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REVIEW ESSAY

"Injuns!": Native Americans in the Movies. By Edward Buscombe. London: Reaktion Books, 2006. 272 pp. Illustrations, references, bibliography, index. \$16.00 paper.

Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film. By M. Elise Marubbio. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006. xiii + 298 pp. Illustrations, filmography, notes, works cited, index. \$50.00.

THE PERSISTENCE OF POPULAR MEMORY: THE CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

These two books, while having significant subject matter in common, are very different in style. Buscombe's small volume serves as an effective review of much that has already been written about cinematic representation of "Injuns," offering some useful new interpretations, but apparently not primarily with a scholarly audience in mind. Marubbio's book is very much a specialized work of scholarship, with a much narrower focus, being essentially the first full-length treatment of the cinematic representation of Native American women.

Buscombe is known for his works in film criticism, where he has frequently focused on the Western as a genre. It seems logical that he would now turn his attention to the representation of Native Americans, who have long been one of its key fixtures. Indeed, he begins with a helpful chapter on the formation of the Western, tracing its roots in the theatrical and literary traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, with an appropriate nod to captivity narratives, dime novels, and Wild West shows. None of this is really new; as Buscombe himself acknowledges, there has been so much written on Native American representation that it is hard to offer a truly

fresh take. Buscombe, like Marubbio, makes it clear he is not especially interested in the question of whether movie representations are "accurate"—we all know they are not. Rather, both authors are concerned with the nature of the constructed representation of the Indian and what that tells us about American culture generally.

In his first chapter, Buscombe runs through the Westerns of the early twentieth century as he establishes the development of the genre's key elements: the focus on the quest of the white male hero, a figure who often encounters Indians in a very narrow range of roles, and his part in the taming of the frontier. He stresses the familiar trope of the Vanishing Indian, who is either fighting the inevitable demise of his culture (and is thus "bad"), or is nobly assisting the white colonizer (and is thus "good"). As Marubbio does in much greater detail, he points to the very limited range of representations of Native American women. They often symbolically represent both the savagery and the nobility of the untamed land and function as brokers between white and Indian (although ultimately always to the benefit of whites), following the archetype of Pocahontas. For

Buscombe, however, like most writers before him, the celluloid Indian is predominantly a male figure.

Buscombe then presents chapters on the “liberal Western,” from *Broken Arrow* to *Dances with Wolves*, and “passing as an Indian,” which discusses the many non-Indian actors who have played Indians in movies. Perhaps his most original and interesting chapter is on “Indians in the European Western,” in which he addresses why the Indian became such an object of fascination across Europe, with the hugely successful German novels of Karl May selling millions and spawning popular movies. Particularly fascinating is his discussion of a cycle of Indian movies made in East Germany, in which sympathetic Apaches “stand directly in the way of aggressively expansionist American capitalism” (209). Buscombe shows here and elsewhere how the image of the Indian, although retaining familiar themes over decades, has always been adapted to fit particular social and historical moments, a point Marubbio also makes forcefully.

Indeed, Marubbio effectively uses the concept of the palimpsest to describe how Native Americans have represented a kind of slate upon which white Americans have drawn and redrawn their own history and identity, with each set of images leaving traces of the past. Of course this is not a new idea; many scholars have pointed out that popular representations of Indians have little to do with Native Americans themselves, being instead about Euro-Americans’ concerns about their own identity. Marubbio, however, offers a new focus on the particular role of Native American women in the familiar cinematic iconography. As she contends, “within the symbolic language of this American myth and the myth of the frontier in film, the Celluloid Princess stands metonymically for Native American acquiescence to the sovereignty of the United States” (7). She argues convincingly that although Native American women’s roles are often quite small (especially given the frequency with which the characters die), these roles are often pivotal in the development of the story.

Early in the book, Marubbio lays out her central thesis, suggesting there are three primary themes in the life history of the cinematic Indian woman—“the primordial mother earth concept, the dangerous Native American Queen, and the innocent Indian Princess” (9)—and that each comes to the fore at different historic moments. Overall, films use the Native female body to dramatize and justify American colonialism and expansionism—the body is possessed by the colonizer, and the almost inevitable death of the woman “signals the continuing action of colonialism by erasing the symbol of Native America and the American wilderness” (19).

In painstaking detail, Marubbio then traces the rise of different variations on the theme, starting with early twentieth-century films, and taking us into the beginning of the third millennium. She frequently covers the same ground as Buscombe (and the many authors who have gone before them), but her central focus on women offers fresh insights. The first two chapters address the “celluloid princess,” focusing on the early 1900s through to around 1930, during which Native women, typically noble and chaste, helped the white hero, often at the expense of their personal survival and, by extension, that of their people, who were, after all, “vanishing.” The figure continues in the 1950s, with the “sympathetic” Westerns of the period, such as *Broken Arrow* (1950). She argues that the films of that period use the Princess figure “as an allegorical reference to domestic civil rights politics” (84).

