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BOOK REVIEW

Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film. By Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, University of Nebraska Press

Jacquelyn Kilpatrick suggests, in the introduction to her book on American Indians in film, that when one social group stereotypes another, it is also a form of "self-identification." One way to examine "how a group defines itself is to look at those it makes its heroes." While canonizing the Euro-American rugged individualist in a struggle to tame the wilderness, American writers and filmmakers have consistently separated Native peoples as the "Other," marginalizing their status through five centuries of misrepresentation - this from a dominant culture that needed myths to justify its wholesale usurpation of an entire continent. Kilpatrick offers an eloquent and compelling story about these myths constructed by Euro-Americans that, beginning with reports just after first contact, have persisted from the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, through the nineteenth century dime novels and into cinema through the proliferation of "B" Westerns.

Celluloid Indians: Native Americans in Film is an eloquent interrogation of the stereotyping of Native peoples in cinema, print media and politics. From early American literature to treaties, Congressional hearings and legislation and onto the Hollywood screen, where the most flagrant stereotyping and negative mythologizing in our century has taken place, the

author's account is academic, thorough and a good read, as well. As such, it serves as a kind of compendium on the history of Native stereotypes as well as a chronicle of the films where they have been so successfully perpetuated. In formatting the book chronologically, Kilpatrick, of Choctaw, Cherokee and Irish decent, has made it an invaluable resource to educators interested in developing themes on roots of racial, ethnic and gender bias and stereotyping. After a comprehensive pre-cinematic look at the American Indian in popular culture, the author divides her discussion of movies by decade.

The book opens with an analysis of the work of James Fenimore Cooper, a well-intended Romantic who, like Rousseau, painted the "noble savage" into his fiction. His characters: Chingachgook and Natty Bumppo, however endowed by their originator with intellect and valor, were also doomed by Cooper as the last of a dying breed. Those who follow would accept the vagaries and vices of greed and materialism and pay with the demise of their once proud heritage. Yet the Nineteenth Century's most enduring and racially insidious invention of popular culture was Nathan Slaughter. The main character in a series of dime novels by Montgomery Bird, Slaughter represented American nationalism's emerging archetype: the rugged individualist out to tame the frontier. Kilpatrick describes Bird's hero as "a one man genocide squad," who blazed his way through twenty-four editions, representing the belief that Indians were "beneath and beyond redemption." Slaughter served the nation's metaphor to justify the religious zealotry of manifest destiny. Euro-Americans were from a strictly established land-owning system, Americans Indians were communal-based. Though Native traditions were seen as complex, their history was

orally based, which many of the immigrants perceived as non-history. These attitudes, expressed through media and public policy, effectively expunged the collective guilt of a young Republic as it annexed its way across the continent.

The stereotype of the American Indian with scowling face and rigid body, speaking a jerky, Pidgin English or simply standing stoic and voiceless with arms crossed, was well established in the American popular psyche by the time Edison invented the kinetoscope. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, with its patented attacks of blood-thirsty savages on wagon trains in the arenas of early Twentieth Century America and Europe, transferred seamlessly to the first penny arcades, carrying demeaning stereotypes to silent film. D.W. Griffith contributed greatly to exacerbating racism. As the author asserts: "Minorities in film have resided in a domain of subjection or as antagonists--less than human" using the language of a child, 'Me friend'...relegated to another time."

The frontier mythos of the dime novel moved to the talkies. Kilpatrick offers a scathing indictment of John Ford's "Stagecoach," considered by many movie critics to be a masterpiece with its innovative cross-cutting, use of deep focus lens work and creative action sequences. Historical accuracy was ignored for the sake of cinematography as Ford has the "microcosm of civilized society," represented by the stagecoach with its white passengers, traveling through Monument Valley, the Apache, couched as the villains, perched miles away, only to swoop down within minutes to attack. The "inept" Indians are no match for the ultimate "western hero": John Wayne. In this, and countless other

westerns, Indians are presented as a homogenous group with Hollywood prop designers mixing clothing, culture and location with abandon.

