

From Savage to Noble: The Evolution of the Portrayal of Native Americans in the Western

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Abstract

Since its inception, Hollywood cinema has had a great influence in the general public propagating views about a wide variety of subjects, and in particular, transmitting notions about diverse groups of individuals through their representation in movies. Native Americans have been one of said communities, whose depiction has been restricted to the Western, a genre that has a history of misrepresenting indigenous people. Nevertheless, in the more than a hundred years of the Western, society's outlook and treatment of individuals who belong to other ethnicity or colour has changed radically, especially after the rise of the counterculture and the Civil Rights Movement; a shift that has been mirrored by the movie industry. On this account, the aim of this paper is to examine whether this new viewpoint was adopted by the Western in its portrayal of Native Americans, by scrutinizing two emblematic movies of two distinct eras of the genre: John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) as representative of the Classic Western, and Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) exemplifying the Revisionist Western. In the framework of representation and stereotyping as concepts as well as the genre's history, the approach was to observe in which features the movies correlate or differ in terms of their Indian characters. A thorough examination revealed that significant differences can be found between the motion pictures, in that the first relies on the Hollywood stereotype which characterizes Indians as the personification of savagery, while the second attempts to disengage from that narrative to a great extent by offering a more meticulous and liberal portrayal of Native Americans. I thus argue that the impact of the counterculture and Civil Rights Movement can be discerned in the Revisionist Western which, contrasting the Classic Western, incorporates the principles advocated in said movements into its renewed vision of indigenous people.

Keywords: Native Americans, Western Cinema, Representation, *The Searchers*, *Dances with Wolves*.

1. Introduction

“Red”, “savage”, and “uncivilized” are some of the qualifying adjectives which are ingrained in the collective consciousness of Western civilization regarding the image of Native Americans. This misguided conception is sustained by many myths which are still regarded to be true, but which nevertheless lead to ignorance at best and racism at worst. One shared belief among people, especially among children, is that Native Americans do not belong in civilization, for their society is a “primitive” one. Further far-fetched from reality is the false assumption that Native Americans do no longer exist because all of them perished when Europeans conquered the entire territory of North America. These views are not only inaccurate but also fail to recognize indigenous people in a contemporary light, turning natives of today invisible. Given that these false notions are only a small portion of the entire perception the Western world has towards natives, one may wonder where these ideas emerge from.

As stated by Raymond W. Stedman, a professor of English and Communication, the main sources which are responsible for this inaccuracy are history books and the media (4). Concerning the latter, cinema is a medium worth mentioning, as it is one of its genres that gives the biggest exposure to Native Americans on the screen: the Western. The film historian and archivist William K. Everson defines the Western as a genre that through its history has been “one of the enduring staples of movie entertainment” (9). As one of the most influential movie genres in American society, the Western is defined by its cliché storylines and themes such as gunfights and chases (Everson 12). Apart from these distinctive situations, Western movies are also renowned for presenting archetypal characters like the cowboy hero and the sheriff. Nonetheless, the quintessential aspect of these movies is the portrayal of Native Americans, more often referred to as Indians¹. Traditionally, Western cinema has depicted Native Americans by means of stereotyped characters who served the plot of the movie, usually as the villains of the story. Nevertheless, movies have seemed to have undergone some changes in this respect.

According to professors of film studies Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, a movie genre is characterized, on the one hand, by its iconography, and on the other, by its

¹ There are many terms to designate indigenous people, but there is no clear consensus for their collective designation (For further information, see Stedman’s *Shadows of the Indian*). In this paper, I use the term *Native American* to refer to the actual people, and *Indian* for their depiction in film.

“thematic myths”, which are the ideological matters a movie may display. These are usually decisive regarding a genre’s success; the genre gains traction when the issues it exhibits reflect the societal interests of the time, and simultaneously, it decays when it fails to adapt to the historical and cultural context in which it is produced (86-87). As a result, genres have had to reinvent themselves in order to maintain their relevance in the movie industry, including Western cinema. As Everson notes, from decade to decade, Western movies have attempted to adapt themselves to different audience profiles to keep the genre alive, a move that would entail at times transformations in terms of the content and style (9). One of the aspects in which alterations were made was the portrayal of Native Americans. In the 1960s, the emergence of campaigns such as the Civil Rights and the American Indian movements became prominent and demonstrated that a change had occurred in the collective consciousness. American society began to reconsider the established moral and cultural principles, a phenomenon that would be known as counterculture. This had a profound effect on the movie industry, as directors would start to embrace the shift in values in their stories. It gave rise to Revisionist Western movies that would, among other aspects, offer a more sympathetic view of Native Americans (Rollins and O’Connor 124-125).

This paper analyses whether this change of values and sensibilities can be discerned in the trajectory of Western cinema regarding Native American characterization, by a thorough examination of two specific subgenres: on the one hand, the Classic Western, which represents the golden era of the genre; on the other hand, the Revisionist Western, which is characterized for providing a ground-breaking approach to the established conventions of Western movies. To this end, I first define the essence of stereotypes and the role they play in cinema. Secondly, I delve into an exploration of the Classic Western subgenre, followed by an in-depth analysis of one of its most influential movies, *The Searchers* (1956). Thirdly, this paper devotes a section to its counterpart, the Revisionist Western, after which the movie *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is scrutinized as representative of the subgenre. Finally, I offer a conclusion reached by observing how the representation of Native Americans differs from one movie to another.

2. The Essence of Representation and its Function in Cinema

Hollywood cinema has had a powerful presence in the collective consciousness of modern society since its very beginnings. Due to its compelling nature as a pastime for

the masses, it has captured the interest of individuals belonging to different strata of society. However, rather than being a medium of entertainment alone, it has operated as an instrumental force in disseminating a range of ideological and social notions about a variety of topics and realities. Such notions include viewpoints about gender, race, class, and ethnicity, amongst others. One of the ways by which Hollywood cinema has exerted such influence is by the act of representation. Relying on the contributions made in cultural and media studies regarding this issue, this section explores the nature of representation in culture and mass media. I first examine the role representation has in society as a tool for meaning production as well as a cultural practice. Secondly, I focus on the presence of representation in fiction, in Hollywood cinema in particular, through stereotypes.

