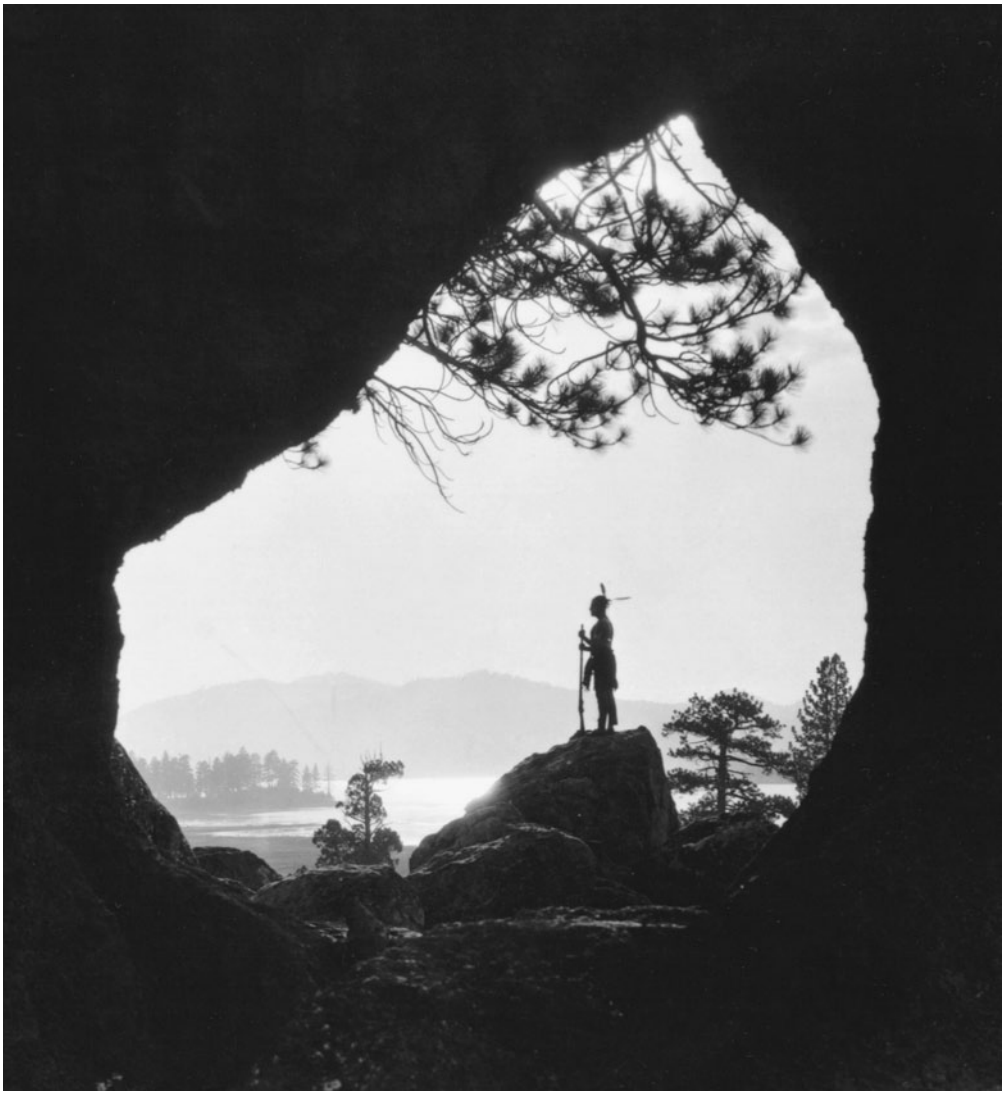
The Invention of the Western Film

A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century



The Last of the Mohicans (1920). (Courtesy of the George Eastman House.)

PART ONE

"My Friend, the Indian"

LANDSCAPE AND THE EXTERMINATION OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN IN THE SILENT WESTERN

> "These Indians are my friends, but I must send them to their death."
>
> Intertitle in the 1925 film *The Vanishing American*

The early "moving picture" could revel in the mere discovery of landscape. *Arrival of Train, Cheyenne* (1903), *Coaching Party, Yosemite Valley* (1901), *Panoramic View, Lower Kicking Horse Canyon* (1901) – such glimpses of the West in motion had dotted turn-of-the-century peep-show parlors and punctuated vaudeville acts. The Western fully arrived as a genre, however, when the movie industry learned that its survival depended upon more systematic production of films with story lines, and by 1910 the Western had come to account for at least a fifth of all U.S. releases.[1] If it is worth taking up our exploration of the Western film with these early narratives, it is not only because of their numbers. What we find in the first one-reel Westerns, however stylistically simple they may be, are some of the wider possibilities that the Hollywood-studio era would come to forget – or suppress.