The author's discussion of miscegenation is particularly interesting. Seen as an implicit threat to the purity of the gene pool and the breakdown of the social order, in Hollywood westerns of the 1940's and 1950s, a standard code for scripting (essentially replaying centuries-old standards in popular writing) was followed. If a white woman were to have sexual relations with an Indian man, it was a tragedy and they were both doomed. A white man who succumbed to the wiles of an Indian "princess" carried a "romantic aura about it". He was spared but his lover was doomed to death, sometimes by her own hand to "save the man from death or humiliation-or sometimes simply inconvenience."

This and other forms of "scientific racism" do not begin to unravel until the 1960s Vietnam-induced radical enlightenment. Even then, politically correct attempts by liberal White moviemakers didn't get it right. Publicized as "a sympathetic and accurate portrayal of American Indians," *A Man Called Horse* was not well received by the Native community. Besides once again offering the "generic Hollywood Indian," Kilpatrick quotes Ward Churchill's (American Indian activist and author) response: "The Movie] depicts a people whose language is Lakota, whose hairstyles range from Assiniboin through Nez Perce to Comanche, whose tipi design is Crow and whose Sun Dance ceremony and the lodge in which it is held are both typically Mandan." The most grievous offense, though, is misrepresenting a ceremony intended as a rite of spiritual awakening and humility, a

communion with the spirits for "the betterment of the tribe." The director turned it into another Eurocentric test of personal machismo.

From an educator's point-of-view, one of the most telling reviews of recent films is *Pocahontas*. In her research, the author found that, though Disney hired Native American consultants to work on the project, their advice was summarily ignored. Kilpatrick's indignation is justified when she asserts that the film's "pseudo-history will exist as fact in the minds of generations of American children." Pairing Pocahontas who was, in reality, only ten years old when she was said to have begged her father to spare the life of John Smith (the existence of this event remains in question), with a man whose physique has been compared to that of a tree stump, is akin to teaching about the Holocaust and "putting in a nice story about Anne Frank falling in love with a German officer."

The final chapter of *Celluloid Indians* surveys the work of contemporary American Indian writers, producers, and directors of cinema. Included, is a lengthy discussion of *Smoke Signals*, "the first feature film written, directed and (co) produced by American Indians to achieve...popular success." Also receiving extended analysis is the work of Victor Masayesva Jr. (Hopi), who incorporates "stunning effects and artistic choices." He has written, produced and directed acclaimed documentaries including *Imagining Indians*, a subtle but brutal indictment of the commodification of things Indian.

Reading this book, it is obvious that the author spent considerable time researching her subject. Films that Kilpatrick considers significant merit detailed analysis. This includes

exhaustive, but never exhausting, plot summaries. More than annotated filmographies, they serve as "*Cliff Notes*" for anyone interested in knowing plot development and characterization from beginning to end of a given film. Discussions of stereotyping, racism and classism are fully explicated with cogent references to recognized scholars cited. Another research tool offering insight into dated films is the author's effort to juxtapose reviews from popular journals of the day with her own critical narrative. It provides enlightened rebuttal to remarkably obtuse sentiment. Kilpatrick demonstrates with severe clarity, how casually filmmakers would dismiss truth when it came to telling stories involving native culture. Often, in the case of moguls like John Ford, it was for convenience and to maximize profit. Ford noted in an essay on the subject: "the director who strives too hard to represent humanity by rubbing down the rough edges of racial and personal traits is likely to make his work drab and colorless."

Such dishonesty toward racial issues in popular culture guarantees its entrenchment. Often subtle and in the closet, other times, as in *Columbine*, open and blatant with tragic results, racism and bigotry are alive and well in America. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick's excellent tome brilliantly traces the root causes of these diseases: the cultural construction of stereotypes and their evolution through time and popular media-all to sustain the status quo and sell the product. The lessons of this book are essential to anyone interested in teaching tolerance and the sources of racial bias. *Celluloid Indians* belongs on the bookshelves of educators and researchers because it presents an articulate and persuasive critique of a powerful genre: a medium that has systematically perpetuated stereotypes of Native peoples at the expense their rights, humanity and dignity.

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