Representation is a complex phenomenon that has been thoroughly explored previously. According to the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, it plays a pivotal part in creating and distributing meaning within a culture by means of language, images and other symbols (15). Furthermore, the employment and interpretation of meaning through representation is embedded in culture and history; it is in accordance with the social conventions of a particular society and moment in time that the connection between a concept and its representation is established. Such connection is thus inevitably bound to mutate in virtue of the social and historical circumstances in which it originates (Hall 32). In other words, a particular element may not be interpreted in the present with the same meaning it would have had five decades before, and similarly, an element could be interpreted dissimilarly across different cultures.

Moreover, the way we make sense of the information we receive relies on the processes of encoding and decoding, which entail putting said data into a code so that the receiver unravels its meaning. Due to the variable nature of meanings, codes also fluctuate in line with the changes within a culture (Hall 62). In some instances, the meaning may be purposely encoded in a particular way so that the receiver arrives at a specific interpretation more easily (166-167). Additionally, the creation of representation and thus, the production of meaning, is partial in that it is subject to the arrangement of power in society. It lies in the hands of those in power to determine the descriptions of reality and their representations (Dyer 12). Consequently, these portrayals tend to reflect the

viewpoint of the normative part of society; however, they do not necessarily correspond to the truth.

Regarding the function that the production of meaning fulfils in society as a result of representation, Hall remarks the following: “Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we ‘belong’ – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups.” (3). Through the creation of representation and meaning, humans make sense of their reality insofar as it allows them to discern the place they belong to as members of society. This sense of belonging correlates highly with how meaning in itself is created, which is by categorizing concepts in terms of their difference into contrasting sets of pairs, as in “black” and “white” (Hall 235). This binary system also applies to the representation of individuals, particularly those who are perceived to be different from the prevailing group, usually for being ethnically and racially distinct. This kind of representation, which illustrates people in extreme and opposing concepts such as “civilized” and “primitive” (Hall 229), carries within an implicit message that emphasises the otherness of these individuals. In this respect, the portrayal of race relies heavily on stereotypes (Hall 257), which happen to be an asset in the movie industry.

Stereotyping, as a practice of representation, consists fundamentally in creating generalizations from the reality around us. When it comes to fictional works, the English academic Richard Dyer identifies stereotypes as a subset of fictional characters whom he refers to as “types” (12-13). These characters are defined for having archetypal attributes that remain constant through the course of the narrative. Hall expands on the definition of stereotyped characters by noting that in such cases, the traits become the whole essence of the fictional person, and are presented exaggeratedly (258). Due to that superficiality, the stories that feed off stereotypes offer a rather simplistic view. As indicated by Benshoff and Griffin, Hollywood cinema is characteristic for making use of such plain style to present storylines and other narrative elements so as to create movies easier to grasp (79). In this manner, movies contain stock characters that lack depth and merely represent an idea, such as the ones of goodness or evilness (Benshoff and Griffin 80). Stereotyped characters are distinct in that they usually have a pre-established role in the narrative assigned to them (Dyer 15). Such is the case of Native American characters in Western movies, where they are normally portrayed as villains. Their stereotyped

characterization and its function in said movies, however, will be explored in the following sections.

Owing to their nature, the employment of stereotypes as a means of representation raises a number of issues. On the one hand, the simplicity that stereotypes display fails to acknowledge the true complexity of the realities that they are supposed to depict (Dyer 12). In movies, stereotyped characters have simple and predictable personalities that do not reflect how complex and unique humans are. On the other hand, the fact that this type of representation is customarily associated with particular groups of individuals – e.g. ethnically and racially diverse people- can have a profound effect on the perception most of society forms about these groups. As Dyer states, stereotypes give the false sense of being the result of an already formed idea shared by members of society about the represented group, when in truth, stereotypes are frequently the ones to originate such beliefs (14). Moreover, misrepresentation also originates the notion that every individual in the real world who belongs to the group being depicted necessarily shares the same traits which are shown on the screen (Benshoff and Griffin 41). Thus, if a group were to be continuously represented through barbaric characters, the members of said group would be thought to be uncivilized as well.

In this section, I have explored how meaning is constructed and how representation works in movies through the form of stereotypes. Meaning, which is implemented by people in power, is what gives sense to our world, and is liable to change as it relies on historical and cultural factors. Difference is imperative for the construction of meaning, which in itself creates the notion of either belonging to society or being the “other”. In motion pictures, this conception is implemented through stereotyped characters, who have overemphasized attributes and serve the plot of the movie by having a premeditated role. Although it is an inescapable and natural aspect of cinema, it can be harmful as well as deceitful, since it creates ideas that may lead to deluded thinking. In the next section, I delve into the way Western cinema has undertaken this practice of representation with the figure of the Native American during the golden age of the genre.

3. The Treatment of Native Americans in Classic Westerns

Since its early days at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Western has had significant notoriety in American cinemas until its initial decline in the 1960s (Buscombe

23). Although the genre has undergone several alterations through the course of all those years, its core has surpassed the test of time, and a set of conventions -recurrent elements and motifs- have come to define the genre itself. One element that has become emblematic in the genre is the portrayal of Indians, which has arguably shown a misleading characterization of Native Americans. However, as we will discuss in this section, the history of the Indian character in the Western is not straightforward. On the contrary, the image of this character has been altered cyclically, rather than progressing in a continuous linear path (Aleiss XVII). Therefore, in the following lines, I explore how the representation of Native Americans evolved from the origins of the Western to the 1950s, which was the pinnacle of the genre.

