CHANGING PORTRAITS: AMERICAN INDIAN IMAGERY IN EUROAMERICAN CULTURE

Elvira Stefania Tiberini
Università di Roma "La Sapienza"

The image of the American Indian has undergone inevitable transformations over the years, in keeping with the changes in the historical background against which it is set. Originally associated inexorably with the Frontier myth in American culture, its evolution appears to have produced throughout the different media (figurative arts, literature, cinema, comic strips, photography) a generalizing and all-inclusive stereotype and yet a multifaceted one in tune with the diverse perspectives.

In 1991 the National Museum of American Art in New York recalled public attention to the American Frontier myth through an exhibition with a somewhat provocatory title, "West as America". The theme of the epic adventure of the West was presented through a repertory of images (mostly paintings) of frontier life proposed not as mere representations but as examples of "ideological narrative". Apart from its considerable emotional impact, the exhibition aroused particular interest, reawakening the debate on the Frontier theme in American history, highlighting the persistence of an interpretative gap between the orientations of academia and the meaning given to it in popular culture (see White & Limerick 1994: 4) and dividing the public into two *lobbies* - in favor and against the implicit project of demythicization of the Frontier evident in the layout and explanatory texts of the exhibition itself. And the detractors of the show protested, accusing the Smithsonian Institution of complicity in redimensioning or even demolishing the Frontier myth, in spite of the preeminently theoretical-

scientific goals of the Institution expressed in recent publications (Hinsley 1981).

The new trend manifested in the exhibition was consistent with the line the press and, more generally, the American media followed in the early '90s, in tune with the New Western Historians who had inaugurated a critical re-interpretation of the American West and contested the versions of both Frederick Jackson Turner and William Cody (in art Buffalo Bill).

These two different theories - as White and Nelson Limerick remind us (1994) - were set one against the other immediately after the official "end" of the Frontier period, at the Chicago World Fair in honor of the 1893 World Columbus Celebrations which both Turner and Cody attended.

Apparently wide divergences, due in part to the two men's different formation (the former was a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the latter a scout in the army and an entertainer) separated Turner's definition of the Frontier, and consequently his image of the Native American, from Buffalo Bill's.

According to Turner the Indians filled a peripherical and inessential role and were, in a sense, reabsorbed into their habitat which was characterized by its wilderness - they were "wild men" since they belonged to a "wild" environment, and therefore must be dominated - and it was not accidental that they were depicted in prints of the period on the edge of the spaces across which the pioneers advanced in a faithful and explicit visual transfer. Buffalo Bill opposed this version of the Frontier (as conquest first of the territory and then of the "savages") with a very different one in which the Indians were active protagonists and not passive spectators, dominion over men coming before dominion over territory. But Buffalo Bill's vision of the matter substantially inverted the terms of history: it was filtered through a cultural lens which attributed the function of assailants to the natives, White's «Indian killers» (White & Limerick 1994: 27), and that of victims or, at least, of «badly abused conquerors» to the Euroamericans (*ibidem*), in a paradoxical inversion of roles. In fact, though they follow very different itineraries, the two definitions end by belonging to the same mythical weft, «separate but connected strands of a single mythic cloth» (*idem*: 45), and both stem from the same system of

symbolic representations formed by familiar stereotypes which, for this very reason, can easily be mobilized.

The nature of the area in which Buffalo Bill expressed the epic adventures of the West - the show business - allowed him to "set off" the images of the Frontier and, within them, those of the American Indians, besides recalling them in a significant symbiosis of constantly crossing and overlapping planes of reality and fiction which produced a surprising and sensational hybridization. In fact he himself and his Indian actors constantly alternated performances on stage and active participation in skirmishes and battles: Cody, who as a scout in the 5th Cavalry regiment had often fought by the side of Custer, habitually repeated his exploits in his show, and many of his Sioux actors took part both in the battles in defence of the Ghost Dance and their subsequent representations on stage, thus acting out the popular version of themselves and staging a sophisticated form of mimesis in which «Indians were imitating the imitation of themselves. They reenacted white versions of events in which some of them had actually participated» (*idem*: 35).

At all events the power of the Western epic in the history of American culture is significantly manifested both in its survival after the end of the Frontier period and in its capacity to expand and take over areas which did not belong to it originally, thus living a kind of Kroeberian life of its own. The myth lives on - as White reminds us (*idem*: 54) - in institutionally structured ludic spaces (like the Disneyworld or Disneyland Indian villages) as well as in more informal spheres (such as children's games) in which the old roles of cowboys and Indians still persist.

The stereotype of the Turner version of Indians as "part of nature" converges with the definition of natives expressed in the first early XVII century New Continent texts in English. Though the tones, in assonance with the attitudes, differ, moving from Alexander Whitaker's sharp and vehement judgement to Thomas Morton's paternalistic compassion, the resulting image is substantially identical: subhuman and godless creatures which must be evangelized and saved from eternal damnation and then taught how to read and write and become civilized. In other words, the definition of a native did not move away -

except for the fact that it was qualified as the result of a living encounter - from the prototype already established in English literature, which consequently authoritatively confirmed it.

