

Solidarity with the Dead

On Some Issues with the Depiction of Native (American) People in Hollywood

Zsolt Pápai

Abstract: From the 1950s onwards, Hollywood has broken with the racist portrayal of Natives found in classic Westerns of previous decades, yet the emancipation/rehabilitation of Natives has still barely succeeded. This is due to the evaluative principles and value perspectives of Hollywood films. Hollywood films are structurally unsuitable for the emancipation/rehabilitation of Natives. This paper proves this assertion in three steps. First, we will briefly review the situation before the supposed turning point of the 1950s and outline the paradigm shift of the fifties. In the second step, we examine the image of the hero in Hollywood films and how compatible (or incompatible) it is with the portrayal of Native people in films. Finally, we will analyze the portrayal of Natives in a contemporary film, *Killers of the Flower Moon* (director: Martin Scorsese), released in 2023. The film was undoubtedly made with good intentions, but it is not free from the problems of representation of Natives.

In the paper, we discuss the indigenous people and their descendants in the current territory of the United States, but we consistently avoid using the term “Native American”, opting instead for the simplified noun “Native”. The politically correct term “Native American” actually reflects the perspective of the white mainstream, making it incorrect. It interprets the homeland of the Natives as America, even though it was the conquering whites who named the continent America.

Keywords: Natives, film genres, Western genre, liberal Western, frontier theory, Hollywood hero, Hollywood Renaissance, active hero and passive anti-hero, happy end, ‘the victim narrative’, noir sensibility

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1. One-Dimensional, and Two-Dimensional Characters

The Western genre is obviously not synonymous with Hollywood films, but in classic Hollywood, it was almost the exclusive medium for depicting Natives. Early genre theorists already noticed that the Western had a historical and social mission, as well as the power to shape identity. As John G. Cawelti points out: "... popular formulas [they mean film genres in this context – Zs. P.] can be partly understood as social rituals. The structures of Western bear this out. A ritual is a means of reaffirming certain basic cultural values, resolving tensions, and establishing a sense of continuity between present and past. The Western with its historical settings, its thematic emphasis on the establishment of law and order, and its resolution of the conflict between civilization and savagery on the frontier, is a kind of foundation ritual. It presents for our renewed contemplation that epic moment when the frontier passed from the old way of life into social and cultural forms directly connected with the present. By dramatizing this moment, and associating it with the hero's agency, the Western reaffirms the act of foundation. In this sense, the Western is like a Fourth of July ceremony." (Cawelti 1984, 100)

The fundamental task of the Western was to develop value orientations that could unify the nascent American nation. The struggle of the pioneers allowed 20th-century immigrants to identify with them, thus the fictional shared past created by the Western helped in the formation of the American nation. The task of Westerns was to propagate the myths that shaped national consciousness, such as "uniqueness" and "manifest destiny", and there was a theory to support this, Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis formulated in the 1890s. According to Turner, the conquest of the frontier played a key role in the birth of American democracy. He believed that settlers, upon arriving in the new environment, found little use of the social structures and production methods brought from the East, so they discarded them and created an alternative, unique civilization that was more democratic than the eastern states. Along with taming the forces of nature, a key element of conquering the wilderness was overcoming Native resistance: thus, anti-Native sentiment became intertwined with the formation of American national consciousness. (See Pápai 2020, 149–172)

However, the simplification of Native images in the Western genre was a longer process that matured in the 1930s. In Westerns of the 1910s, positive Native characters were not uncommon. In the 19th century, American society viewed Natives ambivalently – not unequivocally negatively – and early film portrayals of Natives were influenced by 19th-century literary conventions, one branch of which ('Indian Atrocity Novel') was hostile to the natives, while another ('Indian Romance') invited identification with them. Similarly, the dual perspective on Natives was present in Westerns of the 1910s and 1920s, resulting in many films that depicted them positively (Thomas H. Ince: *The Heart of an Indian* [1912], Cecil B. DeMille: *The Squaw Man* [1914], George B. Seitz: *The Vanishing American* [1925]). Sometimes even within the same body of work, Native heroes appeared contradictorily: in Griffith's films, they were sometimes sympathetic (*The Squaw's Love* [1911]) and other times repulsive (*The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* [1913]), while *The Massacre* (1912) presented the relationship between settlers and natives dialectically. Similarly, DeMille's portrayal of Natives was two-sided, with negative representations dominating not in the 1910s but later. Douglas Pye writes: "If the West was seen as a potential Eden, the garden of the world, it was also seen as the wilderness, the great