First of all, in order to understand the formation of the Native American portrayal in cinema, it is essential to acknowledge that the state of affairs and the particular time in which the Western emerged shaped significantly the characteristics of the genre (Buscombe 30). Its foundation was deeply influenced by nineteenth-century literary and artistic works of diverse nature (e.g. theatre, paintings, dime novels), which made way for the establishment of the genre's conventions (30-53). A case in point is Cody's Wild West show, whose success promulgated the West as a motif and the Indian as a conflictive figure, with the distinct characterization of a painted warrior on horseback (58-60).

As for the way the Native American depiction has been translated into movies, the academic Edward Buscombe makes a general remark expressing that it has been one without depth, as it fails to display the cultural richness and variety amongst Native American tribes (24). According to him, this is due to the conditions in which the Western originated as a movie genre, but also because the Native American perspective may not be compatible with a largely white audience (28-29). However, it could be argued that this limited view of Native Americans may be also due to the restricted historical frame in which Western movies are set, which is usually between the end of the Civil War and the start of the twentieth century (25). Another result that could be attributed to that historical frame is that movies frequently display the mentality of such times. Nevertheless, the Indian characterization in Western cinema has experienced many adjustments to adapt to the necessities and interests of the changing times.

In the beginning, Western movies portrayed American Indians in a positive light. Until the year 1910, there was a trend to represent Indians as having the moral high ground

in comparison to white characters, who were instead the uncivilized ones (Buscombe 86). Such is the case in some of the first Westerns of D. W. Griffith, where Indians would normally demonstrate hostility only when being incited by whites (82). Thus, it could be said that during this time, Indians were characterized in the manner whites are usually shown in most Western films. Nevertheless, this kind of representation was promptly replaced by the one the general public is accustomed to, which is that of the Indian menace to the white settlers (88). As suggested by Buscombe, this change in narrative is attributable to a number of factors, including the fact that idealized and sympathetic Westerns would be overshadowed by movies containing action and romance (92).

In the decade of the 1930s, Indians were pictured as the initiators of conflict and a threat to peace and stability, as Westerns began to embody the nineteenth-century concept of Manifest Destiny² in their narrative (Aleiss 59). These characters were depicted as the stereotypical barbaric and slow-witted Indians who posed a threat to the ambitious expansion of Americans. Such motif can be seen, for instance, in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (Buscombe 96-97). Nonetheless, around the time *Stagecoach* was released, the portrayal of Indian characters would slowly start to shift into something else.

By the end of the 1930s, the world's outlook drastically changed owing to the Nazi threat and the impending war that was about to come. This transformation would also take place in Western cinema, particularly in the approach directors decided to take to present Indian characters. In the wake of the rise of fascism, the idea of a united front to show the strength of the nation began to gain traction (Aleiss 62). This being the case, "Hollywood proceeded to lump Blacks, Mexicans, and Indians in a 'melting pot' of racial minorities united with white America against the fascist enemy" (75). The new attitude of the movie industry affected the figure of the Native American in that it started to be represented in a more thoughtful manner (61). This kind of portrayal would embrace the notion of Indians assimilating into white society. Eventually, this new angle became the prevalent formula adopted by Hollywood during the war and in the post-war era, and employed by B Westerns as well as Epic Westerns (70-76).

² *Manifest Destiny* was a doctrine used to legitimize the US expansion over North America and other territories, as a way of bringing their Christian values and ways of life to indigenous people (Benshoff and Griffin 236).

The notion of assimilation was further emphasized in the following decade, the 1950s. By then, Westerns presented the demise of the Indian identity as the only possible resolution for their Indian characters. Such narrative choice echoed the mindset that permeated society in the nineteenth century, according to which Native Americans were doomed to extinction (Buscombe 105). In this respect, Hollywood displayed two types of Indians: on the one hand, the “good” Indians who accepted their fate and the idea of adapting to white society, thus sacrificing their Indianness; on the other hand, the “bad” Indians who refused to surrender and responded with aggression, which often ended in their downfall (123). Arguably, this narrative sent the message that Native American culture and heritage had no place within a “developed” society predominantly white.

Concurrently, Western movies of this time also took a grim approach when displaying Indian characters involved in romantic or sexual relations with whites. In relations involving Indian women, these would normally perish. The instances where the man was the Indian character -which was rarer- would often follow the captivity narrative, in which the white woman is captured and held against her will (Buscombe 126-128). Despite all this, the movies of the 1950s were characteristic for offering a compassionate and less racist portrayal of Indians (118). However, as the author and professor Angela Aleiss remarks, this would change with Ford’s *The Searchers* released in 1956, a film that “marked a turning point in Hollywood’s classic Westerns” (101).

On the whole, this section has demonstrated that the representation of Native Americans in Western cinema during the first half of the twentieth century experienced a discontinuous evolution and that its transformation through the decades was subject to the circumstances of the world in said times. In its early days, the Western genre gave a sympathetic depiction of Native Americans, but it radically changed to a more stereotypical and harmful one in the 1930s. Nonetheless, the image of Indian characters would mutate and become positive in the light of the fascist menace. As the Western reached its apogee of popularity in the 1950s, films would take a mildly benevolent approach with the notion of assimilation on the front. However, the 1956 movie named *The Searchers* offered a different view of Indians that would once again break the pattern.

4. The Classic Savage Indian of *The Searchers* (1956) by John Ford

In 1956, the Classic Western experienced a radical shift in its approach to the representation of Native Americans with the release of *The Searchers*, a movie directed by John Ford that was box-office hit. The movie replaced the honourable and heroic cowboy with an uncontrollable protagonist whose racist views leave the harmony between whites and Indians explored in previous movies out of the picture (Aleiss 101). Given its relevance in the history of classic Westerns, this section is devoted to examining how the representation of Native Americans is undertaken, by observing how close their characterisation is to the stereotype. To this end, I delve into the depiction of the characters by focusing on three key aspects: their physical presentation, the representation of their culture and lifestyle, and finally, their role in the movie.

