their own words much of the beauty of their way of life is lost. The half-breed's silly interpretations should be compared to some of the speeches of the Sioux holy man Black Elk to see how much has been lost.

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round . . . The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.

SOLDIER BLUE

Ralph Nelson's version of the Indian massacre is an obvious commercial rip-off on the new sympathy for Indians. Instead of the dirty Injuns making dastardly attacks on helpless whites, it is the cavalry which makes dastardly attacks on helpless redskins. The director relies totally on explicit scenes of carnage for his argument and effect.

The film opens with a payroll detachment of cavalry ambushed by Cheyenne seeking gold to buy guns. The sole survivors are Honus Gant (Peter Strauss), a naive young soldier blue and Cresta Lee (Candice Bergen), a woman who has just been released by the very band which has staged the ambush. The couple start the long trek back to the main army unit and encounter the gamut of wilderness perils. Cresta shows far more skill than simple Simon Honus. She sweats, belches, and seduces while slowly convincing Honus that the white men are much more murderous than the Indians.

The Indian lore in the film is spotty. One pleasant surprise is Cresta's admission that Spotted Wolf has released her because he could not make her happy. Many Apache warriors claimed they would not have sex with a woman captive until they had "won her heart." Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce stated that in his long war with the whites no women were ill treated. Such intriguing claims may yet undermine the image of the raping savage that is imperative to any racist mythology. Unfortunately, the virtue of the Indians in *Soldier Blue* is only a device to be set against the lusty soldiers who are bent on raping everything that walks.

Naturally, Honus must fight a duel with an Indian. Naturally he is victorious—for nowhere in film history does an Indian win one of these duels, though they are supposedly part of his culture. The victim in this case is one of three Kiowa who come upon Cresta and Honus. Good Honus cannot bring himself to kill the warrior after beating him but one of the other Kiowa does the job for him out of disgust for his comrade's defeat. This is Hollywood Indian myth at its most flamboyant. War parties were almost always made up of relatives and close

friends. The other Kiowa would not have killed their companion but would have waited to relate how he had wiped out the disgrace by some brave deed in another battle or duel.

Honus and Cresta are eventually separated, but they make their individual ways to the army camp. Cresta finds the colonel there is planning to massacre her former tribe and she rushes off to warn them. Honus does not believe the attack will occur until it actually takes place. The attack itself outdoes the many previous violent scenes by several tons worth of blood and torn limbs. Nothing is left to the imagination. Heads get chopped off and breasts sliced away. Blood and brains splatter in slow motion. Children are tossed about on bayonets. Women are raped, then mutilated. The mayhem is so grisly that it loses its effect, seeming more like a comic book than a genuine slaughter. The victims seem unrelated to the idyllic Cheyenne laughing and playing in the village shortly before the attack. Honus is outraged and rebels. He gets put in chains for his troubles. Cresta takes a Cheyenne child in her arms and goes into captivity with the survivors.

Nelson writes that he got ideas for his film by reading of the massacre at Sand Creek and making a connection with war crimes in Vietnam. Nothing so complex comes over on the screen. Colonel Iverson (John Anderson) is a maniac. His soldiers are beasts. Obviously these whites are insane. There is no question of land, skins, reprisals, or what Black Elk called "the yellow metal that makes Wasichus crazy." There is only an irrational kill instinct that horrifies the "real" white society represented by Honus and Cresta.

Nelson's use of violence for its own sake causes him to lose at least one important visual effect. At Sand Creek, Chief Black Kettle rode out to meet the soldiers waving a huge American flag given to him at a meeting when he was promised the land would be his "as long as the grass shall grow and the rivers run." The scene is shown in *Soldier Blue* but given the clichés surrounding everything else, the sight of the American flag trampled beneath the hoofs of advancing cavalry becomes the shal-

lowest of social comments.

Had Nelson done his research more zealously, he could have produced an even more revolting scene as an anti-climax. The "real" Colonel Iverson was named Chivington, an itinerant preacher, and the assault troops were not regulars but civilian volunteers. When the battle was over, the victors and their preacher leader took their scalps, heads, arms, and other trophies to a large Denver music hall. There the show was stopped and the stage cleared so that the men could parade their souvenirs to the wild applause and cheering of the entire audience.

LITTLE BIG MAN

Arthur Penn takes a longer and more sophisticated road to dish out the same conclusions as in *Soldier Blue*. His Chief Old Lodge Skins says that everything is alive to the Indian but everything is dead to the whites. Thus the massacres are once more reduced to racial mania unconnected with social or economic considerations. Even the defeat of Custer becomes personal rather than social. Custer is an insane egocentric general who seems to know that his charge will fail. The Custer with one eye on the Democratic National Convention, the Custer who had political supporters drumming up votes at that convention, the Custer who counted on the public's partiality to successful generals, the Custer who had taken mineralogists, reporters, and miners into the Black Hills—that shrewd Custer is lost. We have only another insane Iverson commanding more soldier blues.