American desert. The life of the frontier was both ennobling, because it was close to nature, and primitive, at the farthest remove from civilization. The Indian could be both a child of nature, primitive but innocent, and the naked savage. In Cooper, this dual vision of the Indian is a feature of most of the tales – the virtuous tribe of the Mohicans set against the unredeemable evil of the Mingoes.” (Pye 2003, 208)

By the 1930s and 1940s, the image of Natives in Westerns had become one-dimensional. Although more progressive films were made in the second tier (*End of the Trail*, by D. Ross Lederman [1932], *Susannah of the Mounties* by William A. Seiter [1939]), mainstream portrayals became uniformly simplistic. In John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), Natives were shown as simply bloodthirsty (in the legendary scene of the stagecoach attack), but other films were ultra-nationalistic and chauvinistic. Such was Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Plainsman* (1936), or even more so *Union Pacific* (1939), where Natives were not only aggressive but also depicted as imbeciles. *Northwest Passage* (King Vidor [1940]) was chauvinistic in the same way, where white intruders led by Robert ‘Indian Fighter’ Rogers (Spencer Tracy) burn down an entire Native village roused from sleep because “they are hellions”.¹ The insert of the film set in the 18th century already mentions the defeat of the Indians as a test of heroism and a condition for the country’s rise. “This is a story of our early America... of the century of conflict with French and Indians... when necessity made simple men, unknown to history, into giants and endurance.”

After the experiences of World War II, the channels for racist propaganda narrowed. This was partly because the United States needed to distinguish itself from those it had defeated (the Nazis and the Japanese). Additionally, the strengthening of civil rights movements was not conducive to the previous exclusionary discourse. Although the American Indian Movement would only be founded in 1968, the civil rights struggle of African Americans had already begun at the turn of the century and achieved their first successes in the 1950s, impacting Hollywood and demanding changes in the representation of previously disadvantaged races (not just African Americans).

For Natives, these changes are indicated by their transition from background characters to leading roles. This shift is also linked to current political reasons. Hollywood directors, in opposition to blacklisting and aggressive anti-communism, raised a veto in ‘Indian Westerns.’ The Western genre was less exposed to political attacks because it had historically served patriotism well, thus offering more freedom to speak than other genres. Most ‘Indian Westerns’ of the 1950s served as allegories of McCarthyism, with Natives portrayed as victims of mainstream ideology. This victimhood position became a fundamental aspect of Natives and their portrayal at the dawn of the great emancipation/rehabilitation wave, a factor that would be crucial for later developments. (See Slotkin 1998, 366–378)

The two most important films of 1950 are *Broken Arrow* by Delmer Daves and *Devil’s Doorway* by Anthony Mann. The emancipation/rehabilitation of Natives did not begin here; clearly, as we’ve seen, these were not Hollywood’s first ‘pro-Indian films’ (Richard Slotkin’s term), yet they were pioneering because, after their release, it became significantly harder to make Westerns suggesting the old, orthodox image of Natives. However, neither paradigm-shifting film is without contradictions. The Natives inviting complete identification are played by white actors, and in *Broken Arrow*, the less sympathetic, conflict-stirring characters are portrayed by actual Natives (in the key scene, the white actor [Jeff Chandler] playing the tribal chief is on the side of peace, while the others are not). White racial superiority even deforms this thoroughly liberal Western. In other respects, *Broken Arrow* is liberal: it indeed did much against racial hatred.

Devil’s Doorway so unabashedly portrays the settlers’ mercantilism and prejudice that the Twentieth Century Fox, shelved it after its completion, only releasing it following the success

¹ It is particularly problematic that the canonization of Rogers as a hero is aided by one of the era’s most charismatic male stars, Spencer Tracy. The actor and director King Vidor shape Rogers into a figure of exceptional physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength, and with the final words, they elevate him to heroic heights, they make him somewhat like a demigod – even though he is a monster.