The Searchers tells the story of Ethan Edwards, a veteran who comes home to his brother's family in Texas three years after the Civil War is over. His arrival is however soon overshadowed after a group of Comanches led by a chief named Scar massacres the family and abducts their two daughters, the nine-year-old Debbie and her older sister Lucy. This leads Ethan and the Rangers on a quest of rescue, until they experience a setback when they get ambushed by Scar and his tribesmen. Such encounter prompts the Rangers and their captain to withdraw from the mission, but encourages Ethan to continue his pursuit of vengeance, joined by Lucy's fiancé and Martin, the sisters' adopted brother. Upon finding Lucy brutally murdered, his fiancé instinctively attacks the Comanche campsite and is killed. Alone on their quest, Ethan and Martin spend the following years trying to track down Scar in order to rescue Debbie.

Firstly, one aspect which is worthy of scrutiny when analysing the characterization of an ethnic group in movies is the appearance they are presented with. In the case of *The Searchers*, the physical depiction of Native Americans is done in a seemingly homogenous way. Even though some exceptions can be found in some background characters, the main approach to their portrayal is to replicate Hollywood's classic image of indigenous people: the Indian warrior on horseback. This cliché of Western cinema is particularly embodied by the authoritative figure of the Comanche tribe, the war chief named Scar. He is characterised as a Comanche with long hair, decorated with two braids and feathers. He has a scar on his face, which is covered with war paint - as is his torso - in the scenes where he acts as an attacker. During some of these violent scenes, we also

see him putting on a feathered war bonnet. This presentation, along with his uninterrupted stern countenance, helps to build a threatening presence.



Henry Brandon as the war chief Scar in *The Searchers* (1956).

The menace Scar and his tribesmen represent is also supported by diverse cinematic techniques, such as shot compositions and ominous background music. The ambush scenes serve as an illustration, particularly one in which they surround Ethan, Martin and the rangers. As they are slowly riding their horses, the figure of Scar emerges in the distance, on top of a hill. After a signal, more Comanches appear dressed up for battle, and they begin to ride their horses at the same pace as that of the rangers. Supported with unnerving music, the image of this scene alone shows the tension between the two groups. Everything described thus far (i.e. outward appearance, demeanour and cinematic devices) creates a dramatic effect that transmits a sense of danger and conveys the presence of the Comanches as an imminent threat. One last note in regard to their physical display is that, while all the extras are interpreted by Native Americans, the only Indian character with great significance in the story, Scar, is interpreted by the white actor Henry Brandon. Ford had a history of using Native Americans for background characters, but by choosing a white actor to play the part of Scar, he perpetuated the customary practice in Western cinema of hiring white actors instead of indigenous for pivotal Indian roles (Rollins and O'Connor 141).

Another feature of indigenous representation in the Western, which has sparked criticism amongst Native Americans, is the depiction of their ancestral customs; thus, it is relevant to examine how they are displayed in *The Searchers*. According to the freelance writer Carl Waldman, the Comanches were heavily involved in warfare and were excellent horsemen and horsewomen (75). It can be argued that this part of the tribe's history is reflected in the movie, since the characters are experienced riders too and are hostile towards the white characters. However, by and large, no much attention is

given to any other cultural aspect of the tribe in which goriness is not involved. Any element which would have provided more depth to these characters, and therefore, humanize them - e.g. their spiritual practices, family relations – is barely shown. Given that all the Comanches except Scar are relegated to the background, their communal life is absent and the chance of displaying any of their traditions discarded.

In addition, most of the information the audience learns about this tribe's traditions and beliefs is provided by the protagonist, Ethan Edwards, who happens to be the one character who despises Indians the most. All throughout the movie, it is discovered that Ethan is highly knowledgeable about the Comanche ways of life, a familiarity that one can assume he acquired due to his experiences during the war. His expertise on the Comanches includes their war tactics, which is what leads other characters like captain Clayton to rely on Ethan's educated guesses about Scar's movements. The previous contact he would have had with Indians seems to have turned him into a bigoted person who harbours a deep resentment against Indians, whom he views as savages and even non-human: "A human man rides a horse till it dies... then he goes on afoot... A Comanche comes along... gets that horse up... and rides it twenty more miles... Then he eats it" (*The Searchers* 37:32-43).

His deep hatred towards the Comanches and Indians altogether drive him to show insolence towards their spiritual beliefs. During the initial pursuit of Scar and his tribe, Ethan and the rangers come upon a half-buried dead Comanche. Ethan shoots the corpse numerous times, asserting that this way, according to the Comanche religious belief, the dead will not be able to enter the spirit land. His lack of regard is also shown after meeting with Scar at his campsite, when Ethan tells Martin, in an ironic tone, that Scar has not seized the opportunity to kill them in said encounter due to "Comanche hospitality". In all, most of what the audience gathers regarding the Comanches' ways of life is of bloody nature, which depict this tribe as violent. Moreover, everything is mainly shown from the perspective of Ethan, a racist man who has no respect for them, and thus does not hesitate to desecrate their dead, since he views them as nothing more than savages. Regarding Ethan's violent nature, Aleiss observes that his actions reflect the savage self he carries within, thus equating him with Scar (102).

