

Movies

“ . . . melodrama has shaped the American popular imagination, molding our perception of self and country.” (Daniel C. Gerould)

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Abstract

Melodrama has been a part of the American life since colonial time. This genre, with its ‘hero-villain’ or ‘black and white’ development of characters, has formed the idea of the American heroes. In Western films, in which the ‘local’ themes of westward movement on the American society are developed, melodrama treats the dichotomy of hero-villain more stereotypically. The heroes depict the concept of the American ‘self’ and the villains picture the ‘other.’ However, the development of Western film shows that the stereotypical treatment on ‘self’ and the ‘other’ undergoes some changes.

Keywords: *American Indian; character; film; hero; Hispanic; melodrama; self; the other; villain; western.*

I first learned about the United States when I was still a child, in the 1970s, from Western films. In those days a lot of movie-theatres imported Hollywood Western films. Therefore, the first images I learned about the U.S. were cowboys, Indians, and “bandits.” After watching a western movie, we often played a war game with characters imitating those three images: the cowboys who were usually the heroes, the Indians who were wild savage people, and the bandits who were cruel villains.

Being a student at the English Department, IKIP Malang (now State University of Malang) in the late 1980s, I started to know better about the American literature. I found out that Western was indeed a genre which was related closely to the American melodrama. Now that I have a chance to write about Western films, my interest draws me back to my childhood; to the images about western movies I enjoyed then.

American melodrama and Western movies, however, are both very wide fields of study. From the jungle of American melodrama and Western movies, therefore, I shall limit the scope of my investigation to the construction of “self” and the “other” in Western movies. To do so, first of all, I shall discuss the relationship between American melodrama and Western movies. This is important since “self” and the “other” in Western movies are best understood from the American melodrama’s discourse. Then, I shall deal with the construction of “self” and the “other” in Western movies using a critical approach.

The critical approach I am using is based on the critical theory that developed in the Frankfurt School tradition, which was heavily Marxist. After undergoing some modifications in the hands of neo-critical theorists such as Kincheloe and McClaren, critical theory no longer relies too much on Marxism; instead, it uses the premises of postmodernism (Basuki, 2000, p.3). “Research in the critical tradition, therefore, should take the form of ‘self-conscious criticism’ by which ‘researchers try to become



aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform their research as well as their own subjective, inter-subjective, and normative reference claims.” “Postmodern Critical Theory” or critical postmodernism requires that I should be up-front about my position as I did in the opening of this paper.

1. Melodrama: From Stage to Screen

Melodrama as a genre started to form in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe (Worthen, 1993). The genre was born together with the growth of industrialization in Europe, in which a lot of people were drawn to cities to work in factories and formed a large group of working class. There was a great demand of entertainment which suited their needs. Since generally they were less educated than the common theatre patrons, plays written by Shakespeare or Oscar Wilde, for instance, were not their interest since such plays might look too serious to them (see Basuki, 2000). Some theatre people could see this demand and they created plays that were simpler and emotionally—instead of intellectually—appealing. Such kind of plays were then known as melodrama.

The term melodrama was initially used to indicate “plays accompanied by musical score” (Brocket, 1995, p.354) which was used to “accentuate the emotional coloring of the action” (Worthen, 1993, p.568). In the latter development “the term became more generally applied to plays with conventionalized set of characters, a clear narrative structure, and a distinct moral cosmos.” The characters were usually clear-cut, black and white between the hero and the villain; the narrative structure usually dealt with the conflict between the hero and the villain with the hero’s victory in the end; and the moral cosmos was usually in the form of moral lessons in which “the good” could in the

Melodrama influenced the United States when there were a lot of European actors/dramatists, mostly from England, coming to perform in the US stages. These stages were in the east coast, in cities like New York or Boston. Gradually, melodrama, which was “originally a foreign import from Europe, . . . grew acclimatized on American soil during the nineteenth century” (Gerould, 1983, p.7). To Gerould, as a “crude, violent, dynamic in action, psychologically and morally simplistic, reliant on machinery and technological know-how for its powerful effect,” melodrama matched the American “democratic revolution in thought and feeling” at that time.

