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## **THE WESTERN AND THE INDIAN RAISON D'ÊTRE**

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Sławomir Bobowski's 2015 *Western i Indianie. Filmowe wizerunki rdzennych Amerykanów w kinie amerykańskim do końca lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku* (Western and the Indians: Cinematic Images of Native Americans from the Beginning to the 1970s) evolved from a childhood conversation about Westerns (which constitutes yet another proof of the magic appeal of the Western genre to the adolescent audiences of certain generations). Bobowski recalls a discussion with his fellow friend Jacek about the Indians and cowboys in Westerns; as a boy, Bobowski disapproved of the former ones and praised the latter ones, while his fellow friend Jacek had a different opinion: the Indians were great and the white people sucked because they attacked and subdued the indigenes. Bobowski admits that he then felt ashamed and realized his ignorance. Fortunately, a repressed sense of guilt and embarrassment does not determine the contents of the book. *Western i Indianie* is neither apologetic nor expiatory, distinguishing itself from so much of ideologically motivated academic writing. The book offers a clear-cut vision of the Hollywood mythologized hero, the Indian, as immortalized by the American film industry.

Bobowski's objective is to examine the topic of otherness/cultural difference, anthropological by definition and inherent in American culture, as represented in its oldest national genre, the Western (11).<sup>1</sup> For this purpose he refreshes Tzve-

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<sup>1</sup> Bobowski does not take anthropology all that seriously, quoting Umberto Eco's sarcastic remark, "the cultural anthropology is the bad conscience of the white man who thus pays his debt to the destroyed primitive cultures." *Western i Indianie. Filmowe wizerunki rdzennych Amerykanów w kinie amerykańskim do końca lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku* (Wrocław: Atut, 2015), 12.

tan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* which discusses three primary ways of approaching "the other": in axiological terms which imply judgment: the other is either good or bad; in praxeological terms which imply the action of rapprochement (identification) or distancing in relation to the other; and, finally, in epistemological terms which have to do with the knowledge of the other or lack thereof (21).

The Western is a racist genre, according to Bobowski. Bypassing the fact that the classical Western usually employed non-Native American cast (or, using Bobowski's vocabulary, "shoe polished" actors) as indigenes, the Indian will always remain silent in Westerns because, as Bobowski correctly points out, the Western represents the Wild West from the Euro-American point of view (413). Therefore Native Americans have never manifested themselves on the screen as they really are; their representation depends on what effect the Euro-Americans want to achieve: either the demonization of the Indian or the identification with the Indian plight. And this was subject to change. Bobowski discerns all the evolutionary stages: from the savage (*The Stagecoach*, 1939) to the noble savage (that being more often a female who redeems herself by sacrificing her life for the sake of a white community, particularly, the white lover, attenuating the miscegenation taboo: *The Squaw Man*, 1914) and to a good Indian (*The Last of the Mohicans* or *Broken Arrow*, 1950) and a man living in harmony with nature (antipollution ads with Iron Eyes Cody). The softening of the Indian image, noticeable in the 1970s, constitutes a caesura: that decade intended to rehabilitate the Indian (alas, in the material sense, little good did it do to Native Americans). Importantly, Bobowski is correct to observe that the positive representation of Indians then established became a constant in the decades that followed. The filmmakers decidedly avoided portraying Native Americans in a negative light, opting for a politically correct depiction of the idealized Indian. Cloud Dancing in CBS's Golden Globe winner *Dr. Quinn's Medicine Woman* serves as a good illustration of the above.