Every visual, sound and narrative element I have examined thus far contributes to the role that Scar and his tribe fulfil in the movie. Portrayed as intimidating and violent,

they play the part that had been given to Native Americans in the classic era of the Western: the villains of the story (Benshoff and Griffin 245-246). In this respect, Scar emerges as the antagonist of the movie, and thus, the enemy of the “cowboy hero”, Ethan. However, notwithstanding the importance of his role, he is a flat character. In addition to his stereotypical appearance, he does not possess any complexity in his personality and psyche; he merely represents the idea of evilness. The only aspect that gives a layer to his characterization is the motivation behind his acts: “Two sons killed by white men. For each son, I take many scalps” (1:24:10-20). Although the movie goes beyond other classic Westerns that did not offer any explanation for Indian brutality (Benshoff and Griffin 244), his motives are not further explored. Arguably, this lack of depth renders Scar’s character unrealistic and dehumanizes him.

Moreover, the villainy he and his party represent is discernible in the two primary ways their role is executed: through their actions and the race relations. In respect to their deeds, they demonstrate their cruelty with violence. As mentioned beforehand, they are essentially the initiators of conflict whenever the opportunity arises. It could be said that they lack a moral code, since they go as far as killing an innocent family and annihilating an entire native camp. Nonetheless, their heinous acts go beyond murder. As I have previously explained, many Westerns of the 50s resorted to the captivity narrative, and *The Searchers* is no exception. The plot revolves around Debbie’s abduction, being the sole reason for the existence of Scar and his tribesmen in the movie. They kidnap Debbie, and over the years, she is raised as a Comanche so that she becomes one of Scar’s wives when she is of age. It is through this occurrence and the finding of Lucy’s body that the viewers are implicitly told that rape is also among the atrocities committed by Scar and his party. As Buscombe observes, sexual abuse is an inherent element in abduction stories (42).

Another aspect which reflects the antagonism of the Comanches is the conflictual relations they have with whites; specifically, the way Comanches and Indians in general are viewed by Ethan and others. Like Ethan, the rest of the white characters also perceive Indians as primitive and evil, while they regard themselves as the image of civilization. In this sense, they show contempt towards the Comanches and other natives, for instance, in the way in which they refer to them, often using terms like *buck*, *squaw* and *injun* that

have become derogatory with time³. A more explicit display of mockery is given by one of the rangers, a humorous character named Mose, who in separate instances makes fun of the Comanches by mimicking the stereotypical “Indian dance” and war cry.

However, the element that arguably shows best the tension between the two races is the issue of miscegenation⁴, a theme that has been approached with oscillation in the movie industry (Aleiss XVII). From the onset of the movie, viewers are made aware of the magnitude of the problem through Martin’s character, who we learn is part Cherokee. Ethan, being as bigoted as he is, seems to have conflicted feelings for him due to his Cherokee heritage. On that account, although Martin was raised by Ethan’s brother, Ethan refuses to acknowledge him as part of the family, denying being his uncle on several occasions. The conflict between both races and what each represent -civilization and savagery- is also shown when Ethan and Martin witness the tragic effects that white women endure for having been captive. When searching for Debbie, they meet women who have been rescued by the American calvary, and no ounce of what they were is left. They seem to have lost their sanity, and act as if they were little girls or frightened animals. At such a sight, Ethan remarks that they aren’t white anymore, but Comanche. His observation appears to equate madness and childishness -which in turn could be translated as savagery- with being Indian.

The dilemma of miscegenation is once again brought up when Ethan and Martin first reunite with Debbie, who, instead of feeling relief at the prospect of her rescue, has no desire of leaving as she feels at home with the Comanches. Seeing that she has embraced her Comanche identity, Ethan abandons the idea of saving Debbie; he no longer considers her his niece and feels compelled to kill her. It seems as though Debbie is no longer accepted by those who were her people. Ethan’s new aim is to annihilate Scar’s tribe, with Martin being the only one retaining the hope of rescuing her. Nonetheless, at the outset of the movie, Ethan seems to have a change of heart and instead of killing Debbie, he takes her in his arms in a paternalistic way. No explanations are given into why Ethan changes his mind. However, in the scene prior when Martin rescues Debbie,

³ The Collins Dictionary defines the terms of *buck*, *squaw* and *injun* as offensive and old-fashioned terms used to refer to Native Americans (see “Buck”, “Injun” and “Squaw” entries).

⁴ *Miscegenation* refers to interbreeding or marriage between individuals of different races (see “Miscegenation” entry). In the Western, this issue was especially explored through romance subplots between whites and Indians (Aleiss 23).

she is relieved and ready to go back home. Although Ethan does not witness this, from the audience's perspective, the movie's message is clear: the captive woman is saved and welcomed into "civilised society" once she has renounced her Indian upbringing. This appears to indicate that the disparity between whites and natives could not be greater, and that their coexistence is unattainable.

On the whole, this section has explored the way *The Searchers* depicts Native Americans in terms of their outward presentation, cultural aspects and plot function. Among the Indians that make an appearance, the Comanche chief Scar is the only prominent character, carrying the antagonist role and resembling the Indian stereotype in all aspects. Along with these elements, the use of cinematic devices and the way their culture is reflected, mostly through Ethan's character, render the Comanche as menacing and primitives. Moreover, the plot endeavours to display their evilness through the atrocious acts they perpetrate and the conflictive relations that are established between them and whites, with special emphasis given to the way the latter view them.

5. The Characterization of Native Americans in the Revisionist Western

In the past sections, we have discussed that John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) was pivotal in the genre's history as it prompted a significant transition regarding Native American characterization. Deviating from the post-war image of many Westerns that emphasized the idea of assimilation and amicable coexistence between whites and Indians, this film depicted a reality that did not allow such peacefulness and would establish the tone for the subsequent film productions (Aleiss 101). Nevertheless, the years and decades that followed saw the emergence of the counterculture and Civil Rights Movement, which would shape the film industry altogether and prepared the ground for the rise of revisionist or anti-Westerns (Rollins and O'Connor 124-125). In this section, I examine how the changing sentiments of the American society influenced the way indigenous people were represented, starting from the 1950s to the emergence of the revisionist Western, and the genre's revival in the 1990s.