of *Broken Arrow*. This film is controversial precisely because of its creator's intransigence and firm morals. Anthony Mann speaks out even more decisively against the traditional representation of races than Delmer Daves does in *Broken Arrow*, while also burying the myth of activism and faith. The Native chief, who fought gloriously on the side of the North in the Civil War, tries to save his people from being relocated from their ancestral land. He staunchly believes in legality but, despite knocking on every door of the bureaucracy, fails to succeed; ultimately, he is forced into armed resistance and falls in the decisive battle, struck by bullets from his former comrades. The foundation of *Devil's Doorway* is a massive paradox: the film undoubtedly sides with the Natives, being one of the most honorable attempts to critique the white übermensch mentality not only of its time but in the entire history of Hollywood. Yet, it has a long-term detrimental effect because it plays a significant role in embedding 'the victim narrative'. Subsequently, the evolving representation policy would predominantly depict Natives as victims, preventing their portrayal as heroes or protagonists. Paul Newman's monologue in *Hombre* (Martin Ritt [1967]) summed up an entire generation's opinion: "Lady, up there in those mountains, there's a whole people who have lost everything. They don't have a place left to spread their blankets. They've been insulted, diseased, made drunk and foolish. Now, you call the men who did that Christians, and you trust them. I know them as white men, and I don't."²

2. The Active Hero, and the Passive Anti-hero

Regardless of what we think about the value orientations of the classic Western, which is based on the frontier theory and illustrates its theses, the genre was actually damaged by adopting the Natives' perspective. By placing Natives in the leading role and adapting their viewpoint, it committed an act of self-sabotage. Jenő Király writes: "By positioning oneself in the Natives' perspective, the classic Western collapses because, from the Native point of view, the settlers are disruptive agitators of the timeless idyll, wild conquerors..." (Király 2010, 276–277) Paradoxically, by positioning the Natives as victims, the Western also committed an act of violence against the Natives themselves. Our current interest lies not in the self-destructive tendencies of Western creators but in the change in the genre's depiction of Natives.

Hollywood films always favor the active hero, leaving passive characters to art films. This preference has historical and national characterological reasons (based on "American optimism"), as well as genre-related reasons. The audience of genre films (also known as mass films or entertainment films) expects not only the presentation of conflicts but also their resolution, and the key to resolution is the hero's activity. Thomas Elsaesser wrote about the relationship between classical Hollywood film dramaturgy and hero image in 1975: "The dramaturgy [...] posited figures who were psychologically or emotionally motivated: they had a case to investigate, a name to clear, a woman (or man) to love, a goal to reach. Ideological critics therefore detected in the classical cinema a fundamentally affirmative attitude to the world it depicts, a kind of a-priori optimism located in the very structure of the narrative about the usefulness of positive action. Contradictions were resolved and obstacles overcome by having them played out in dramatic-dynamic terms or by personal initiative: whatever the problem, one could do something about it, and even eventually solve it." (Elsaesser 2004, 281)

The privileged position of the active hero is also proven by the fact that in Hollywood films, passive characters cannot reach a happy end. Whether their passivity is due to external circumstances (as in many tragic romances, starting with Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* [1919]) or their own will (Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* [1971]), they do not find fulfillment. In Hollywood, heightened activity even elevates moral insanity to the status of a movie hero (in

² As a counterpoint, here is the opinion of Robert 'Indian Fighter' Rogers on the Natives, from the previously mentioned *Northwest Passage*. "... those red hellions up there have come down and hacked and murdered us, burned our homes, stolen women, brained babies, scalped stragglers, and roasted officers over slow fires..."

gangster films), while passivity leads even the most lovable characters toward destruction (as seen again in *Broken Blossoms*). In Hollywood films, the active hero's fate ends well even when they do not achieve their goal: in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming & King Vidor [1939]), no one gets what they actively desired, yet everyone is happy, and in *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen [1976]), the hero loses the final battle, but his defeat is stylized as a triumph by the film.

In the Hollywood perspective, a non-active hero is essentially an anti-hero, even if the character is likable and evokes identification from the audience. One of the markers of the anti-hero is precisely their passivity (the other being immoral behavior, as in gangster films or film noir). My central thesis is that parallel to the rejection of racist directions, Hollywood films from the 1950s onwards have systematically – not occasionally or temporarily – rendered Native characters in Westerns passive, which hinders any form of emancipation and rehabilitation, even if the creators are well-intentioned. In the Hollywood value structure, the passive hero is considered a pariah. Thus, the failure of emancipation is encoded in the transformation of Natives into passive characters.

'The victim narrative' does not always require the portrayal of a passive Native from the outset, but it necessarily involves their transformation from active to passive. Sometimes the Native character is initially active but becomes helpless due to compulsion: such is the case in *Devil's Doorway*, or later in *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson [1969]). The victim position and becoming passive are interconnected and mutually dependent. The victim role inevitably degrades to passivity, which is not conforming to Hollywood norms and hardly harmonizes with the Hollywood hero image.

