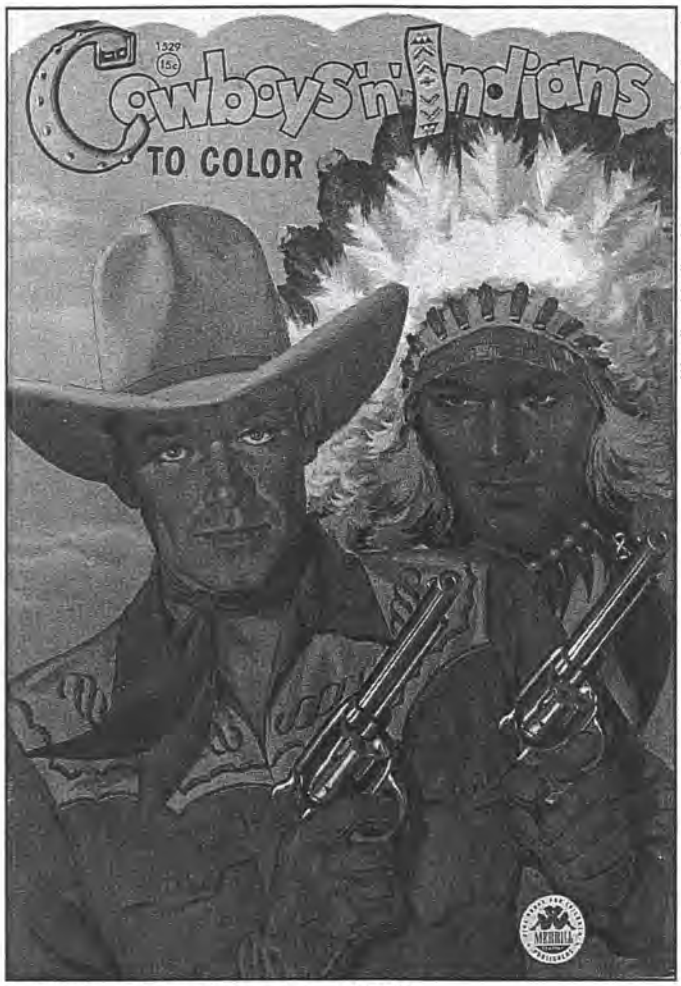
The Non-Vanishing American Indian

Are the modern images any closer to the truth?

BY RICHARD HILL

Images of Indians keep emerging and reappearing in American culture. With every generation, new uses of these Indian images are found in business, religion, government, education, and entertainment. More has probably been written, sung or filmed about Indians than any other group of Americans. Images that we either love or hate can be seen in the media, in literature, on film, and on the jerseys of our sports heroes. The "Vanishing American" refuses to vanish.

Does today's Indian image change our cultural and racial stereotypes? Are we finally seeing the Indians for what they are, or are we only seeing another version of what the white man hopes Indians are? The answer is equivocal: While some images in the news media and elsewhere reflect a growing understanding of Indian life, many of the racist stereotypes persist.



Woodland Indian Museum, Brantford, Ontario

A child's coloring book dated 1950.

Indians in the news

Indian images in the news provide a weathervane for changing social beliefs. Depending on what media outlet is examined, Indians are portrayed as socialist, anti-environmental, spiritual, or troublesome.

The alternative press seems to have adopted Indians as a cause to strike a blow against capitalism and racism. The Indian struggle for rights has been played to the radical left, the Yuppie center, and the disenchanted children of the wealthy right.

The environmental press, on the other hand, is more than willing to present Indians as modern exploiters of the land, and wants to debunk the myth of the Indian as a natural conservationist. *Outdoor Life* editor Clare Conley, in a 1984 editorial titled "The Threatening Indian Problem," blamed the problem on Indians: "The 'Great American Guilty Conscience,' actively kept alive by the Indians, has stripped the American people of their ability to deal logically with the rampant Indian excesses that are becoming more flagrant every day. Make no mistake. The tribes are on the move. They aim to lay claim to as much land — your land — as they can get, and the plan to commercialize our fish and game resources ..." This sounds more like what an Indian might have said about the Pilgrims three hundred years earlier.

The New Age press has adapted Indian spiritual traditions to suit their own need, and we see the Indian as the new symbol of spiritual salvation. The conservative press calls for an end to all Indian treaties and complains that Indians are too expensive for the richest country in the world.

In mainstream daily newspapers, the most common image is the disempowered Indian, often suffering from alcohol abuse or the lack of education, improper housing, or poor health. In the public's eye Indians appear to be out of step with the American Dream. *Time* magazine called Indians "adrift in their own country."

Solid, investigative reporting does sometimes find its way to the world of Indians, most notably in recent series in *The Arizona Republic*, *The Anchorage Times*, *The Denver Post*, and the *Seattle Times*. In the larger urban areas, however, Indians remain a mystery. Most readers of large metropolitan newspapers receive no information on the history and implication of Indian treaties, the status of Indian governments, the problems of Indian education, or the realities of reservation life.

TV influence

Baby-boomers grew up watching Indians on TV. Tonto was the faithful companion of the Lone Ranger. A good Indian was someone who did what the white man told him to. These de-

pictions still color Americans' image of Indians.