During a time in which real Native Americans dealt with isolation and racial discrimination, films released in the 1950s followed the lead of *The Searchers* on displaying unresolvable enmity between Indians and whites. Said films predicted the end of federal policies that had unsuccessfully attempted to assimilate Native Americans into

American society (Aleiss 105). This theme would continue to be explored in the next decade, with Indians being portrayed either as victims of racial bigotry or an impending threat to civilization (113). A case in point is Ford's *Two Rode Together* (1961), which reveals the hypocrisy found within a racist society where whites who have been captive are killed and ostracised by their own "civilized" community (109). Thus, by the end of the 1960s, the traditional images of the civilized cowboy hero and the savage Indian were long gone; as Aleiss remarks, "this tension erupted into a powerful violence that would shatter the myth of Manifest Destiny and destroy the classic Hollywood Western" (118).

Concurrently, in the decades following the 1950s, a shift began to take place in society's conception of Native Americans. Distancing from the limited view which only conceived Native Americans as people who had to integrate into white society or whose way of life was timeless and therefore antiquated, people began to acknowledge the contemporariness and evolvement of indigenous people (Buscombe 132). Between the 1960s and 1970s, Indian activism and the anti-war movement gained prevalence in the United States. They would be echoed in the movie industry through revisionist or anti-Westerns, which attempted to display the historical maltreatment of indigenous people in the hands of whites (Aleiss 120). Such films include *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue*, the narrative of which depict genocides that took place in the 19th century in a way that reflected the anti-war mood of the era (124-127). The depiction of said massacres was particularly gorier in the latter film, a characteristic that would have much presence in epic Westerns, where the acts of white characters appeared even more barbaric than those of 1950's Westerns (121).

Be that as it may, not every Western followed the trend of picturing whites as the villains and Indians as the victims. Some filmmakers attempted to portray Indians' ways of life in a meticulous manner, including wild and bloody customs. The reasoning behind such depiction was that those traditions were necessary for Native Americans to survive the extreme conditions they faced in the wilderness. In this respect, Aleiss observes that whilst that approach came close to exaggeration at times, it did give more depth to a characterization that had conventionally been plain in the history of the genre (128). *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) is a case in point; as Buscombe states, the film "tested the limits of the rather too easily achieved liberalism that had become the norm in Hollywood's treatment of Indians" (134-135). Rather than showing Indians in a sympathetic but

simplistic way, the film demonstrates that Indians and whites are equally disposed to act violently against one another (135-137). Another film that took a similar course was *A Man Called Horse* (1976), whose portrayal of Indian characters elicited criticism from Native American activists since they found it offensive and demeaning (Aleiss 133).

As the decade of the 70s progressed, the Western suffered a significant loss in popularity; it seemed as though the genre had nothing more to offer (Buscombe 137). Its “renaissance” would take place two decades later, in the 1990s, with films like *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and *Dances with Wolves*, the latter of which happened to prevail over the rest (137). Its release in 1990 was well-timed; that year was favourable for Native American communities since laws that covered their interests were passed (Aleiss 141). The film resulted in success as its take on the representation of Native Americans highly pleased the public. Its reception was positive to the extent that some deemed it the first film in the genre’s history to ever depict Indian characters with true sympathy and authenticity (142).

All in all, this section has explored how the representation of Native Americans in Western films evolved from the 1950s to the 1990s. Beginning with *The Searchers* as a turning point, films released in the 50s and the start of the 60s adopted the narrative in which the differences between whites and Indians were unsolvable, and thus assimilation was not an option. As a result of the social climate in the US between the decades of the 60s and 70s, a new subgenre known as anti-Western emerged, which in its beginnings focused mainly on the aggression of whites against Indians. However, concurrently, some Westerns took an alternative path and strived for narratives in which the ideas of savagery and being civilized were not constricted to either whites or Indians, since both groups were capable of acting as such. After its decline in the 70s, the genre experienced its renewal in the 1990s, with successes like *Dances with Wolves*.

6. The Revisionist Approach to the Noble Indian in *Dances with Wolves* (1990) by Kevin Costner

Dances with Wolves, which was directed and starred by Kevin Costner, was released to theatres in 1990. As indicated previously, the movie was widely acclaimed and contributed to the resurgence of the Western genre. Benshoff and Griffin define this revisionist Western as a “nostalgic Hollywood blockbuster”, for it adapted the tropes of

the genre to the mindset of the time (258). Between the time *The Searchers* was released and the 90s, the worldview about Native Americans drastically changed and made their representation in Westerns anew. In this sense, the movies that arose in the 80s and 90s strived to present Native Americans as virtuous by focusing on their cultural traditions (257). For this reason, in this section I scrutinize the manner in which the new ways of depicting natives can be perceived in this movie, and observe in what aspects it deviates from the narrative of *The Searchers*, by focusing on the same elements explored in the previous analysis.

Dances with Wolves follows a Lieutenant of the US Army named John Dunbar who is posted to Fort Sedgewick, an outpost on the frontier that has recently been deserted. With his horse and a wolf that occasionally visits him as his only companions, Dunbar comes into contact with a Sioux tribe that lives nearby. After an initial wariness, both parties become curious about each other, which leads to friendly visits in which they gradually begin to trust each other. As time goes on, Dunbar becomes one with the tribe, by sharing experiences -which he records in his journal- like buffalo hunting, learning their language, participating in ceremonies and spending leisure time together. He helps the tribe fight their enemies and falls in love with Stand With A Fist, a white woman who was raised by the Sioux, and whom he ends up marrying. Mistaken for an Indian at first, he is captured by the American calvary and accused of treason. Although he is saved by the Sioux, he leaves the tribe alongside Stand to prevent the Sioux from being found.