Penn chooses the form of the comic elegy, a tall tale told by 121-year-old Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman), the last survivor of Custer's Last Stand. The conception of Crabb is interesting. Unlike the typical Western hero who serves the interest of "progress" (expansion) in one form or another, Crabb just wants to survive. Captured by Indians, he becomes an Indian just as later he will be gunman, medicine seller, hobo, etc. He is Everyman and lives out various lives of the West with frequent returns to the Cheyenne and Chief Old Lodge Skins. It is through

this character that for the first time an Indian speaks with more than grunts. The chief is played by Dan George of the Salish and is so much the ideological center of the film that it seems impossible that Penn originally wanted Sir Laurence Olivier or Paul Scofield for the role and indeed at one time had cast Richard Boone. The notion of these fine but very Anglo-Saxon actors playing the stoic and gracious chief who is the repository of Indian lore reflects a cheapness in Penn's conception. This cheapness surfaces on various occasions. When the chief is enjoying a good pipe, there is a hip suggestion that the old boy is smoking grass. His farewell speech to earth is made into a joke. Even more misleading, the chief's reference to the Cheyenne as "the human beings" leaves the idea that the whites must be something less. Actually, almost all tribes referred to themselves as "the people" or "the human beings"; the names we know them by are usually names given by their enemies. Similarly the often used, "It is a good day to die," is not personal idiom but the standard phrase used by plains people to bolster their courage in a tough spot.

Penn does break through to some new ground in a scene toward the end of the film. The chief has become blind and is sitting in his tepee prepared to die because a battle is raging outside. Crabb convinces the chief he has become invisible, and the old man chortles and laughs, completely delighted with his invisibility as he walks amid the struggling Indians and soldiers. Penn also goes out of his way to explain what counting coup means and to note other Indian customs accurately.

Penn's use of a homosexual Sioux is far less successful. The homosexual is an offensive limp-wrist drag queen from a Manhattan Hallowe'en ball. The people of the plains had reverence and fear of homosexual men. They lived in special parts of the village and warriors might live with them without loss of dignity. At certain times, the homosexuals were sought out to perform specific rituals and other times they were studiously avoided. All this is lost between fluttering eyelashes and a lispy come-

into-my-tepee-sweetie performance.

The warrior who does everything backwards is another bastardized conception. He is the most disagreeable of the Indians and for some reason is shown as the slayer of Custer. Such men were usually charged with keeping camps cheerful with their jokes. Special backward ceremonies were also common to emphasize the power of the circle and to note the two faces of reality.

Backward warrior and homosexual aside, because Penn allows the audience to know the Cheyenne, their slaughter is far more horrible than that in *Soldier Blue*, even though the scenes are less brutal. The Indians' right to strike back militarily at the Little Big Horn doesn't have to be argued. (The parallel with Vietnam is strong. Crabb's wife has distinct Asian features and there is no trouble in imagining a chat between Uncle Ho and Old Lodge Skins.)

Yet, all too conveniently, *Little Big Man* is two movies in one. One paints a sympathetic picture of Indian life and the other is a crude burlesque of the white West. Nowhere is there a clash of real values. We identify with the Indians because they are nice. We are not troubled with problematic things like ownership of skins, minerals, and land. The Indians held the land was owned communally and could not be bought or sold. Their lives emphasized spiritual over material things. Their fights were matters of individual fame-seeking rather than politics and economics. Their communal way of living with reverence for all life made their way incompatible with the "manifest destiny" of the young American republic. Like *Soldier Blue*, *Little Big Man* fails to deal with these questions as it moves simple-mindedly from massacre to massacre.

TELL THEM WILLIE BOY IS HERE

Based on actual events in California, *Willie Boy* marked the return of Abraham Polonsky to Hollywood after twenty years on the blacklist. The story is set in 1909 after the defeat of the Indians but at a time when war chiefs such as Joseph and Geronimo were still alive and

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warriors who had fought the cavalry were still alive to teach the young. In spite of this, Indian ways were dying. The Indian Bureau had outlawed use of Indian religion, language, dress, hair style, and customs. They penned the tribes on reservations, then whittled down their size each year. A few Indians had adjusted and become like whites. Most had fallen into despair, poverty, disease, drunkenness, and often suicide. Some like Willie Boy found new ways to rebel.

Polonsky only touches on the outlines of Willie's rebellion but we know he is not a "good Indian." Willie (Robert Blake) has been to a reformatory. He has a fight with pool-hall racists. He is taciturn and the audience quickly recognizes in him the alienated, isolated twentieth-century rebel hero. His life is rubbed out for the most trifling of circumstances. An Indian father forbids Willie to see his daughter. They meet and make love. The irate father intervenes with weapons and Willie has to kill in self-defense. He takes his woman and begins a flight that he, the girl, and the audience immediately understand must end in death.

