

If this all sounds vaguely familiar, like something you may have seen on late-night television or on a video, you're right. The foregoing bit of purple prose is a synopsis of the climactic scene from John Ford's classic Western film *Stingaree* (1939). It is an image that has been repeated in countless variations in hundreds of films, an image deeply imbedded within the nation's collective memory. The image is easily recognizable because, like all stereotypes, it depends upon a few familiar clues. The Indians of the silver screen were almost always skilled horsemen, heavily armed, fiercely determined, and adorned with feathered headdresses. Their language was often limited to an unintelligible collection of grunts and "ughs," or a pidgin English punctuated by an occasional "how!" Never mind that this image conveyed little of the vast variety of Native peoples who lived as sedentary fishermen or farmers, who achieved a remarkable degree of peaceful coexistence, who dressed in a wide array of clothing fashioned from local resources, and who spoke hundreds of complex and expressive languages.

Actually, to be fair, there never was a single Hollywood version of the American Indian. Film historians have identified three main stereotypes, each of which was drawn from earlier forms of popular culture. The least common image was that of the Pocahontas figure, the tenacious Indian maiden who could be counted on to risk her life to aid the white newcomers in the land of her people. Equally sentimental was the image of the Indian who was virtuous and sublime in his relationship with nature, a tragic figure doomed to extinction by the advance of white civilization. This sympathetic image was essentially an updated version of the noble savage, a literary convention whose roots lay in the writings of Rousseau and other social critics of the Enlightenment. The third image, and the one that predominated, was that of the warrior, a bloodthirsty savage who attempted with all his might to block the westward expansion of white settlement. This was the image that had the most dramatic possibilities and the biggest box-office appeal. It was he who bedeviled those terrorized passengers in *Stingaree*.

The warrior was the image of choice from the earliest days of the film industry. A band of treacherous Indians in *Kit Carson* (1903) attacked and murdered a band of defenseless trappers, while a press release for *Ogallalah* (1911) warned that the film was as "savage and cruel as Indians are by nature." The most lavish of the early Westerns,

suitably entitled *The Indian Wars* (1913), featured the reenactment of five of the bloodiest battles between Indians and the United States Army. The development of the feature film and the low-budget Western of the 1930s and 1940s tended further to emphasize action over sentiment. The Indian warrior thus remained the dominant stereotype. "Not only were bands of marauding savages good adversaries for the heroics of the star," film historians Michael T. Marsden and Jack Nachbar observed, "but also long shots of feathered riders made for exciting action sequences and were eminently reusable."

The quintessential characteristic of the warrior was his opposition to European American civilization. In film after film, masses of armed Indians waged battle against the advance of the frontier, but by the final reel there was never any doubt that their opposition was futile. That was the way it was in their campaigns against the overland pioneers in *The Covered Wagon* (1923), the transcontinental railroad in *The Union Pacific* (1939), and the "singing wires" of the telegraph in *Western Union* (1941). When the warriors did score a victory, as in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, the white protagonists were treated in films such as *The Flaming Frontier* (1926) and *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941) as tragic heroes.

The antecedents of these images can be traced to the first contacts between Europeans and Native Americans in this hemisphere. Images of noble savages and bloodthirsty warriors appeared as stock figures in thousands of travel accounts, novels, poems, and plays; they were reproduced in galleries of paintings, engravings, lithographs, and sculptures. The positive image portrayed the Indians as proud and dignified, possessed of great strength and endurance. The negative image emphasized their incessant warfare, fiendish revenge, and penchant for phalized their inhuman cruelty. Accounts of whites captured by Indians were among the earliest best-sellers in American literature. The first of these so-called captivity narratives, published in 1682, made plain its assessment of Indian character: "Atheistical, proud, wild, cruel, barbarous, brutish, (in one word) diabolical . . . the worse of heathen." Gothic novels in the eighteenth century and dime novels in the nineteenth perpetuated these images endlessly. They were brought to life in Wild West shows that enthralled audiences throughout Europe and the United States in the late 1800s. A favorite attraction of these ersatz historical extravaganzas was a staged Indian attack on—what else?—a runaway stagecoach.



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