First and foremost, one of the aspects which is pertinent to examine is the characterization of the Sioux characters. Regarding their physical appearance, they depart from the stereotypical look of savagery in which Westerns usually depicted Native Americans. They instead wear clothing which resembles the style that, according to Waldman, the Plains Indians wore (228). Kicking Bird, who is the shaman of the tribe and a main figure in the story, is normally presented with a hairstyle decorated with feathers, and a dyed deerskin shirt with quillwork and fringes, as well as accessories. His demeanour and countenance do not instil fright as in the case of Scar. On the contrary, Kicking Bird gives an image of serenity which conveys the impression of being a wise and reputable man. This is perceptible from the moment the character is introduced to the viewers, when he first visits Dunbar's post riding a white horse. He is a highly regarded member of the Sioux due to his role as the shaman, which involves being a healer and

seer with special abilities (342). Through his interactions with Dunbar and the friendship they establish, viewers also learn that he is curious, patient and amiable.



Graham Greene as Kicking Bird in *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

Even though Kicking Bird is the most important Sioux character in the plot, there are other figures who are also depicted meticulously, such as Wind In His Hair. In terms of personality, he is the antithesis of Kicking Bird. As Dunbar relates in his journal, he is an intimidating, tough and outspoken man. Being mistrustful by nature, he is not afraid to speak his mind to take the opposite view to Kicking Bird when the latter proposes to go and talk to Dunbar. Nonetheless, Wind In His Hair undergoes a drastic transformation over the course of the story in terms of his perception of Dunbar. As they increasingly have more friendly encounters, Wind starts to develop respect and a fondness for him, ultimately considering him a friend. Moreover, there are minor characters that in some way represent their community, like the Sioux chief Ten Bears, Kicking's wife Black Shawl and the children. Arguably, the Sioux portrayal is reminiscent of the "noble Indian stereotype" that was used from the 80s onward; but as Benschhoff and Griffin remark, their detailed depiction makes them rounder (258). Apart from the elaborated characterization, it is noteworthy that all the Indian parts, including the important characters, were given to Native American actors belonging to different tribes, such as Oneida, Lakota, and Omaha (259).

Along with the thorough portrayal of the Sioux, the movie devotes an extended period of screentime to display the tribe's lifeway and culture. We are shown, for instance, how crucial buffalo hunting for their community; the animal's meat is their primary food source, and for the hunts, they prepare themselves with the efficiency of an army. The fruitful hunt is highly celebrated with a feast and a night ceremony in which the Sioux

chant and dance around the fire to the sound of the drums. Simultaneously to these joyous celebrations, the Sioux gather in tipis to bond with each other by sharing amusing stories and smoking pipe. As stated by Waldman, the pipe had significance in the Plains tribes and it was used during rituals (342). The audience also gets a glimpse of the political life of the village through the councils they hold, where they discuss what course of action to take regarding Dunbar. The fact that they are portrayed as a close-knit community with customs which bring unity and elation renders the Sioux as genuine and approachable characters, which is how Dunbar eventually perceives them: "I've never known a people so eager to laugh, so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other. And the only word that came to mind was harmony." (*Dances with Wolves* 2:12:38-46).

The meticulous characterization and the exhibit of their way of life are involved in the formation of their role in the plot. As opposed to the Indians of *The Searchers*, the Sioux do not have the predetermined role of the villain, but that of the ally. While *Dances with Wolves* could be considered an innovative Western in that it gives a broader perspective of the Indians than its predecessors, it is still told through a white man's viewpoint, and it is this way, through Dunbar's eyes, that we watch the role of the Sioux unfold. Within this context, Buscombe argues that the Sioux are simply a medium for the white protagonist's personal development (142). In essence, the movie explores how the forming relationship between the Sioux and Dunbar challenges the prejudices of the latter, who gradually realises that the notions he had regarding Indians were misguided: "Nothing I've been told about these people is correct. They are not beggars and thieves. They are not the boogie-men they've made out to be. On the contrary, they are polite guests and have a familiar humour I enjoy." (1:34:24-36). Contrary to Ethan's experience in *The Searchers*, the familiarity Dunbar acquires with the Sioux does not antagonize them; instead, it makes Dunbar genuinely care for them.

Be that as it may, the movie takes an interesting approach at the plot's midpoint that diverts it from the pro-Indian movies that only reflect the goodness of Indians. In a scene at night, the Sioux celebrate the killing of some white men, much to Dunbar's dismay:

It was suddenly clear now what had happened to them. And my heart sank because I tried to convince myself that the white men, who had been killed, were bad people and deserved to die. But it was no use. I tried to believe that Wind In His

Hair and Kicking Bird and all the other people who shared the killing were not so happy for having done it. But they were. As I looked in familiar faces, I realized that the gap between us was greater than I could ever have imagined (1:55:09-35).

This scene is relevant for a number of reasons. On the one hand, it provides moral ambiguity that adds depth to the characterization of the Sioux. On the other, it could be interpreted as a confirmation that there is some savagery within them. In this respect, the “gap” Dunbar mentions could refer to the insurmountable differences between whites and Indians. However, the movie provides evidence that this is not necessarily the case.

One of the ways in which the coexistence between whites and Indians proves to be possible is through *Stand With A Fist*. Like Debbie, she is a white woman raised by a tribe; not as a hostage, but as the daughter of the shaman, who took her in and raised her as his own when her parents were murdered by the Pawnees. Another indication that the relations between whites and Indians can be amicable is the relationship that is established between Dunbar and the Sioux. Nonetheless, the movie takes one step further as it does not only display a friendship between them, but also the white character assimilating into the Sioux culture. Cohabiting with them, he integrates their customs, learns their language, is given a Sioux name as well as a lodge in their village, and fights for them. By the end of the story, his identity as the Lieutenant John Dunbar vanishes and his new identity as *Dances With Wolves* is fully embraced. This transformative journey that Dunbar experiences is a recurrent trope of revisionist Westerns known as the “initiation archetype” (Rollins and O’Connor). Be that as it may, the movie averts the matter of miscegenation by making the white characters be each other’s love interest (Aleiss 145).