The initial surprise now in looking back at the Westerns that began

to explode in popularity around 1908 is how often their stories center on Native Americans (and not always merely white impersonations of them), at a time when American Indians were not particularly prominent in popular culture, beyond misty or silhouetted nostalgia for photographic images of their "vanishing."[2] "Indian and Western subjects" was the industry trade-paper category for *The Red Girl* (1908), *The Aborigine's Devotion* (1909), *Her Indian Mother* (1910), *A Redskin's Bravery* (1911), *For the Papoose* (1912), *Hiawatha* (1913), and the like – to cite surviving examples.[3] Indians may well have entered American film for the reason that they came into the European tradition as a whole: Searching for stories to set in the landscape, pioneer filmmakers stumbled upon "Indians," the presumed men of nature.[4]

When we go back and watch surviving silent Westerns chronologically, there are a pair of subsequent surprises, because of how different the genre looks and because of what different things it has to say in its earliest guises, especially from around 1908–10. In landscape, Westerns from this era are lush, woodsy, and wet: filled with lakes, streams, and canoes, of chases through the underbrush, of hand-to-hand fights through forest clearings. In narrative, many of these Westerns are set entirely within tribal communities or feature a "noble redskin" as guide or savior to the white hero. Only later, around 1911, do we begin to find the wide vistas, rolling grasslands, arid deserts, and those savage Great Plains Indian wars that now appear so fundamental to the genre. The earlier styles and stories seem bound up with the industrial origins of U.S. moviemaking: The first American Westerns were shot in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. When the industrywide move to production on the West Coast came, more changed than the landscape, and I would argue that the new stories that began to be told were not necessarily advances. It is customary to condescend to the "primitive" style and "ersatz" landscapes of the earlier eastern-filmed Westerns, but for a variety of reasons, it may be worth taking their arguments seriously.

Through the first half of this Part One, we'll follow a large number of one- and two-reel Westerns directed by D. W. Griffith for the Biograph Company between 1908 and 1913. As individual creations, his Westerns are generally less engaging than those of Thomas Ince, whose three-reel *The Invaders* (1912) will be our focus toward the end of this part. But Griffith now has one great advantage over every other director of this era: Virtually all of his work survives, and thus in his fifty or

so currently viewable Westerns we can follow the transition from eastern Westerns to far-Westerns – an abrupt shift both of landscape and narrative, as it turns out – that has parallels in the lost films of other directors, to judge from trade-paper descriptions.[5] It has been traditional to begin surveys of Western-film history around the time of Griffith's best-known Western, 1913's *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch,* with glances back at Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and at the first cowboy hero, "Broncho Billy" Anderson. And yet a different sort of Western was so widely produced before 1911 that the first "Death of the Western" pronouncements came from trade journals that year, as elegies (*The Nickelodeon*'s "The Passing of the Western Subject") or plaints (*Moving Picture World*'s "The Overproduction of 'Western Pictures'").[6] Films such as *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* and *The Invaders* actually arrive near the end of another history of nearly forgotten Western-film possibilities – one we'll explore before moving on to the more confining Hollywood tradition.

1. Indians to the Rescue

Much has been said and written the last twelve months on the desirability of providing American film subjects for American moving picture audiences. . . . There seems to be amongst exhibitors, among whom we have made the inquiry, a strong and increasing demand for Indian and Western subjects, and here probably we get the most satisfactory answer to our own question. Indian and Western subjects may fairly be considered American, because they deal with the aboriginal or original life of the pioneers of the country.

"What Is an American Subject?" *The Moving Picture World,* January 22, 1910[1]

The continuity of the film Western with the West is nowhere more startling than in the Edison Company's *Sioux Ghost Dance,* filmed in September 1894. This was less than half a year after Edison's first kinetoscope parlor had opened and fewer than four years after the last major Plains Wars cavalry battle: the Wounded Knee massacre of Sioux (Lakota) on the Pine Ridge Reservation, following the spiritual revival named for its circular "Ghost Dance" ceremony, which included calling upon ancestors to help clear the land of white invaders. This brief (about twenty seconds long) kinetoscope film of beaded and bare-chested men and boys is made even more otherworldly and death-haunted by the stark black backdrop common to all early films shot in Edison's one-room studio in West Orange, New Jersey. The Oglala and Brulé Sioux had stopped into the studio for a couple of hours one Monday morning while touring in Brooklyn with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. The link to recent cavalry battles against the Sioux was not lost in the arch *New York Herald* report of the filming, headlined "RED MEN AGAIN CONQUERED":