The first XVII century early American literary texts in English in which natives were the central theme created a suitable terrain for the appearance of the stereotype of the American Indian in Euroamerican fiction. Right from the beginning (1) this fiction was characterized by its capacity to combine fact and fiction, history and imagination, and to take on historical veracity simply because it drew on documented facts and incontrovertible evidence, thus inaugurating a trend which has persisted over the years and led to the present hybrid journalistic-fictional genre consecrated by the works of Norman Mailer or Tom Wolfe.

The most successful and widely read novels on the Indian theme all belong to the early XIX century and include famous and evocative titles - *The pioneers* (1823), *The last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The pathfinder* (1840) or *The deerslayer* (1841) - by J. Fenimore Cooper which appeared in "The Leather Stockings" series, but also Chateaubriand's *Atala* and Henry W. Longfellow's *The song of Hiawatha* (1855). All, with different accents, unquestionably referred back to the already widespread stereotype of non-fiction literature. Besides, in novels, in spite of declared historical accuracy, the call of creative freedom and aesthetic goals has often led writers to a more agile handling of facts and characters. And these, being forced into the plot, sometimes lose all contact with reality. At all events we should grant all these authors the merit of having contributed to acquainting the general public with a differentiated and complex - even if not always faithful - Indian reality.

A trend of radical criticism (2) has tended to read ideological support of expansionist policy first and, later, of imperialistic consolidation, into the XIX century novels. It is certainly true that literature can reflect the ideological orientations of the dominating ethnic groups and even be actively used for political propaganda; it is also true that the redefinition of the history of the American Indians to fit into a "suitable" image through literature, with its power of impact on such a vast audience, could represent a strong temptation for the young American Nation.

However a certain critical caution is necessary. The potential of ideological conformism contained in novels on the Indian theme and their capacity to influence popular conscience in given directions is one thing, and attributing to the authors themselves the planned intention of instilling specific messages of a political nature into their works in support of colonization (as some people have asserted) is another. While it seems likely that, once produced, a work of literature can be ably and unscrupulously used for certain ideological designs which it did not have originally, it is harder to admit that a writer will consent to his creative genius and passion being constrained and subjected to goals which are not literary or aesthetic.

Besides, a careful analysis shows that XIX century America produced more than one image of the natives, in answer to different political-ideological solicitations. By the side of the negative notion of the savage and bloodthirsty native, which was functional to the legitimization of the process of colonization and expropriation perpetrated at the expense of the Indians themselves - a physical and ideological obstacle to the occupation of American territory - we find another one, plausibly constructed for exportation. Conceived to be popularized in Europe, this portrait proposed a primitively innocent native who, as such, guaranteed the positive and uncontaminated nature of the New Continent: he was therefore invested with a key role in the foundation of the American Nation and was useful for the construction of a specific historical tradition as well as a bulwark against the importation of the negative characteristics of the old European civilization thought of as currupted and unhealthy by the Puritan founding fathers (3).

Whatever anthropological point of view the image of the native is seen from, it is however undeniable that the perception generally offered by fictional literature is that of an Indian reality suspended in a historical-cultural void, given over in a way to myth and thus deprived of its present reality which is substituted with the metaphorical surrogate of a literary present, therefore a mythical figment.

Thanks to a clever literary sleight of hand the Indians thus cease constituting «a threat to the established order either figuratively (as a matter of guilt and conscience) or literally (in

terms of concrete opposition). That which is mythic in nature cannot be or has been murdered, expropriated and colonized in the "real world"» (Churchill 1992: 38) in such a way as to allow the colonizer to construct his own national identity on virgin territory at the expense of the people who have been colonized (see Fanon 1965). If this is true - and Churchill appears to be convinced that it is - the final result is no longer art but absolution.

Present-day literature moves, rather obviously, along other planes, becoming successively literary products with reciprocally distant connotations. In some of them the falsification of the Indian reality, after decades of rectifications, seems all the more unjustifiable and can be understood only in the light of improper goals - such as the pursuit of profit or sensationalism - or of a superficial and clumsy use of information which in the end produces a grossly distorted account of the native reality. Other works which on the one hand have substituted the old icon with a new "ransomed" image of the American Native, on the other find it equally difficult to get away from the more usual model of reductive typification of the Indian which persists under the new apparently inverted version. Emblematic of the first type we have Ruth Beebe Hill's *Hanta Yo: an American Saga* (1979), an alleged in-depth study of the life of the Lakota Sioux which in fact provided a singularly inverted representation in which a very distorted range of values was attributed to the Lakotas themselves. The book - from which the *Mystic Warrior* TV mini-series was drawn - provided the product of the author's imagination with just enough truth for it to appear plausible and was advertised as the result of serious research and reliable testimonies (4). It soon became a best seller with considerable incisive power over the broad target it succeeded in reaching. Tony Hillerman's thrillers are of a different nature. His works, starting in 1970 with *The blessing way*, not only inaugurated a new literary genre - a hybrid between detective fiction and western novels - but, in tune with changed times (5), finally proposed a new Native on an ideologically modified horizon in which the "smart guys" are the Indians and the Euroamericans appear corrupt and unjust.