Additionally, the complicated relations between both races are explored by presenting whites as the main villains. Echoing the anti-Westerns of the 60s and 70s, the movie addresses the many ways in which Native Americans were wronged by white settlers. One of the issues which is tackled is the scarcity of buffalos that is mainly caused by white hunters, who slaughter the animals only for money and whom Dunbar describes as unethical and callous people. On the other hand, the US army is presented as an imminent menace for the Sioux, as the likelihood of an invasion looms over the horizon. When the threat becomes certain after Dunbar’s capture, the Sioux chief Ten Bears, showing Dunbar an old helmet, reflects on the prospect:

The white men who wore this came around the time of my grandfather's grandfather. Eventually we drove them out. Then the Mexicans came. But they do not come here anymore. In my own time, the Texans. They have been like all the others. They take without asking. But I think you are right. I think they will keep coming. When I think of that, I look at this helmet. I don't know if we are ready for these people. Our country is all that we have, and we will fight to keep it (3:12:19-13:06).

An invasion is not a new experience for them, and as slim as their chances may be, they are resolved to defend their land at whatever cost. The epilogue, however, reminds the audience that eventually, the Sioux were forced to surrender after their homes and food source had been obliterated, their lost civilization becoming an echo of the past.

Even though it is the army which poses the ultimate threat, there is another group that represents villainy as well: the Pawnee. This tribe was a long-established adversary of the Sioux and collaborated with the settlers (Waldman 217), facts which are reflected in the movie through the confrontations between the two tribes and a final scene in which we see the Pawnee aiding the army in the search for the Sioux. Be that as it may, their portrayal could be questionable. Depicted as pure villains, their physical and behavioural characterization emulates Hollywood's stereotypical approach (Benshoff and Griffin 258). They are only seen in their warlike looks, covered in war paint, and being hostile towards Sioux and whites alike. Given that not even an insight into their motives is offered, their depiction also feeds the ongoing Western narrative of plain bad Indians.

In conclusion, *Dances with Wolves* depicts Indians in a new light with the Sioux characters. They deviate from the stereotype since they are characterized more thoroughly both in terms of physical appearance and psyche, particularly with Kicking Bird and Wind In His Hair. Their attitudes towards Dunbar and the display of their customs and community life give indication of them being affable and truthful. They play the role of the ally, and the movie focuses on the development of their friendship with Dunbar, whose preconceptions about Indians are challenged. Moreover, rather than portraying the Sioux as plainly good, it offers some depth by presenting some of their acts as morally dubious. The possibility of harmony between whites and Indians is also explored through the characters of Stand With A Fist and Dunbar, the two of which end up assimilating into the Sioux culture. The movie presents the whites as the antagonists, by showing the

danger they pose to the Sioux; but it also displays the Pawnee as the villains, whose characterization enforces the Hollywood stereotype.

7. Final Thoughts

This paper has examined how the representation of Native Americans in the Western genre has developed over the decades. The construction of meaning is based on difference, which creates the notion that those who are racially and ethnically distinct represent the "Other"; in cinema, this idea is implemented with the act of representing said individuals through stereotypical characters. Throughout the history of the Western, the depiction of Native Americans has been cyclical rather than progressive, adapting to the state of affairs in each era. By examining a 1956 movie that exemplifies the Classic Western (*The Searchers*) and a 1990 revisionist Western (*Dances with Wolves*), the aim was to analyse whether the shift of collective consciousness that occurred in the 1960s is discernible regarding the characterization of Native Americans. Although the revisionist movie resorts to stereotyping in order to portray the Pawnees as the villains of the story, I conclude that the authenticity and sympathy which were valued during the counterculture movement can be observed in the main characters, the Sioux.

In *The Searchers*, the representation of Native Americans can be deemed considerably shallow and bearing the resemblance to the Hollywood Indian stereotype. *Dances with Wolves* mirrors that image with one specific tribe, but diverges from that approach with the tribe which bears more relevance in the story, as the movie offers characters with more meticulous characterization. Whilst the Comanches in the former movie play the pre-established role that enforces the stereotype, the Sioux are shown as evidence that Indians do not always have to be the enemy, and that they can be as humane as white people. While *The Searchers* seems to indicate that the differences between whites and Indians are entirely unsolvable, *Dances with Wolves* appears to address that even though such differences exist, one group can coexist with the other, and even establish amicable relations, if they dare to open their hearts and minds.

On observing the dissimilarities between the movies, it is discernible that while the Western has retained the features that make it identifiable, it has managed to reinvent itself to adapt to the changing times. With the rise of Revisionist Western, the approach to depict Native Americans has become increasingly mindful, by deconstructing the

genre's classic image of indigenous people through a more elaborate portrayal that seeks to humanize them. The dynamic between whites and Indians, which is another key element of the genre, has been reversed. The Classic Western, as shown in *The Searchers*, pictured the conflict as the civilization's hand subduing the threat of savagery. *Dances with Wolves*, on the other hand, displays the revisionist view of the issue; aiming for historical awareness, it gives insight into the mistreatment Native Americans received from white settlers.

Notwithstanding what *Dances with Wolves* achieved in terms of its portrayal of Native Americans, a close inspection reveals that there is yet a long road ahead for Hollywood to accurately represent indigenous people; the characterization of the Pawnees as enemies demonstrates that the image of Native Americans as bloodthirsty savages lingers in the collective's mind. The benevolent approach to the depiction of the Sioux and the movie's gloomy ending seem to indicate that, at best, Native Americans are regarded as a fascinating, mystical and noble civilization that has long been lost. Although this view is a respectful one, it is not entirely factual, as it fails to recognize the Native American communities that still exist nowadays. Resultantly, Western cinema, through the act of representation, maintains the erroneous myths of Native Americans alive.

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