Bobowski's *Western i Indianie* is a well-researched book. It constitutes a successful attempt at writing a comprehensive history of the Western genre within a thematic framework. The author does not only dissect Hollywood depictions of the Indian but he also delves into the literary and pictorial tradition of representing Native Americans prior to the emergence of film. From the founding myth of Pocahontas (one cannot help wondering how the Anglo-Saxon Americans cherish their first interpreter by opposition to the Mexicans, "the Sons of La Malinche," who have been traumatized by the Cortés-Malintzin/Malinche intercommunication), captivity narratives, Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*, Washington Irving's *Traits of Indian Character*, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, all the way to dime novels and Western fiction (Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*). The Western evolved not only from literature but also from nineteenth-century American painting and Bobowski is quick to observe this: George Catlin's *Mandan O-Kee-Pa Ceremony*

picture inspired Elliot Silverstein's staging of the Sun Dance ceremony in *A Man Called Horse* (80), while John Ford incorporated Frederic Remington's *The Old Stagecoach of the Plains* into his famous Western *Stagecoach* (84). Sue Matheson points out that John Ford found crucial inspiration in the work of Western painters, which she illustrates with a reference to the standardized cavalry uniforms (the dark blue shirt, the blue pants with the yellow stripe down the side of the leg, the black Stetson, the golden neckerchief, the saddle blanket with the yellow trim) that are copied directly from Remington's canvas.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Bobowski is knowledgeable about Indian tribes (this could not be any the less significant in a volume that deals seriously with Native Americans) and their rites. He is very precise in identifying correctly the Indian protagonists as Cheyenne, Apache, Sioux, Seminole, Creek, Navajo or Arapaho. As a cognoscente, Bobowski exposes the gross incompetence of the Hollywood filmmakers who paid little or no attention to tribal differentiation already in the Ford era. The epitome of such negligence was Earl Bellamy's *Seminole Uprising* (1955) where the title tribe, the Seminoles in Florida, fight with the U.S. cavalry on a desert hill, wearing regalia typical of Great Plains Indians (176). The filmmakers also committed lesser sins such as trespassing on Indian values, inscribing them with Christian tinges (*Windwalker*). Even the writer-scholar Blain Yorgason makes a *faux pas* when he attributes a Siouan interjection "Hoka-hey" to his Cheyenne protagonist in the book *Windwalker* (396).

Bobowski is almost successful in avoiding clichéd thinking. By providing relevant contexts, he convincingly challenges the prevalent academic notions (e.g. Ward Churchill). Firstly, he rehabilitates John Ford, the giant of the Western genre and, secondly, he demystifies the liberal 70s. John Ford, however constrained by the film industry rules, used to hire Native Americans (usually Navajos) to portray Indian characters in supporting roles. Furthermore, Ford's representation of Native Americans in *Fort Apache* is not stereotypical or racist.<sup>3</sup> His Cochise (alas a Mexican Apache) — neither "a breech-clouted savage" nor "an illiterate, uncivilized murderer and treaty-breaker" — is a brave warrior and a protector of the tribe. For a change, he is eloquent: he speaks good Spanish (a fact), not the standard "howgh" or "infinitive English" that we are so used to. Emphatically, Ford's white characters tend to be equally savage as the indigenes (Ethan Edwards vs. Scar in *The Searchers*). Furthermore, Ford includes a representation of cruelties suffered by Native Americans in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). Importantly, Bobowski deprecates counterculture's attempts to ameliorate the aboriginal predicament on and off-screen. The apparent liberation of the Western and its resulting sympathetic view of Indians in late 60s constituted a part of anti-establishment dissent and protest against the Vietnam War. This

<sup>2</sup> Sue Matheson, "Introductory Lecture: *Fort Apache* (1948)."

<sup>3</sup> Curiously, Bobowski commits a *faux pas* himself: in discussing *Fort Apache* he demotes Owen Thursday from lieutenant colonel to major (192).

is nowhere better seen than in the discussion of Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970) and Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) — in fact Bobowski calls the latter explicitly “beautiful agitprop stylized as ethnographic documentary” (349). *Little Big Man* is an adaptation of the picaresque novel by Thomas Berger published in 1964 under the same title. The film director is more politically correct than the writer and Bobowski's brilliant analysis of the book bares it ruthlessly: while Berger demythologized the Wild West and the Indian via his picaroon Crabb, Penn clears his film of all disturbing elements (such as the massacre of the white settlers attributed in the movie to the Pawnee tribe) that could undermine the romanticized vision of Cheyennes. As befits a film made in the counterculture period, the director does not dispense with an occasional praise for flowerish-powerish free love staple either.