Set in the Arizona Navajo reserves, Hillerman's thrillers move around two key characters, the detectives Joe Leaphorn

and Jim Chee, both members of the Navajo police force but, because of this, also agents of the United States Department of War and the Interior. Here the image has truly changed. Integrity, investigating ability, rationality are attributes of the natives: the criminals, on the contrary, are white. But according to the most radical critics - Fanon, Churchill and Mc Cloud, for example - a more attentive observer will see that nothing has really changed: the white criminals are always "individuals" and consequently expressions of deviance from an establishment which remains basically positive, and Leaphorn and Chee's unmistakable gifts seem to stem more from their ethnic option, and therefore from their adherence to Euroamerican models, than from racial/cultural characteristics or attributes. Actually, though readers who are free of illusions will undoubtedly find the change in the definition of natives more apparent than substantial, here too it is quite possible that a more general audience will see a reversed image: and we must not forget that the target of detective fiction is extremely vast. And so we cannot unquestionably read into Hillerman the mystifying intention sometimes attributed to him of deliberately supporting the régime. This would make of his work a masterly expression of imperialistic literature - all the more deceptive, according to Churchill, because of its subtle use of the media. Churchill maintains that Hillerman's novels represent «the very quintessence of the modern colonistic fiction» (*idem*: 279) and that, with remarkable literary cleverness, the author removed the colonizers from active participation in the process of colonization, replacing the key character of the Euroamerican detective with a native policeman who is accomplice and responsible. An ineffable example of how the dynamics of colonization can be improved on, though too sophisticated to be altogether trustworthy.

The guideline which marked the itinerary of the image of the Native from Indian killer to Indian victim - which was to reach its maximun emphasis through Hollywood movies - was confirmed in painting and later in photography: both contributing to visually crystallize the icon which was progressively becoming dominant in western fantasy. And both tended originally to visually reproduce what fully corresponded

to the "noble savage" at the beginning of the XIX century, in the version of violent defender of his own land and in the more edulcorated one of the Native who, in an acculturative phase, manifested the signs of his weakening (crosses, presidential medals or even peace calumets); however the image of the massacring Indian, the "Red Devil", which remained predominant in this ambit too, seemed inclined to legitimize the expansionist policy of Manifest Destiny, cleverly attributing the responsibility for their genocide to the Indians themselves.

At all events figurative art expressed itself formally in two different genres: portraits and "in the field" paintings. The former (of which the major exponent was Charles Bird King, resident painter of the Indian Office in Washington between 1822 and 1842 (Dippie 1992: 132) were an evident answer to the anxiety to immortalize first the chiefs of a race in the process of extinction and then a culture on the way to extinction. The latter, of whom George Catlin and Karl Bodmer were among the first and foremost representatives (6), expressed the need to cull, before it was too late, the Indian reality in its dynamism rather than *in vitro*.

Photography came into its own around 1850 - with the revolutionary discoveries of the Kodak company and the production of new and manageable portable cameras - and from then on professional photographers like J. A. Anderson, E. S. Curtis, F. A. Rinehart, R. Reed and the Gerhard sisters produced entire collections of artistic photographs on the Indian theme and portraits of Natives which were shown in World Exhibitions and Fairs (see Richardson Fleming & Luskey 1994).

Photography replaced painting more in its formal technical aspects than in its contents and for some time it followed the latter's mode of expression producing both studio portraits and "in the field" photographs: however the former, in particular, significantly certified the inevitable change in perspective, culling the features of the cultural shift which from then on, for a long time to come, was to keep Indian cultures suspended half way between two worlds (7).

W. H. Jackson's photos of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania are an emblematic example of this: they immortalized groups of students at various phases of their process of occidentalization and reached their artistic climax in

the image depicting the students in front of the school, some in western dress with short hair, others no, some wearing moccasins, others holding a book - the epitome of alphabetization. Jackson's aesthetic genius is expressed above all in the details: the windows open on two worlds which inexorably confront one another, children sitting on the window sills and therefore in a liminal position not only figuratively but literally too, cut in two, half out of the margins of the photo, and therefore marginalized not only figuratively but literally too. This image more than any other certifies the photographer's surprising capacity to cull solicitations from an Euroamerican repertory and pour them into his art in symbolic effects of great emotional impact, taking on himself and generally imbuing his photographs with the role of chronicler of a present of transition and hope which replaced that of memorialist of a noble but irrecoverable past.

The most familiar and widespread stereotype of American Indians (prefigured with genial intuition in Buffalo Bill's performances) is undoubtedly the image transmitted by the Hollywood filmography which led Westerns to become the cinematographic genre *par excellence*, the genre «whose origins almost blend with those of the cinema and... which arouses wonder for its geographical universality» (Rieupeyrout & Bazin 1957: 13-14).

The film icon of the American Indian developed against the setting of western scenarios and in the repertory of its reiterated clichés: the cowboy, the *entraineuse*, the outlaw. At first it was indissolubly linked with attacks against stage-coaches or carovans of pioneers and inexorable final defeat but later it was gradually transformed, in keeping with the transformations of western films themselves. Born of the integration between a mythology and a means of expression, Western films became the means of reception and diffusion of the variations of mood, ideologies and perspective (8).

The portrait of Indians evoked by Hollywood filmography is therefore also marked by an evolution of its own - from Turner's creature, who was part of the wilderness, up to the noble champion of the most recent versions - punctuated by changes in both formal perspective and contents, even if the alternation

of negative and positive typifications does not follow such a clear chronological scansion.