The relegation of Natives to passivity and thereby to an anti-heroic position stems not only from a bad American conscience but also from the zeitgeist: the American mass film becoming more modern and consequently darker, with a noir sensibility. The Native protagonist appears at a bad time, precisely when the traditional hero position is weakened, and the myth of activity is shaken in Hollywood films. Film noir is the emblematic genre of this process (Billy Wilder: *Double Indemnity* [1944]), but more passive and/or doomed central characters also appear in sci-fi (Jack Arnold: *The Incredible Shrinking Man* [1957]) and horror (Alfred Hitchcock: *The Birds* [1963]), and even in traditionally hyperactive hero genres like gangster films and thrillers (John Huston: *Asphalt Jungle* [1950], John Frankenheimer: *The Manchurian Candidate* [1962]). Similar tendencies are seen in Westerns without Natives: the noir-sensitized (or noir-influenced) Western is epitomized by Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950).³

3. Cult of *Pariah*: Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023)

The feverish spread of 'the victim narrative' began in the early 1950s and reached a mainstream current during the so-called Hollywood Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, becoming a creed for directors. Whether given a major role (*Hombre*, *Soldier Blue*, *Little Big Man* [Arthur Penn, 1970]) or a minor – even single-scene – role (*High Plains Drifter* [Clint Eastwood, 1973]), Natives received greater attention. This period coincided with Martin Scorsese's early career, soon making him a central figure of the film renaissance. Scorsese remains a significant figure in global cinema, with each new release being a major event.

The film *Killers of the Flower Moon*, released at the end of 2023, is based on David Grann's book *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI*. The book details a notorious case in American criminal history. The Osage tribe, expelled from their ancestral lands, were compensated with barren land unsuitable for cultivation. However, the land, initially unwanted, suddenly became highly coveted as it was discovered to contain vast oil reserves. A series of mysterious murders began, with the Native landowners being

³ For a detailed discussion on the changes in Hollywood mass films, see the following. Pápai Zsolt: *El nem csókolt csókók. Magyar film noir és melodráma 1. [Unkissed Kisses. Hungarian Film Noir, and Melodrama. Vol. 1.]* Budapest: MMA Kiadó, 2024. pp. 114–129.

systematically killed. The book focuses on investigator Tom White and the formation of the FBI, but Scorsese and screenwriter Eric Roth shifted the focus. They centered the story on Ernest Burkhart, originally a secondary character, a war veteran and Osage millionaire who married Mollie Kyle. Under the influence of his uncle, William Hale, who orchestrated the terror spree, Ernest inadvertently assists in the murder spree, including the targeting of his beloved wife. In the film, the FBI's formation is a minor subplot, and even the exposure of the criminals is secondary; the crime narrative only appears in the final third of the three-hour runtime.

Within the first quarter-hour, it's evident we've entered a confined world. Apart from the opening wide shots of oil rigs, the film lacks the expansive landscapes typical of Westerns. In *Killers of the Flower Moon*, everything is suffocatingly allegorical. Scorsese's adaptation is the heir to medieval morality plays. It's not just that the narrative setting can be interpreted as an allegory of the World, but also because it features characters representing various moral qualities and forces rather than autonomous personalities. Ernest Burkhart (Leonardo DiCaprio) embodies the 'American (Hollywood) Guilty Conscience,' blind and opportunistic enough to collaborate with evil forces against his own interests. His wife, Mollie, illustrates the 'Oppressed Natives,' condemned to long suffering (treated with so-called medicines that are actually slow-acting poisons by the satanic WASP creatures) but ultimately driven by a survival instinct. Even in these scenes, she remains on the border between passivity and activity; when she goes directly to the President of the United States to seek protection for herself and her people, she moves like a zombie from the toxins pumped into her.

Not only Mollie but every other Native character is a passive sufferer of events. They fall or lapse into inactivity; although the community members sense the danger, their compulsion to talk paralyzes them. The scenes of debating, hesitant, and spiritless Natives recurrently appear in the film as a visual refrain.

Ultimately, *Killers of the Flower Moon* is an illustrative example of 'the victim narrative'. Certain pre-production phases foreshadowed this. Casting Lily Gladstone as Mollie, the heroine, seems a mistake; her presence is inexplicably defensive throughout. The casting director might have deliberately or instinctively chosen a heroine who inherently exudes passivity. It's as if the casting director was arguing for the very idea at the center of this study by choosing Lily Gladstone.