Fate seems to be Willie's worst enemy. President Taft happens to be visiting in the area. The national press corps plays up the "Indian outbreak" and the possibility of presidential assassination. Old Indian hunters get out their knives for one more scalp. The local lawmen fall over themselves to prove the West is as lawful and orderly as the East. Poses chase the fleeing couple and in due time, Sheriff Coop (Robert Redford) takes up the hunt personally.

Polonsky goes out of his way to underline the equality of Coop and Willie. Their handprints in the mud match. The muffled sex cries of their women mingle on the screen. Coop respects his prey and would prefer not to hunt him, but like all white screen sheriffs he is better at the Indian game than the Indian. After cornering his man, the sheriff offers a rifle duel which Willie accepts even though he has no bullets—the suicide of the modern existentialist.

Actually, aside from some comments on how Willie is a great runner and woodsman, his In-



Hoffman as white Indian: LITTLE BIG MAN

dianness is only a device. He might be a black or rebel white youth. The other Indians are faceless, opinionless men. They help neither the sheriff nor Willie. When one Indian-hating sheriff is killed by Willie, they are pleased. When Coop allows them to burn Willie's dead body Indian-style, they are equally pleased. They are divided over the mysterious death of Willie's woman. One thinks she has killed herself to let Willie escape. Another thinks Willie has had to kill her himself so she would not be captured. Neither alternative is as likely as that the woman would have attempted to stay hidden and if captured would wait until the warrior came for her. Such common sense is very much in line with Indian thinking and very much out of line with Hollywood Indian mythology.

Such misconceptions are less critical than the mistaken interchangeability of Coop and Willie. They seem so alike their roles could be reversed. But this is a contemporary myth element; it didn't hold in 1909. Willie was a lone rebel from a defeated civilization suffering profound cultural shock. Coop was one of a people still fresh from the conquest of a continent. He could offend politicians and reporters when it came to the matter of Willie's burial but not in the matter of his survival. Their duel was not the apparent man-to-man struggle seen on the screen. Coop has traced his prey through the aid of the telegraph and

the train and the printed map and the Indian informers and the gangs of white men waiting at every possible escape point from the wilderness. Like the Nez Perce pursued by seven different regiments over fifteen hundred miles, Willie is not defeated by valor but by logistics. The liberal/radical Polonsky can afford to posit his antagonists as equals but it is not so.

Polonsky and the other directors have doubtless worked with as many good intentions as any Hollywood production allows, but they have only done a facelifting on the old Cowboys & Indians bit. The grunting, foul-smelling savage may never ride again, but it will be some time before the Native Americans are treated as serious subjects in themselves rather than as stand-ins for Vietnamese, blacks, or youth culture. But their challenge to the screen remains, and becomes more acute year by year: understanding the nature and depth of the crimes against the Native Americans is essential to understanding where the United States has been and where it is going. The Indian has always been the white man's mystic enemy, dreaming dreams and living lives the whites have never dreamed or lived. Standing Bear of the Sioux spoke of this antagonism near the end of his life some four decades ago. His words seem as valid now as then:

The white man does not understand the Indian for the reason that he does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent, some of its fastnesses not yet having yielded to his questing footsteps and inquiring eyes. He shudders still with the memory of the loss of his forefathers upon its scorching deserts and forbidding mountain-slopes. The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. And he still hates the man who questioned his path across the continent. But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still

vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Andrist, Ralph K., *The Long Death: The Last Days of the Plains Indians*. Collier Books, 1964. \$2.45. Beautifully written history.

Astrov, Margot, ed., *American Indian Prose and Poetry*. Capricorn Books, 1946. \$2.45. The best available collection.

Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*. U. of Nebraska, 1932. \$1.50. The classic account of Sioux life by the cousin of Crazy Horse.

Day, A. Grove, *The Sky Clears*. U. of Nebraska, 1951. \$1.75. 200 well chosen poems with commentary.

Deloria, Vine, *Custer Died For Your Sins*. Avon, 1969. \$1.25. Revolutionary rap by contemporary Indian spokesman.

Josephy, Alvin M. Jr., *Patriot Chiefs: A Chronicle of Indian Resistance*. Viking, 1958. \$1.95. Important point of view.

Kroeber, Theodora, *Ishi in Two Worlds*. U. of California, 1961. \$1.95. Moving biography of the last of the Yahi Indians.

Brown, Dee, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970. \$6.95. The new touchstone of Indian scholarship.

Due by the author of this article in fall, 1972: Georgakas, Dan, *Red Shadows* and *The Broken Hoop*. Doubleday-Zenith, \$1.50 per volume. Poetic prose history of the tribes who inhabited what came to be the territorial United States.

Any of the above books not available at local outlets can be ordered by mail from Eighth Street Bookshop, 17 W. 8th St., N.Y.C. 10011.