Already the production of the "silent years" placed movies in which the easy characterization of the "Indian villain" dominated side by side with more equanimous representations in which directors manifested understanding or compassion, however slight, for the Indians - sometimes even culling, with a multiethnic spirit well ahead of their times, the drama of Indian society (as Thomas Ince did in *The heart of an Indian* which appeared in 1913 [9]).

An eloquent measure of the insuppressible "otherness" of the Natives was also the silence which continued to surround all their apparitions even after the advent of the sound-track in the '30s. Speech seemed to be granted only to Indian protagonists, by then significantly interpreted by professional Euroamerican actors, thus suggesting the non-existence of cross-cultural communicability.

However right through the '50s and the first half of the '60s the predominant stereotype remained that of the slaughtering Indian, in an inexorable escalation. There were few exceptions, for example D. Daves' *Broken Arrow* (1949) - which offers a picture of the Cochise Apaches in a kind of reverse perspective even if it is coloured with patronizing shades - and John Ford's more famous *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) - which, instead, represents a definite inversion of tendency in Fordian production and was meant, in the director's intentions, to «set the record straight» and admit the massacres which had been perpetrated. «Let's face it, we've treated them very badly... We've cheated and robbed, killed and murdered, massacred and everything else» Ford himself in fact admitted in the course of a meeting with P. Bogdanovich (Sennet 1992: 188) (10).

At the end of the '60s and in the early '70s a new line, characterized by a reversal of the film description of Indians and their transformation from killers to victims, was inaugurated. These years were marked by the birth of counter-culture, the civil rights' movements and the youth protests in the American Universities: evident echos of the Vietnam war overflowed into the production of Hollywood Westerns, which welcomed and translated the solicitations and ferments in public opinion. On a terrain rendered fertile by the possibility of linking the horrors

of the two wars, the American Indian became in a natural way the symbol of contemporary crimes against humanity.

Well known films like A. Penn's *Little Big Man* (1969), R. Nelson's *Blue Soldier* (1970), E. Silverstein's *A Man Called Horse* (1970) or S. Pollack's *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972) all offer the image of an Indian reality clothed in new dignity. They also often recall some of the darkest episodes of the conquest such as, for example, the 1864 Sand Creek massacre or the massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890.

But though the new Hollywood plots presented the image of a "redeemed" and ennobled Indian, the screenplays did not succeed in avoiding stereotypes in which emphasis played a leading role where the now positive Indian iconography was concerned, thus confirming the tendential fixity of filmographic mechanisms: the ensuing Indian reality did not appear less rigidly structured than in the films of the silent years or in those which accepted the anti-Indian thesis.

A Man Called Horse, produced with the declared intention of describing "the spirit of a people" on the basis of an ethnological substratum, was advertised for its presumed faithfulness to history and its attention for social behaviour and costumes reconstructed through famous texts (in particular Catlin's). However a careful study not only reveals gross oversights - for example the attribution of a typologically Mandan Sun Dance, a Crow tipi structure and decoration and an Assiniboin *coiffure* to ethnically ambiguous Sioux (Churchill 1992: 237) - but also the adoption of «a late-romantic perspective with many reactionary shadings... and a vision by which the white man among the "savages" must necessarily end by being a leader, the son of an alienating but superior civilization» (Bellour 1973: 331).

Thus the sympathy for Native Americans which sprang from the terrain of counter-culture did not really produce an effective readjustment either of the image of the Indian or of the nature of transcultural relations in Western filmography, or a different interpretative approach except for the evident and reciprocal inversion in the racial/behavioural attribution of characteristics to Indians and Euroamericans. This perspective has remained constant, consigning the Natives to an unvaried anthropological uniformity which often identifies them *tout court*

with the societies of the Great Plains beyond and in spite of ethnic specificities.

This cultural uniformity corresponds paradoxically to a temporal setting between the frontier boom and the end of the Indian wars (1825-1890) leading to the perception of a materialization of the Indians when the pioneers first made their appearance and their disappearance at the end of the frontier period - a vision in keeping with the usurpation of real time perpetrated against the Natives by literature too. Finally - as Churchill notes too (1992) - the filmographic map does not envisage any life for the Natives outside their interaction with Euroamericans, better if with *one* Euroamerican, around whose personal story the plot itself develops. A narrative expedient which not only confirms the vision of a strongly individualized white reality as opposed to an Indian reality conceived as a uniform aggregation but also leaves room for considerable conscious or unconscious manipulation of native ontological values in the wake of western cognitive categories.

Even Kevin Costner's celebrated *Dances with the Wolf* (1990) has not truly altered the position of the interpretative axis and though it is constructed on premises of deep human understanding it does not go beyond the confines of the story of a personal *entente* which leaves the potentiality of a more inclusive cross-cultural experimentation unresolved (11).

New contributions come, though, from other recent movies: different in spacial and historical-temporal setting and also in their aesthetic pursuits, they stand out as experimental results of a more modern narrative perspective.