Western plays, however, were not written until 1810s when there was a westward movement (Brocket, 1995). Starting from the period, when the exploration of the west became popular, the original American melodrama, which dealt with Western images, came into being. Melodrama was a perfect form for Western plays since, as Augustus Harris put it, “[it is] . . . dramatic, full of life, novelty, and movement; treating as a rule, of the age in which we live, dealing with characters they [the audience] can sympathize with, and written in a language they [the audience] can understand . . .” (quoted in Booth, 1996, p.5). With such characteristics, the plays could depict the ideas of the wild, unexplored frontiers which were romantically appealing to the American audience.

While melodrama on the stage “drew a wide audience” (Worthen, 1993, p.569) in the late nineteenth century; film, a new form of entertainment, was developing. Although originally developed from photography and was considered as a “recording art” (Monaco, 1977, p.7) that did not have any dramatic elements, it had finally become more and

more evident that film could accommodate such elements. Although film differs from theatre in that it is not live, both film and theatre have similarities in that both are dramatic arts. In the latter development, “as realism became an important force,” (p.33) film gained more advantages than theatre since “film could show real location” (p.34). With its ability to show the details of scenery, film could show a more realistic view of the west than theatre could. With Western wilderness as their settings, Western melodrama has surely found a better home on screen than it did on stage.

Interestingly, it was not only melodrama that chose film. Instead, film industry itself in reality also chose melodrama among any other dramatic, literary genres such as tragedy or comedy due to the fact that film, says Monaco (1977), “is a very expensive art” (p.13). Because it is “capital-intensive” (p.13), film should be able to sell massively if it is to survive at all in the entertainment business. Since “melodrama is above all a democratic genre of popular art, designed for large mass audience . . .” (Booth, 1996, p.5); it has become the most suitable genre that operates in film industry, which requires a large audience. Melodrama and film, therefore, acquire a perfect marriage.

2. “Self” and the “Other” in Western Movies

Melodrama is one of the children of modernism, which is driven by positivist philosophy. Mainstream modernism, which was initiated by the renaissance, holds the positivist’s belief that there is an ultimate reality/truth that can be achieved by human beings as long as there is enough effort. “Knowledge of ‘the way things are’ is conventionally summarized in the form of time-and-context-free generalizations, some of which take the form of cause-effect laws” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.109). The positivists, therefore, aim their inquiry at the “explanation, prediction and control” (p.112) of the world. They search for unity and universality in their endeavors.

Modernism has a very distinct view about the “other.” Since they believe that there is an ultimate civilization, they hold ‘the assumption that contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples . . . [are] less civilized than themselves . . .’ (Hodgen quoted in Vidich and Lyman, 1994, p.25). Therefore, they have a kind of duty to make the “other” civilized. While this duty was “born out of concern to understand the “other” (p.24), [they] are nevertheless also committed to an understanding of the self.

In melodrama, however, the idea of “self” and the “other” is simpler. “Self” in melodrama is an agent of change: the agent who seeks the ultimate truth, “self” is subject to success or failure, depending on the effort s/he makes and the truth s/he holds. There is a cause-effect law that governs “self”’s behavior. When “self” holds moral truth s/he is likely to succeed, but when s/he is lack of moral truth s/he usually fails. Life, therefore, is a matter of choice. “Self” can choose to be good or bad or at least, if s/he is born bad, s/he can choose to change. In melodrama, the “moral self” is usually the hero and the “immoral self” is usually the villain.

Based on the positivist basic view of the “other,” anybody who has not acquired the moral truth, or at least has not been in the path of the truth, is considered the “other” in melodrama. The “other” can be either the one that is unaware of the truth or that that chooses to ignore it. The “immoral self,” therefore, although originally comes from the “moral society,” becomes the “other” when s/he breaks the society’s law. The duty of “self” is to make the “other” aware of the truth and change to embrace it. The “other” who complies will receive reward, at least in the form of acceptance in the unity of truth. The one that does not comply should receive punishment or even perish.



“Self” and the “other” in Western movies is heavily related to the hardship of the westward movement in the nineteenth century. “The Western is rooted in the historical realities that took place during the gradual advancement westward of the United States of America” (Newman xv). Not having been touched by any modern civilization, the West was considered wild so that there was a need to tame it through law and order. Newman further said:

While couched in terms of the coming civilization, the rise of law and order or the establishment of community values, the Western is essentially about conquest. Cavalries conquer the Indians, pioneers conquer the wilderness, lawmen conquer outlaws and individuals conquer their own circumstances. (p.xv)

This part of the American history, which is widely called the frontier, “is, in fact, the only mythological tissue available to this young nation” (Fenin and Everson, 1962, p.6).

