

trying to justify its behavior, past and present.

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## Critique

James Joyce once said that history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. This article by Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet is part of our collective process of awakening. The first portion of this article recounts the psychological and economic consequences to the conquest and domination of American Indians by more recent immigrants from Europe, Africa, and Asia. However, one need not dwell upon the history or the tragic unpleasantness of these post-Columbian events. Instead, the focus here is on present blurry eyed attempts to live in and cope with a multicultural, twentieth century North American society.

The American film industry reflects, consciously and unconsciously, the dynamic, often ambiguous, often contradictory society of which it is a part. Thus, in its own way, Hollywood struggles to cope with the American Indian as part of North America's past and present. Films may be offensive, exploitative, or inaccurate; but the illusions produced for audience entertainment also mirror society. Although the Hollywooden Indian is not authentic and may be insulting, the Hollywooden Indian image is a genuine cultural artifact of the North American experience—good or bad, right or wrong.

The Hollywooden Indian is both real and unreal. This image is "real" in the same sense that the Hollywood Westerns are real. These historical fiction films, like the dime novels before them, represent a synthesis of popular history, a confused nightmare of wagon trains, of gunfighters, and of cowboys and Indians. These myths about ourselves and about nineteenth century western history represent the realities of neither the "cowboys" nor the "Indians." Of course, many modern, real working cowboys in the American West today are Indians. Many more participate in rodeos and in the rural cowboy culture generally. The Hollywooden Indian is an illusion as are the backlot scenery and the false front buildings behind them. Myth builders *use history* rather than write it just as magicians defy physics and common sense.

Myths and stereotypes about American Indians fostered by Hollywood cause psychological damage as Bataille and Silet point out, especially when illusions are confused with reality. The homogenized Hollywood Indian is regrettable and misleading. However, one need not apologize for John Wayne or John Ford. They never pretended to be ethnographic filmmakers or even to follow Curtis's early film making example. Hollywood films are not accurate and not intended to be. Fundamentally, Hollywood does not educate; it entertains.

The important question now is where one goes from here. Hollywood continues to entertain; cowboy and Indian westerns are not in vogue. But the American Indian is alive and well and living in the twentieth century. The challenge is to reshape the Hollywood image; *i.e.*, to build more satisfactory illusions for the film audience and more meaningful identities for the American Indians themselves, especially ones that promote relevant expressions of cultures without gross distortions.

Film quality is improving slowly. Indian characters are increasingly more sophisticated and more authentic. Legitimate film roles for American Indians will improve as modern urban Indians are recognized increasingly as active participants in contemporary society. A film about Billy Mills, for instance, is possible and worth making because he is a successful, well-known athlete and, secondarily, because he is an Indian. At the same time, a rich and varied heritage exists; a vast reservoir of material remains largely unused by enterprising Indian writers, directors and producers. It is for them to articulate the drama of life, past and present, on and off the reservation. Indeed, a cowboy and Indian movie from the Indian's perspective ought to be provocative, informative and entertaining as long as it were made well enough to avoid heavy handed moralizing or alternatively the impression of self-parody. The future of American Indian participation in the film industry rests upon quality and creativity, not upon any proportional representation based upon race.

The Hollywood Indian and the cowboy and Indian stereotypes are outmoded today, if not forgotten. But the film medium remains. The challenge is to transform the medium and for American Indian actors, writers, directors and producers to use the medium for creating their own dreams.

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