A party of Indians in full war paint invaded the Edison laboratory at West Orange yesterday and faced unflinchingly the unerring rapid fire of the kinetograph. It was indeed a memorable engagement, no less so than the battle of Wounded Knee, still fresh in the minds of the warriors. It was probably more effective in demonstrating to the red men the power and supremacy of the white man, for savagery and the most advanced science stood face to face, and there was an absolute triumph for one without the spilling of a single drop of blood.[2]

Over the next few years the Edison Company ventured to distant locations to bring back similar ethnography-as-entertainment, such as *Carrying Out the Snakes* (1901), part of a series on the Hopi snake and antelope ceremony in New Mexico.[3] More startling in a different way is Edison's early welfare item, *Serving Rations to the Indians* (1898), probably shot in Utah. In this casually revealing thirty-second document, one Ute woman among a group exiting a log house on the tribe's reservation seems to spoil the group composition by walking toward the camera after she pointedly shakes off a shove from a white man. In the second of the film's two shots, native children leave the same house, by which time a white child in the background has learned to push an uncooperative native kid to walk in the proper direction.[4]

Notwithstanding a few other such disturbing oddities, the first decade and a half of desultory "Western" filmmaking had been dominated by the figures of the cowboy and the gun-toting "highwayman," before Indians made their mass entrance in 1908. Annie Oakley too had stopped by Edison's studio in 1894 to demonstrate some skillful, if humanly imperfect, shooting of tossed plates. Plentiful in the last years of the nineteenth century had been such nonfiction actualities as *Cattle Fording Stream* (1898) and *Lassoing Steer* (1898), single-shot films running a minute or two that are fully described by their titles. The cowboy as gunman dominates the earliest Western fictional anecdotes, such as the twenty-second *A Bluff from a Tenderfoot* (1899), where the strawhatted tenderfoot proves a quicker two-gun draw than knife-wielding cowboys angry at their poker-table loss – the "bluff" revealed when the tenderfoot's "guns" turn out to be a pair of fans, useful in a visual punch line to cool his sweaty brow. Similarly Billy Bitzer's two-minute *Cowboy Justice* (1904) finds a barroom gambler gunning down a cowboy and then dragged by other cowboys, in the second of the film's two shots, out to a (painted) lake and hanged from a (painted) tree; "When he is well hanged they shoot him full of holes," in the

words of the film's deadpan publicity. Stylistically more convincing were outdoor location films, such as another 1904 two-minute film, *Western Stage Coach Hold Up*, filmed in Oklahoma in such long shot as to imply a hidden-camera documentary. The continuity of the Western with the West is suggested again even in such theatrically staged knockabouts as *Cripple Creek Bar-Room Scene* (1899), purporting to represent the contemporary Colorado gold-strike town through a thirty-second single shot in which poker-playing cowboys look on as a drunk is handily ejected by the woman barkeep, who first squirts him with seltzer. Occasionally glimpsed at the margins of these rudimentary narratives is the figure of the Indian, notably in two relative epics of 1903 directed by Wallace McCutcheon for the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company: the roughly nine-minute *The Pioneers* and twenty-minute *Kit Carson*.[5] Later in 1903, Edwin S. Porter's approximately nine-minute *The Great Train Robbery* was much more dynamically composed and edited, even if its main surprise in retrospect is how it led nowhere, either for its creator or the genre, beyond serving loosely as a narrative model for gun-wielding crime and horse-chase retribution.

In the first years of the twentieth century, especially in 1902 and 1903, it was beginning to look as if the motion-picture craze had had its day, and vaudeville houses began to drop what seemed yesterday's novelty. The problems were partly technical ones of uncertain standards but mainly commercial ones of competition and copyright piracy.[6] A less easily resolved problem remained even when movie-only nickelodeons became the primary exhibition venue after 1905: Simple, shorter actualities were becoming boring to audiences – who presumably would pay to see only so many herds of cattle – while longer story films were too frequently incomprehensible without some live explanation or lecture. In this regard, Porter's other significant surviving Western, the approximately twelve-minute *Life of a Cowboy* (1906), only brought to a head the narrative incoherence that had been barely finessed in the ambiguous temporal relationships of the shots in *The Great Train Robbery*.[7] The obscure story line of *Life of a Cowboy* found compensation in its spectacle (as in the opening shot's huge saloon, where cowboys beat a man who offers an Indian a drink) and its Wild West–show rope and horse tricks. Eventually, *Life of a Cowboy* settles into a rudimentary story about a highwayman who, with his band of Indians, is thwarted from robbing a stagecoach by a heroic cowboy. Much more than this is impossible to say without recourse to Edison's pub-