In the production of Western movies, this history has become a source of inspiration. With the themes of the frontier’s “gods and demigods, passion and ideals, the fatalities of events, the sadness and glory of death, the struggle of good and evil,” (p.6) Western movies flourished and captured the hearts of Americans. “The Western theme, based on the triplex system of the hero, the adventure, and the law, has at all times been fascinating to movie audiences” (p.25).

2.1 The Hero and the Construction of the Western “Self”

Fenin and Everson (1962) note that the early Westerns, approached in quasi-documentary fashion, were characterized by sincerity of sentiment and a poetic spirit. They give examples from movies made in the first decade of the twentieth century such as Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). In such films, the elements of melodrama were already present: good vs. evil, extravagant Western landscape, and pioneers who became the heroes and models in the society. The films “provided ground for the physical expression of those stark puritanical values implicit in the struggle between good and evil, which have so affected the American unconsciousness as revealed in the country’s folkways and mores”(p.9). With such an approach, the film industry helped to shape the construction of “self” in depicting the image of the West.

As the film industry grew bigger, Fenin and Everson (1962) argue, there has been “deliberate manipulation of a nation’s history in the hands of a powerful group of filmmakers” (p.10). They further suggest that the drab and grim frontier with its people struggling for existence as ranchers, farmers and merchants, for instance, is transformed into the prototype of Tombstone and Dodge City, with rustlers, desperados, and outlaws roaming the streets or engaged in saloon fights. Even further Tuska (1985) comments as follows:

THE AMERICAN WEST IN FILM is principally preoccupied with the social and psychological aspects of the systematic distortion and misinterpretation of our past and the possible influence this common practice in Western film exerted, and continues to exert on the national character of Americans, on their international image as perceived by non-Americans, and frankly on the many potential dangers that may arise from what can only be termed an habituation of falsehood. (p.xiv)

In this statement Tuska clearly suggests that the film industry has distorted the real image of the West. Such a distortion, of course, has influenced the idea of “self.” The “self” in Western film is consequently the “self” constructed by the industry. Compared to the stage version, melodrama in Western film treats the American “self” and the

"other" more stereotypically. However, although not necessarily the true picture of reality, Western film has certainly created the images that society takes for granted. Melodrama, in fact, deals with myths that are beyond everyday reality yet work on people's sub-conscious.

Let us now see the outline of "self" in Western films as categorized by Tuska (1985, pp.17-38).

a. The pioneer hero:

A good man who deals with the construction of a railroad, a telegraph, a stagecoach line, etc, this hero is opposed by villains (discussed later) and finally wins the battle. The pioneer hero can also be a converted villain, a hero who has undergone a change of heart to become a good man. Such a hero can be seen in *North of 36* (Paramount, 1938), *The Conquering Horde* (Paramount, 1931) and *The Texans* (Paramount, 1938).

b. The wanderer/searcher hero:

The hero can be a roving cowhand, gunfighter, or mountain man. He wanders from place to place where he becomes involved in various adventures usually to the betterment of those with whom he comes in contact, or—more rarely—for purposes of personal spiritual growth. Examples of such a hero can be found in *Cowboy* (Columbia, 1956), *Will Penny* (Paramount, 1968) and *Monte Walsh* (National General, 1970).

c. Ranch/town hero:

The hero may be either a member of the existing community or an outsider who rides into the community and takes sides in a conflict, usually between the community and a, for example, capitalist exploiter or dishonest banker. Examples can be seen in *Showdown at Abilene* (Universal, 1956), *Count Three and Pray* (Columbia, 1955) and *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1911).

d. Justice/revenge hero:

The hero, depending on how revenge and justice are treated, may seek vengeance and be persuaded instead to seek justice; or the hero may seek justice through due process, be foiled and have to turn to revenge. An example of such a hero can be seen in *The Sundown Rider* (Columbia, 1932).

e. The lawman hero:

The hero is a town marshal or sheriff, ranger, agent of the Department of Justice, detective, etc., working for a legal or moral issue. Examples can be found in *High Noon* (United Artists, 1952), *Death of a Gunfighter* (Universal, 1969), or *Ride the High Country* (MGM, 1962).

f. The reformed hero:

The hero is usually forced into outlawry for whatever reason and finally becomes an outlaw who is somehow reformed, after the dilemma of choosing good or bad. Examples are found in *The Lawless Breed* (Universal, 1953) or *A Man Called Sledge* (United Artists, 1971).