The next section addresses the “sexualized maiden” (which seems an oddly contradictory term) of the 1930s and 1940s, showing how the traditional “squaw” image of highly sexual Native women became transformed into a kind of “femme fatale” figure, who lured men with her exotic charms. Marubbio offers some interesting thoughts on casting choices; while “princess” figures were typically played by white actresses (such as the blue-eyed Debra Paget in *Broken Arrow*), these roles often went to dark-skinned, frequently Latina actresses, such as Lupe Vélez (*Laughing Boy*, 1934). These

decisions probably ultimately derive from long-standing artistic conventions that show “good” Indians as lighter-skinned, as well as deep-rooted stereotypes of “hot-blooded” Latinas.

Marubbio then takes us through the 1960s and 1970s, when “liberal” Westerns like *Little Big Man* (1970) also played on an image of sexually-free Indian women, although roles for Indian women soon became very rare. She argues, however, that the tiny roles for women in such movies as *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) were highly significant; for instance, it is the death of Johnson’s Native wife that transforms him from a peaceful man on the verge of “going Native” into a vengeful killer—casting doubts on the whole possibility of cultural assimilation.

As we move into the 1990s and beyond, Marubbio concludes that the entrenched nature of the stereotypes has made it almost impossible for Native women to break out of them and be seen in fresh roles that tell their own stories. Even in productions with considerable Native input, such as *Dance Me Outside* (1994) and *Grand Avenue* (1996), she argues, despite “their obvious retaliation against Hollywood stereotyping, the films contain the young woman . . . through her typecasting or her death” (223).

Both authors make the central point that the Indian of the movies is primarily a Great Plains figure; even when the location switches to Apache country, until recently the people are often incongruously depicted wearing war bonnets and living in tipis. This speaks to the mythic role of the Plains in representing both the wide-open freedom of America, and its untamed, potentially savage nature, which Indians came to symbolize. Buscombe takes the discussion in an interesting direction with his final chapter, which poses the question of why Pueblo people have not been the focus of movies, even though there is a significant public iconography of the Southwest, represented in art, tourism, and many facets of popular culture. He answers by again referring to the generic form of the Western, in which the Pueblo—represented as it is through pottery, weaving, dancing, and domesticity—does

not fit. It is a feminine image, in contrast to the masculine iconography of the Plains. As Buscombe concludes, once the Southwest was rendered “safe for tourism,” it “held little appeal for Hollywood, which required instead that its Indians constitute a threat, albeit one safely neutralized in the present” (243). This raises fascinating questions; had the Plains Western not emerged as such a powerful genre, could Marubbio be writing about a very different celluloid Indian woman?

Both these books make contributions to the literature on Native American representation, although in different ways. Buscombe’s is more of a survey, drawing heavily on other scholars’ work (as well as his own expertise on the Western). At the same time, he apparently draws only on books; he seems to neglect entirely the considerable body of work that has appeared in such journals as *The American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, or, indeed, *Great Plains Quarterly*. The unusual production of the book series of which this volume is a part tends to detract from its appeal; it is literally “pocket-sized,” making for very small images. Buscombe’s strength lies in the way he locates the cinematic images in the larger cultural discourse about Indians, rather than focusing only on the movies. Moreover, his clear, engaging, and jargon-free style helps make his survey a useful resource both for the general public and for students.

Marubbio’s book is likely to have less general appeal, as might be expected for a scholarly monograph. Her relatively narrow scope sometimes leads to repetitiveness, and her writing style, at times heavy and jargon-laden, is likely to cause readers to struggle. She also makes some unexpected decisions; for instance, she declines to address the Pocahontas legend in any depth. Yet that iconic myth is surely central in the development of the stifling image of the Indian woman who sacrificed herself and her people to fulfill the manifest destiny of conquest. In a sense, she is the root from which all later images grew. Although there have certainly been detailed studies of her (most notably Robert Tilton’s definitive 1994 book, *Pocahontas: The*

Evolution of an American Narrative), addressing the legend more fully would have seemed in order. Another odd omission is any consideration of the 1990 epic *Dances with Wolves*, which was largely responsible for the mini-boom in "Indian movies" in the 1990s. Finally, she might have looked at Daniel Francis's *The Imaginary Indian* (1992), which, although focused on Canada, does address the Princess stereotype, and perhaps (if I may) my own few articles on gendered representation (one of which is referenced). These quibbles aside, the book is a unique and significant contribution to the literature and will be an indispensable resource for those interested in cinematic representations of ethnicity and gender.

Though neither of these studies provides dramatically new insights in what is now quite a crowded field, both are solid, well-researched contributions that will be valued by various audiences. And for readers of this journal, it bears emphasizing that both show with great clarity the defining role of the Great Plains in inscribing the image of "the Indian" in the popular mind. It is an image that, while long overdue for a change, shows few signs of relaxing its grip.

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