Where Bobowski makes a mistake of categorized thinking is right at the beginning, in the second chapter of the book (“Indianin jako obcy i kolonizacja Ameryki”), which I consider to be the most ideologically biased in the whole book. This is where he relies on third parties (Tzvetan Todorov) to relate the history of the discovery<sup>4</sup> and the book visibly suffers from the lack of Bobowski's demythologizing edge. Firstly, he accuses Christianity and the Catholic Church of institutionalized intolerance through opposition to Greek and Roman polytheisms, guarantees of lenience. Paradoxically, he alleges “the great” Aristotle (alas infamous for his misogynic contribution to medieval philosophy) to explain the difference between the perception of slavery in Ancient Greece (not based on racism and xenophobia) and Christianity (stemming from racism and xenophobia). Bobowski seems to forget that Christianity and the Catholic Church had schooled the last man standing, Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar who acted as an advocate of Mesoamerica's indigenes (Anglo-Saxon colonization did not produce any, to my knowledge). Secondly, the author's inconsistency and attachment to preconceived notions manifests itself again in the description of the Spanish conquest and colonization. Although Bobowski insists that he is interested solely in the Natives of North America and not Mesoamerica (18), he does talk extensively about the Spanish colonization, synonymous to him with abuse and extermination. This gives a wrong impression that the English colonization, whose scary details he omits, was effected peacefully, with Pocahontas as an interpreter who is ready, willing and able to safeguard the communication channel between the two worlds. Ewa Nowicka and Izabela Rusinowa think otherwise: they blame the English and the Americans in the first place for the Indian genocide (see Bobowski 37). There are three factors missing from Bobowski's discussion of the Spanish conquest and colonization: the phenomenon of *mestizaje* (miscegenation) proving the incorporation of the indigene population into society, nonexistent under English or American rule which drastically ostracized In-

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<sup>4</sup> Bobowski even reads Columbus and Bartolomé de las Casas through Todorov (see footnotes number 45–46 and 48 on pages 26 and 27).

dians by placing them in reservations; Malintzin/La Malinche/Doña Marina whose interpreting skills facilitated Cortés's conquest of Mexico, which had traumatic consequences for the Mexicans (more information on this can be found in *The Sons of La Malinche* by Octavio Paz), and finally, the fact that indigene slavery, the aspect that preoccupies Bobowski, was banned *de iure* on the Spanish territories in 1542, long before America solved the problem of the peculiar institution.

As Bobowski pointedly observes, none of the autochthonic peoples living on extra-European territories turned out to be more alluring, impressive and interesting than the aboriginal inhabitants of North America (10) — for which they paid the highest price. Hollywood placed the Indian on a pedestal, realizing the New Testament dictum to the core: "Woe to you! You build tombs for the prophets, but it was your fathers who killed them" (Luke 11:47). For Bobowski, the Indian exists primarily through the Western genre, therefore the book does not fully exploit the topic of Native presence in film. A book still waits to be written which would combine the Western's views of the Indians with the Indian perspective, divested of the Euro-American outlook that characterizes most of the films discussed in Bobowski's monograph.

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### Summary

The article is a review of *Western i Indianie. Filmowe wizerunki rdzennych Amerykanów w kinie amerykańskim do końca lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku* (Western and the Indians: Cinematic Images of Native Americans from the Beginning to the 1970s) by Sławomir Bobowski (2015). Taking his clues from Tzvetan Todorov, Bobowski traces the major stages in the evolution of Hollywood's depictions of Native Americans: from the savage, to the noble savage, to the good Indian and a man who lives in harmony with nature.

## WESTERN I INDIAŃSKIE RAISON D'ÊTRE

### Streszczenie

Artykuł jest recenzją książki *Western i Indianie. Filmowe wizerunki rdzennych Amerykanów w kinie amerykańskim do końca lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku* autorstwa Sławomira Bobowskiego (2015). Wziąwszy główne koncepty od Tzvetana Todorova, Bobowski analizuje prymarne fazy ewolucji hollywoodzkich obrazów rdzennych Amerykanów: od dzikusa do szlachetnego Indianina i człowieka żyjącego w harmonii z naturą.

Przeł. Kordian Bobowski