Though television is more sensitive to the Indian side of the story these days, not one television film about Indians was written by an Indian. Imagine "Roots" being written by white men and you see the problem.

Rather than portraying the savage of the plains, the new TV Indian story is a vehicle to deliver a sermon on ethics. Most of these new films depend on the same storyline: The white hero saves the day for the poor Indians who are being exploited by some unscrupulous white man. Over and over again, from the television series *Stingray* to *MacGyver*, the white hero rushes in to save the Indians.

But there are examples of more honest Indian portrayals. ABC's dramatic series *Life Goes On* had an episode with a contractor confronted by an Indian claim over the land he planned to develop. Though the Indians lost their claim in the show, it still legitimized the Indian perspective. A *MacGyver* episode discussed the Indians' claims to their peoples' artifacts, a hot issue in the media.

Public television provides a viable alternative to commercial fare. Many documentary films on Indians are finding their way to the educational network. Again, these films are still written, produced, and directed largely by non-Indians. Yet, there is a serious approach to better understand Indian realities of the past and the present.

A turning point was the mini-series "Roanoak," produced for American Playhouse on PBS in 1986. A host of Indian advisors and actors were used to retell the 16th-century story of the "lost colony" of Roanoke. The project successfully showed the difficulty of the settlers and natives to understand each other, and how the best intentions were destroyed by colonial zeal and greed. Based upon written documents and the paintings of eyewitness John White, "Roanoke" helped us feel what America's birth was like and how violence toward Indians was to become a dark legacy of that period.

More recently, a *Frontline* documentary titled "The Spirit of Crazy Horse" that ran nationally on PBS traced the contemporary history of the birth of modern Indian activism and the struggle to gain

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Illustrations of Indians as warriors have long dominated the art scene.

recognition of the rights of the Sioux Nation to the Black Hills. Despite a 1980 U.S. Supreme Court decision that the Black Hills were stolen and the Sioux should receive $122 million in compensation, a local white rancher who opposes giving the Black Hills back to the Sioux remarked in the show: "When you lose a war, you suffer the consequences. They are a conquered people."

Hollywood

The image of Indians in film has been transformed in the last 20 years. In most cases, that transformation has been simply cosmetic, using Indians as a backdrop to tell a dramatic story about white people. There has been a prejudiced point of view that a film about Indians will not sell, that there must be a way for the white ticket buyers to find a way into the story. Hence, all the recent films are really about how white people interact with Indians. The white guys are still the heroes of these stories.

The films range from the ridiculous ("Revenge of the Nerds II") to the sublime ("Dances With Wolves"). The majority of films in the last two decades have dealt with several new aspects of Indian lives, but most have generally relied on romanticized stereotypes of the Plains Indian warriors.

Some of the new images of Indians are really remakes of the "low the poor Indian" images of a century ago, as we see Indians as helpless victims of the white man's greed and deceit. Locations have changed, times have changed, but the film Indians still await a non-Indian savior. Films such as "Emerald Forest," "Mission," and "The Forbidden Dance" focus our attention to the destruction of the rain forest and the Indian societies that live there. In each case, however, a white man must figure things out. His reward is usually an Indian woman.

The Indian as mystic medicine man is another new version of an old image. In the new film Indians we see an increasing reliance on spirits to solve the dilemmas Indians find themselves in. The scenario repeats itself in "Windwalker," "Poltergeist II," "Renegades," "War Party," and even in "Earnest Goes to Camp." No matter who the Indians are fighting — and all the films feature fighting Indians — we see the power of the Indian spirits make dramatic devices work.

The only time it fails is in "Predator," when the Indian character, the one who "senses" the presence of an alien being, grabs his medicine pouch, cuts himself as a form of sacrifice, and stands to face the alien who has killed his buddies. Another Indian bites the dust and only Arnold Swarzenegger can defeat the creature.

Rambo, the other American folk hero, is a one-man terror in popular movies who is supposed to be half-Apache and half-German. Talk about stereotypes. Rambo is the latest example of the half-breed loner who has made his way through Hollywood films for decades. In his red Geronimo-style headband he destroys all enemies of America, using a bow and arrow with deadly accuracy like all good Indians. It would be interesting to see Rambo take on the Bureau of Indian Affairs, blasting through the bureaucracy, destroying the Interior Department, and making reservation life safe for the Indians.

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Geronimo, of the Apache tribe.

It is difficult to assess how America is being affected by all the new images of Indians. It is certain that Indians are enjoying the increased attention and exposure for serious issues. More and more writers and film producers want the Indian view to get across.

"The American consciousness caught up to itself in regard to how we basically stole land and changed the laws to suit our fancy," said Jim Conway, the supervising producer of the recent CBS series "Paradise," which featured an Indian as a regular character. In an interview in the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto, Conway said "Now it's become the job of the storytellers and filmmakers whenever possible to put the native American into the proper light."

What remains is the question: Are the media ever going to let the Indians speak for themselves? The chances are good that Indians will let themselves be known, for it is clear that the Vanishing American is not about to disappear.

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