licity description. Journalists, and presumably audiences, were regularly grumbling about the incoherence of multishot films: "It is not sufficient that the makers understand the plot – the pictures are made for the public."[8] By 1907, a stock-market crash and resulting recession coincided with the increasingly unresolved problem of how to make longer film stories comprehensible, especially to the nickelodeon's growing immigrant audience.[9]

Into this moment of economic crisis and narrative confusion strode the Indian, providing a solution, it seems to me, simultaneously industrial, cultural, and narratological. (And if the figure of the Indian got little thanks from the industry it helped rescue, there was a tradition for that too.)[10] The year 1908 saw the great growth in Indian films, both in the numbers produced and the centrality of natives to the narratives. During D. W. Griffith's first three months as a director in 1908, he made such Indian subjects as *The Redman and the Child, The Girl and the Outlaw, The Red Girl,* and *The Call of the Wild.* The U.S. industry at this time was in a losing war with French and Italian producers, who were widely – and rightly, in retrospect – regarded as making superior films that were flooding the American market. A January 1910 tally by *Moving Picture World* found "exactly one half" of the films released in New York "made abroad."[11] In economic terms, the solution for the U.S. filmmakers had to be in what we would now call "product differentiation," creating films if not obviously superior, then at least wholly distinctive from Europe's. As several scholars have discussed, the American landscape provided something unmatchable in Europe, a backdrop that branded a distinctive U.S. product and claimed authenticity for certain home-inspired film types, notably the Western.[12] The birth of the American film Western was due not merely to some vague inner need in American culture for frontier stories but also to the way that the American landscape lent itself commercially to the creation of an inimitable international product. What is also revealing, however, is that this international battle between European and American manufacturers begins well before the visually distinctive American landscape of the far West is put to any significant use and while U.S. film production remained almost entirely on the East Coast. The figure of the Indian, even more than the landscape, seems to have provided the initial terms for this international industrial dispute.

The explanation for this use of the Indian in the first Westerns probably needs to be found back in the imagery through which cultural and

economic battles between Europe and the United States have historically been fought. Native Americans and their representation in art have generally been of interest to European Americans only at moments in U.S. history when some sort of resistance to Europe comes to feel culturally important.[13] At the start of the nineteenth century, for instance, when American novelists and dramatists were not much more confident than early filmmakers would be about the cultural value of their creations and were the butt of the British scoff that no one bothered to read an American book, U.S. commentators countered by proposing Indian subjects as "the chief hope for an original literature."[14] Again at the end of the nineteenth century, the new photographs of Anasazi ruins in the Southwest were being widely interpreted within the United States as evidence that the nation could now claim a civilization more ancient than Europe's, one that was architecturally complex and for which Native Americans could be admired (and, conveniently enough, just when tribes were ceasing to be seen as any threat).[15] The mid-nineteenth-century sculpture atop the U.S. Capitol building, titled "Freedom Triumphant in Peace and War," tops its ironies by crowning its female figure with a feather headdress huge enough to signify her Indian status to ground-level viewers.[16] That Europe understood – indeed, invented – the semiotics of this battle is evident back in the sixteenth-century allegorical tradition that signified the New World as an Indian queen.[17]

Thus, even as narrative filmmaking began, the "Indian" was already poised as cultural currency for this transatlantic economic battle. However, European filmmakers, the French in particular, were unwilling to concede anything to the Americans. The Pathé-Frères Company, which alone supplied about a third of the American releases in 1907, had produced such films as *Indiens et cow-boys* back in 1904, set in an all-purpose Indian village complete with Plains tipis and Northwestern coastal totem poles.[18] Pathé's (now lost) *A Western Hero* (1909) caused U.S. trade papers to fume over cowboys on English saddles and Indians in gingham shirts.[19] The answering thrust by Pathé was to open its own American studio, initially in Jersey City in 1910, and then to hire a Native American – James Young Deer, of Winnebago ancestry – to run its West Coast branch. Pathé's greatest in-joke of cultural co-option must be the way its familiar copyright logo, a "red rooster" silhouette, is put forward as a Native American icon and painted on the sides of tipis in its Indian films (as in *For the Papoose* [1912], among surviving