However, the real responsibility for reinforcing 'the victim narrative' lies with Leonardo DiCaprio, who has long been committed to Native causes and played the key role. The film's perspective was initially meant to align with the book, focusing on Tom White. But after DiCaprio, also a producer on the film, expressed concerns that "the story lacked heart" and suggested amplifying the Native perspective, the concept changed significantly.⁴ White's role was minimized, and Ernest's, conceived as the personification of American (Hollywood) guilty conscience, was enhanced. His viewpoint dominates the film, with the creators attempting to showcase his turbulent psyche⁵ (e.g., the scene of Reta's [Mollie's sister] house explosion, where Rodrigo Prieto's cinematography focuses on Ernest's reaction rather than the external action, highlighting his inner turmoil).

Killers of the Flower Moon aimed to be a sensational film of white confession and self-torment but failed. It's "politically and morally correct" in that it spares no whites in its portrayal, but incorrect in its depiction of Natives as passive, thereby degrading them. Like many before, Scorsese emancipates/rehabilitates the Native by stripping them of initiative, thus demoting them. Despite the creators' good intentions (showing endless martyrdom to express solidarity with Natives), the film remains degrading. The final moment, the carnivalesque

⁴ This wasn't the first time DiCaprio stood up for the presumed interests of Natives. Back in 2016, at the award ceremonies for *The Revenant* (directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu), which was a significant breakthrough for him as it brought him both an Oscar and a Golden Globe, he spoke out in support of Natives.

⁵ The diagnosis of an infinitely opportunistic behavior, where someone acts against their own interests under the pressure of their superiors or superego, has been explored more profoundly in István Szabó's Hungarian film *Colonel Redl* (1985), which was nominated for an Oscar.

closing shot (showing the dance of the Natives from an overhead, gradually widening view), is beautiful but unsettling, symbolizing the insignificance of the Natives. As the camera rises, it transforms the view of the dancers into a shrinking ant world.

Even the extreme length of the film degrades, prolonging the state of passivity. Devery Jacobs, a young Native actress who played Elora in the successful TV series *Reservation Dogs* (2021–2023), posted on X (formerly Twitter): “Being Native, watching this movie was fucking hellfire. Imagine the worst atrocities committed against (your) ancestors, then having to sit (through) a movie explicitly filled with them, with the only respite being 30 minute long scenes of murderous white guys talking about/planning the killings.”⁶

Intellectual stalemate. Old films degraded Natives by making them excessively active (turning them into industrious terror boys to be destroyed), while new films degrade them through passivity, turning them into antiheroes. In old Hollywood, a dead Indian was a good Indian; in New Hollywood, a passive Indian is a good Indian, but passivity in Hollywood is always equivalent to death. Old Hollywood exploited the victims of American history, while New Hollywood exploits ‘the victim narrative’.

4. Conclusion

The Hollywood emancipation/rehabilitation of Natives, following the peak of racist depictions in the 1930s films, has been only partially successful to this day, although goodwill has guided most filmmakers since at least the 1950s. Real emancipation is hindered by rendering Natives inactive: creators arouse sympathy for them, uplift them, yet simultaneously deprive them of activity by emphasizing their suffering (as seen in films like *Hombre*, *Little Big Man*). Audiences identify with active heroes but often pity suffering characters. In Hollywood, an active Native historically caused destruction (*Stagecoach*, *Union Pacific*), and sympathy was typically elicited when they were passive, or worse, exploited and subjugated (as seen in Ford’s *Cheyenne Autumn* [1964]). Even paradigm shifts have proven contradictory. The 1950 film *Devil’s Doorway* attempted to introduce an activated, noble Native figure but concluded sadly, noting the failure of all Native activism: the hero’s death alongside with his tribe remaining passive, ultimately succumbing to their ill fate.

The new mainstream American films depict passive and pitiable characters instead of active but destructive Natives. According to Hollywood’s value system, which celebrates activity and routinely rewards it with happy endings, this falls far short of true emancipation or rehabilitation, no matter how it’s marketed. The actors, directors, and producers advocating for liberation and emancipation are on the wrong path when, with few exceptions, they create helpless, sickened Natives instead of empowered ones. Instead of genuine emancipation, there is a cult of pariahs: Hollywood cinema remains unable to shed its shameful legacy, and even the most humanistic works, such as those by Scorsese, are merely mementos. The idolization and adoration of the victim, or simply naive enthusiasm for them, is not necessarily an expression of love or solidarity.

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⁶ Devery Jacobs’ post is quoted by The Guardian journalist David Smith in his review of the Scorsese film. *The Guardian online*.

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