In B. Beresford's *Black Robe* (1991) the text of the film is traditional but it recalls extremely meaningful tribal themes - from evangelization to alphabetization to vision - placing them in a register which does not elude a precise ethnic characterization of the North Eastern groups and which stresses the sincerity of the vocation of the Jesuit protagonist in contrast with the reductive generalizations by which films usually depicted Missionaries of every creed as completely subject to their respective governments.

On the other hand M. Apted's *Thunderhearth* (1992) offers illuminating insights into present conditions in the reserves. Though the apparently inflexible division of the Natives

between integralists and reformists suffers from excessive radicalization and represents the thematic and most striking focus, less sensational but equally important messages (from an anthropological point of view) seem to find their place besides it. The emergence of the flexible nature of the native system of beliefs and values which offers, on the one hand, ample room for ethnic and cultural exchanges is juxtaposed, on the other, to the persistent marginalization of the residents. The director has ably culled the two traits in the emblematic final shot which closes on the connecting road between the free-way and the reserve.

In spite of its clearly commercial destination, W.Hill's *Geronimo* (1993) too reveals the basis of a new filmographic text in which tribal aspects - vision as primary source of power - and topical themes - confinement in the reserves and the difficulty of adaptation to new and extraneous socio-economic models - converge by the side of signals of the formation of the two lobbies which anticipate the times of division which still exist in the present-day reserves.

The ideological register thus acquires its own equidistant dimension and avoids the trap of a facile rhetoric of sanctification of the Native as compensatory expression of his previous demonization. It is also semantically enriched by the amplification of the perspective of ethnic disorientation which brings Indians closer to non-Indians, as in the figure of the American army officer Gatewood who, not being a yankee but a southerner, shares being suspended between two cultures with his Indian guides.

The film is original in the way it places Native Americans in a context embracing all the ethnic-cultural minorities, thus removing them from a visually consolidated isolation and soliciting wider-ranging anthropological reflections.

Though comic-strips were born in America at the end of the XIX century as a new literary genre (12), in their western version they found fertile terrain in Europe and particularly in Italy.

Western comic-strips already appeared in the United States in 1938 with *Red Ryder,* created by F. Harman and C. Flanders, and F. H. Striker's *Lone Ranger* (1939). They

impressed the genre with some of its essential characteristics: the centrality of the figure of the honest and mysterious cowboy, the collaboration and friendship with a Red Indian, the setting which, unlike that of Western movies, is generally chosen in the South West desert regions.

Exported to Europe, comic-strips were inevitably adjusted to the solicitations of the different structure of the target as well as of the different ideological horizons. Excellent examples of this are J.Giraud's French *Blueberry* (1963), with signals of a change in perspective in the protagonist's attempts at pacification between white men and Indians, and *Matt Dillon*, the hero of the *Gun Law* series, conceived by an Englishman, H.Bishop, to whom we owe the clever psychological portrait of the sheriff of Dodge City (see Strazzella 1977: 190-191).

Western comic-strips appeared in Italy with *Kit Carson*, which was first drawn in 1937 for the Mickey Mouse periodical but reached its climax in 1948 with the creation of *Tex Willer* (created by G.L.Bonelli and originally drawn by A. Galeppini [13]).

Tex Willer's success was partly due to his nature of «honest and human cowboy... always ready to side with the weak and the oppressed, even if they are red Indians who have been tricked by dishonest white adventurers... and who uses his pistol unwillingly, and only if forced to» (Strazzella 1977: 188) and partly to his creators' ability to place his figure in an extremely attractive mythical setting. For Tex evokes a reversed reality in which the weak defeat the powerful, and equality, friendship and altruism acquire substance through the comic strip, avoiding the plane of pure theory. Besides, thanks to a masterly recourse to identification with the mythical model, Bonelli and Galeppini leave room for the liberation of the readers' deep needs and for a representation of self which social requirements normally exclude. Tex solicits - and in some ways makes possible - a return to nature, to experiencing "thrills", to adventure, to atavistic values and, what is most pertinent here, he opens the way to the possibility of stable cross-cultural relations.

Tex Willer moves in fact within the circuit defined by the Navajo territories in the South West and is in close contact with the Navajos themselves to the point of marrying a Navajo woman and becoming their recognized leader: Tex's power over

the Natives is increased by the qualification of Indian agent for the Navajo reserve, given him by the United States government, which contributes to endow him with a status whose ethnic margins significantly tend to overlap. However, more than *primus inter pares* Tex is the absolute leader of the Navajos and his relationship with them is completely asymmetrical. In spite of the recognition the Italian comic strip tributes to Indianism, this confirms the persistence of a hierarchical relational scale which, once again, attributes a position of gregarious subalternity to the Natives (14).

Other Italian comic-strip heros exist by the side of Tex Willer. All are characterized by the same rejection of violence as such and by the capacity to set up good relations with the Indians (L. De Vita and R.Paparella's Pecos Bill created in 1950 and for a long time considered an imported character, Sgt. Kirk - the Italian version of the Argentinian original - drawn by Hugo Pratt in 1967, and others).

Italian Western comic-strips thus matured and improved over the years until they were ready to make fun of themselves in the ironic adventures of Cocco Bill, created in 1957 by B. Jacovitti for the Milanese daily *Il Giorno*. Rick O'Shay, invented in 1958 by Stan Lynde for the *Chicago Tribune,* followed: but these stories are all gently humoristic and have no explicit intention of debunking the West.

More recent comic strips - such as *Ken Parker*, created in 1974 by Berardi and Milazzo and regularly produced since 1977 - propose more sophisticated formulas of semantic representation in which «the West is merely a convention which makes it possible to speak of the present through the metaphor of the past» (Cuccolini 1977: 2) thus suggesting deep philosophical implications. Though the Ken Parker comic-strip used traditional *topos* - stage coach attacks, duels and so forth - it certainly introduced innovations and he himself represented the antithesis of the rhetorical hero; the novelty lay both in the narrative techniques (which included thriller aspects and comic cues) and in the graphic techniques: the swift and simple sketching not only gave dynamism to the images but was also the expression of the rejection of an aesthetic and virtuoso quest which - according to Milazzo - would have distorted the genre.

At all events, from the beginning Italian Western comic strips mobilized very different stereotypes from those which had characterized the cinema first and American comic strips later, thus giving life to their own original Western tradition and ideology. «Particularly in their definition of the Indian world, Italian comics soon grew away from Hollywood clichés and were often well ahead of the latter on the way to the recognition of the "red people"'s human and cultural dignity» (Pompa 1983: 66). Not having to justify Manifest Destiny, Italian comic strips were able to freely develop their own mythology, renewing the native models and contents of the epic of the West «until it met up, in a natural and unconstrained manner, with the latest American cinematographic trend of the "crepuscular" West, of the end of the Adventure...» (*idem*: 67).

But this attitude too has not shortened the distance between Natives and Euroamericans: it has, in fact, confirmed it. In spite of a graphic and textual evolution which marked the passage from misleading linguistic and anthropological uniformity to careful research on ethnic specificities in dress and idiom, the image of the Indian has not lost its contours of a stereotype, of a new abstract typification. «This new Indian is too noble, too spiritual, too much of a victim: one has the impression of a positive mythicization which is dangerously parallel to the negative one, of an exaggeration which tries to compensate another exaggeration using the same conceptual parameters» (*idem*: 68); an image of the Amerindian still branded by the excess which makes any possibility of approaching him and communicating impossible.

This relational incapacity proved by the lasting non-existence, even in comic strips, of successful mixed marriages (Pompa ironically notes that «one dies of this love» (1983: 70) referring to the recurring absence in Western films and comic-strips of happy endings of unions) seems belied by the latest filmography and also by the most recent comic-strip production. If one can plausibly infer the happy outcome of an inter-racial love story from some of the sequences in Beresford's *Black Robe* (1991), Pratt's *Jesuit Joe* (1992) is entirely constructed around the figure of a Canadian half-caste (15), explicitly referring us back to matrimonial exchanges between Indians and Euroamericans.

Jesuit Joe - in life Joseph Montour Riel - is a comic-strip based on real events which were transformed into a story board for a film directed by O. Austin. It tells the story of a «crazy half-caste» of Irish descent who gets hold of a Mounty's uniform and crosses Canada in search of his mother, Marie-France Montour, accomplishing on the way, thanks to his disguise, ambivalent feats which fit in perfectly with his personal statute (marked as it is by dual ethnic ascendance) and the transitory and usurped one of ambiguous and external ethnic option. «A crazy half-caste who, finally, was not crazy at all» according to Pratt (1992: 4) and who acted on the basis of a "positive" logic which led him to save a child from kidnapping, to free certain regions from bandits and to save a Mounty's life.

The comic-strip - which offers the novelty of drawing on real events for part of its inspiration and in choosing an atypical protagonist, thus eluding the conventional typology of the genre - is the expression of sophisticated graphic and textual research, explicited in minimalist images where line and color are concerned, which alternate with other barely outlined ones, almost as if they were in the process of completion and consequently deliberately imperfect. An aesthetic exercise which escapes rhetoric because of its rich and anthropologically meaningful contents and because of its position of witness to a still changing image of the Native.

And the portrait appears to have come full circle if we consider the recent Internet maillist project and debate "Native American Stereotype Awareness Project" promoted by an association of American Indians to control the use of their image by Euroamericans and denounce any improper use of it (16).

The use by American Indians of western technological media to reappropriate themselves of their own image and be in a position to impress on it the orientations and meanings *they* consider opportune truly constitutes the link which closes the circle: it incontrovertibly highlights on the one hand the cultural exchange which has in fact occurred through the adoption of a significantly Euroamerican media language and on the other the capacity of the Natives to preserve their still vital traditional heritage, defending it from the obscure margins left open by the interactive dynamics of multi-ethnic societies.

Note

1. The first novel on an Indian theme in English appears to have been *Edgar Huntley* by Charles Brockden Brown, published in 1799.

2. Ward Churchill, Janet McCloud, Martin Carnoy, Bea Medicine, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and, in many of its aspects, Vine Deloria jr., follow this line.

3. On the national ideology of the United States at that time and on the theme "Literature and frontier", see: E. Marienstras (1956), R. H. Pearce (1963), and E. Fussell (1965). On the Natives' iconography since Columbus to the present see: Berkhofer (1979), Stedman (1989), Fabietti (1991), Francis (1993) and Parman (1994).

4. The Santee Indian Alonzo Blacksmith's collaboration in writing the text did not prevent Hill from attributing extremely individualistic ideals to the Sioux - and more generally to the American Indians -, to the point of nonchalantly defining them «traders in spiritual values», thus radically misinterpreting their behavioural model which was marked, on the contrary, by values of sharing out.

5. Hillerman's production - which covered a period of twenty years - belongs to the ideological turning-point of the '70s which was marked by the explosion of the counter-culture, with its inevitable repercussions on American literature, which generally assumed cultural and inter-ethnic attitudes and contributed to a marked change in the conventional countours of the image of the Native.

6. Karl Bodmer's, and especially G.Catlin's paintings, as well as the drawings and etchings which became part of the latter's itinerant Indian Gallery in the United States and Europe, contributed to an important degree to the diffusion of the first Amerindian iconography (see Hassrick 1993).

However the first representation of a Native in traditional garb, wearing the diadem of feathers which was to become the symbolic representation of all the North American ethnic groups, was J.Neagle's portrait of the Pawnee Petalesharo (1821).

7. Jackson also produced some fine examples of studio photos such as that of Petalesharo (who had already been immortalized in a number of paintings) in traditional costume, and that of the Ute Indian, Komus: a half bust representing the faithful equivalent of the conventional portraits of Victorian gentlemen.

8. Bazin significantly stresses that «Westerns are based on a combination of the ethics of epics and of tragedies. Currently a Western is considered epic because of the human condition of its heros, the legendary range of their feats... and the epic style makes sense only through the moral which underlies and justifies it. This moral belongs to a world in which social good and evil exist, in their purity and necessity, as two simple and fundamental elements» (Rieupeyrout & Bazin 1957: 23-24). The ethic nature of Westerns is also often ably emphasized by semantic attributions even to the landscapes, as in the case of "moral landscapes" like Monument Valley, among the environments best able to solicit impressions of strenght and durability.

Ethical messages continue to connote present-day Westerns thus confirming Bazin's interpretative line even through changes in the technical modalities of execution of the Westerns themselves and the historical-social orientations which have led to the present disillusioned and

tendentially impartial cinematographic texts. In the process they have in a way induced the dwindling of the «nature of wonderful tale... stripped by the patient research of scholars which leaves the original fact deprived of seduction and heroism» (*idem*: 195).

Besides, the ethical disposition of the Western genre, linked with the iterative needs of cinematographic techniques, gives rise to a symbolic background of a primeval nature within which the initial assimilation of the Indian to nature acquires a meaning. Where this is concerned Bellour's remark is incisive: «Western films are the place of endless repetition: that of the rites themselves which consecrate an order which is constantly threatened and constantly reestablished... A homogeneous universe required by an epic... whose necessary homogeneity would be gravely endangered if the Indians were men, if they were presented as adversaries of the hero and considered on equal terms» (1973: 64-65).

9. «*The Hearth of an Indian* coaxed tears from its audience through the story of two mothers: a white pioneer woman whose infant is kidnapped by Indians and an Indian squaw grieving for her dead child who is given the kidnapped baby by her husband. Moved by the white woman's plight the squaw returns the baby» (Sennett 1992: 178). Besides those mentioned, several of D. W. Griffith's films which came out between 1913 and 1915 - in particular *The Massacre* (1913) - painted the Indians as «hapless victims of an unprovoked cavalry raid» (*ibidem*).

On indian theme filmography see also Weatherford (1988).

10. It is not by chance that the film «dramatizes the two prevailing images of the American Indian in film. A newspaper editor rushes into the newsroom reading out loud the typical headlines "Bloodthirsty Savages Rape and Pillage" and then notes that such an approach is just not news anymore; they should now "grieve for the noble red man" and thus sell more newspapers» (Hilger 1986: 1).

11. A new contribution to Western filmography also comes from the production of native films by Natives. Where tribal horizons are concerned these offer more reliable insights both on the Indian reality of the past, and on present-day themes - the reserves or urban Indian communities in the North American metropolises, which are also engaged in active processes of recovery or conservation of their traditional patrimony. The *Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium*, formed in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1990, is working in this direction.

Incrementative trends in Indian-theme movies are evident in the dilation of today's production which includes cartoons - such as the Disney's box-office success *Pocahontas* (1995).

Aimed at a children's target, they succeed in making the younger audience aware of interethnic relations and of Natives' presence in America at the same time.

12. According to Mc Luhan's typology, comic-strips qualify, by their nature, as «cold» mediums because they «are a form of expression with a high participation level» (1967: 176) which, unlike «hot» mediums, do not provide consistent quantities of information but require substantial emotional adherence from their beneficiaries «turning them into co-authors and participants» (*idem*: 176). The literary genre inaugurated by comic-strips presents itself as "new" inasfar as it experiments a hybridization of texts and images in which the predominant function is assigned to the image. Some authors - F. Lacassin (1972), C. Della Corte (1961), S. Becker (1959) - have given them noble ancestry

such as Hogarth's illustrated stories or Töpffer or the Italian ballad singers' sheets; in fact the novelty of comic-strips lies also - and above all - in their capacity to activate mechanisms of psycho-dependance which can be exploited commercially thanks to their iterative nature and can only be set in the context of the post-industrial society which is characterized by the emergence of a "culture of images" and subject to the laws of demand and supply.

At all events the surprising success of *strips* soon gave rise to competitive struggles between newspapers of the Hearst and Pulitzer groups for exclusive rights over artists and characters. This led to the founding, in 1913, of the United Feature Syndicate which, since then, has directed the international distribution of comic strips, protecting them with the syndicate copyright (see Pellegrino 1979: 17-18).

13. Tex Willer's graphic physiognomy was however destined to undergo modifications because of a succesion of draughtsmen - from L. Corteggi to F. Gamba to A. Giolitti to J. Blasco and others - each of whom expressed and experimented with a different visual concept of the cowboy.

14. Tex Willer suffers from certain anthropological limitations as well as ethnic-geographical oversights such as the unforgivable totem poles exported from the North West to the South West of the United States with the improper function of "torture poles" typical of the North East, an unprecedented example of multiple erroneous ethnographic stratigraphy. The choice, when it appears conscious, (Brunoro, Gedda & Verger 1994: 50) was motivated by G. L. Bonelli's hyper-evaluation of the evocative power of totems as against the need for faithfulness to ethnological data. He claimed the right to aesthetic licence in a genre like the comic-strip which was characterized by the prevalence of the images over the text.

15. The idea for *Jesuit Joe* grew out of the notes for a biography of Louis Riel, the recognized leader of the XIX century French-Canadian half-castes, by the Irishman Rupert O'Connor (1912-1949).

Joseph Montour Riel was born on November 16, 1885 (on the same day that Louis Riel was executed for high treason). His mother was Marie France Montour and his father the son of one of Riel's own brothers.

16. The principal goals of the "Native American Stereotype Awareness Project" are:

«- to increase people's awareness of how stereotyped images of Native Americans are used by North American Culture for purposes unrelated to the general well-being of Native peoples

- to eliminate the use of the most racist and derogatory of these publicly used images, in an effort to end the kinds of cultural genocide that accompany grossly exaggerated stereotypes».

These objectives are pursued on the one hand by publicizing through the network a constantly up-dated list of the icons and commercial logos used improperly and inviting Internet users to contribute themselves and, on the other hand, by periodically broadcasting a list of the 10 worst stereotypes noted. The criteria used for the negative classification of stereotypes consists in an examination of their conscious or unconscious marginalizing effects on the natives, their possible implications of numerical inconsequentiality of the ethnic minority, their arbitrary use of sacred symbols, their descriptively ridiculizing effects and their connotations of racism or of inferiority of status or rights.

In some cases the stereotypes qualify as offensive and leading to inequality, as, for example, in the videogame *Sunset Riders* where the Indians appear in breechclothes or in the T-shirts produced by *Way Out West Brand* depicting groups of Indian males with the large letters FBI and Full Blooded Indians written at the bottom. In others however, the use of native denominations - as in the cars Mazda Navajo, Ford Thunderbird, Dodge Dakota, Plymouth Sundance, and Jeep Cherokee, or in the case of the logo of the Chippewa Bottled Water - do not appear to stem from truly disparaging intentions.

It seems possible, in fact, that the network protection campaign sometimes oversteps its own scope, seeing "politically incorrect" circumstances - paradoxically in the wake of a decidedly western fashion - even where they do not appear very evident. An emblematic example of this is the *Native American Barbie Doll*: though some people consider it offensive, it can plausibly be taken as an unexpected solicitation towards a more open approach to ethnic values.

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Summary

The article deals with the American Indian imagery as expressed through western media such as literature, figurative art and photography, cinema and strips.

The A. traces its origin back to the iconography connected to the myth of the American Frontier then proceeds to analyze its shift in Euroamerican perspective from the Indian killer

symbolic image - currently used to legitimize the colonization process - up to the reversed 70's icon of the abused Indian.

The present day new trend - especially in western movies and strips - seems to have reached a sort of balance between the two opposite portraits, The Savage and The Saint, both excessively stereotyped, while the route has seemingly come full circle with the Indians themselves leading an Internet maillist project and debate - The Native American Stereotype Awareness Project - thus taking possession of technological media to re-direct their own imagery's use and to prevent its abuse.

Sommario

L'articolo prende in esame il percorso della *imagerie* dell'Indiano d'America attraverso media Euroamericani quali la letteratura, l'arte figurativa e la fotografia, i fumetti e il cinema western. L'A. ne ripercorre l'evoluzione a partire dalla prima iconografia, originariamente associata al mito della Frontiera americana quindi ne analizza i cambiamenti prospettici e la mutazione dall'icona simbolica dell'Indiano massacratore - spesso utilizzata per legittimare il processo di colonizzazione - fino al suo rovesciamento negli anni 70, risultante nell'immagine dell'Indiano vittima.

Gli odierni orientamenti, soprattutto nel cinema e nei fumetti western, sembrano aver raggiunto una nuova equidistanza tra i contrapposti *cliché* del Selvaggio e del Santo, entrambi segnati dall'eccesso, mentre il circolo della mutazione iconografica sembra chiudersi con l'appropriazione da parte degli Indiani d'America dei media tecnologici e la creazione su Internet del "Native American Stereotype Awareness Project" finalizzato ad imprimere - e non più subire - la direzione ai futuri movimenti della propria immagine.