Of all the kinds of hero Tuska (1985) categorizes, the pattern is usually similar: the hero is a good—or bad turned good—character who has the capability of solving the problem and triumphs in the end. The categorization, of course, is an oversimplification because there are in fact heroes (or merely protagonists) who are combinations of two or more types, and there are even heroes/antiheroes/protagonists who do not fit into the categorization. A good example is in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1969), where the protagonists (who are antiheroes) are outlaws who never get reformed until the end. This film, however, still falls into the melodramatic category in that it still operates on the idea of justice: crime should be punished. Although triumphant as bank robbers, they (Americans) finally die at the hands of Bolivian police.

A “deeper” deviation from the categorization is seen in what French (1973) calls the “Freudian Western” (p.49). Using the “popular psychology and sociology” (p.49) that influenced the society then, there were films that “came to challenge the (melodramatic) simple moral basis” (p.49). As examples, French mentions Raoul Walsh’s *Pursued* (1947) and Henry Levin’s *The Man from Colorado* (1948). In *Pursued*, French reports, Robert Mitchum played a mentally disturbed cowboy torn by inner doubt caused by his status as an adopted child, and in *The Man from Colorado* Glenn Ford took the role of a psychotic judge. French contends that in such films, because of the declining belief in good and evil, heroes and villains alike became victims of their childhood and environment; they were neither good nor bad and just often “sick” (p.51).

In general, however, Tuska’s categorization is reliable. In fact, there is a model hero for “Model Western” (French, 1973, p.48) themes. Fenin and Everson (1962) simply use the famous word “Cowboy” to personalize the Western hero. It is a new hero, they say, created by Hollywood (p.20). This Western “self” is best described in the “Ten Commandments of the Cowboy” as follows:

He must not take unfair advantage, even when facing an enemy. He must never go back on his word, or on the trust confided in him. He must always tell the truth, be gentle with children, elderly people, and animals. He must not advocate or possess racially or irreligiously intolerant ideas. Moreover, he must help people in distress, be a good worker, keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits. He must respect women, parents, and his nation’s law. He must neither drink nor smoke. And finally, the cowboy is a patriot. (pp.20-21)

The commandments, which were likely made after some criticisms of the heroes in Western movies or just because of the changing social beliefs in the society in the second half of the twentieth century, mention the necessity that a cowboy have no racial intolerance. It must have been because of the previous treatment in Western movies of the “other” which brought questions to critical minds, either in the society or in Hollywood itself. Even so, some westerns continued to use stereotypical images of the people of color.

2.2 The Villain: the Wicked “Other”

To see clearly how Western movies depict the “other,” let us review the standard “self” in films which French calls the “Model Western.” Erisman describes the model as follows:

He is a white male no older than his mid-thirties. He normally lacks formal education, but he possesses a wealth of empirical knowledge and an intuitively

profound sense of propriety, social values, and natural order. He is physically strong but soft-spoken; modest about his abilities, he is, when motivated by principle or threatened by enemies, capable of almost irresistible violence, assisted by the firearms (rifle or pistol) that he wields with disciplined precision. Unmarried and unfettered by family or occupational ties, he is free to come and go as he pleases, moving in and out of society with careless ease, his lack of deep-seated social obligations accentuating the individualism that controls his every act. (pp.168-169)

While Erisman describes the model in some detail, French describes it simply but clearly as follows:

The hero is the embodiment of good. He is upright, clean living, sharp shooting, a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant who respects law, the flag, women and children; he dresses smartly in white clothes and rides a white horse which is his close companion, he uses bullets and words with equal care, is disinterested upholder of justice and uninterested in personal gain. He always wins. (48)

We can now see what "self" is actually meant. He is the ideal WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), the dominant group in American culture. The hero is a dream "self" of American civilization—at least then—made into a model. In him are planted the mythical characteristics of the "self" the dominant culture wants to possess. The film industry, driven by the dominant culture's belief and mores, helps express its subconscious. "The movies are after all an expression of the dominant culture," says French (1973, p.82).

The "other" in Western movies, consequently, is someone who is not—or not yet—illuminated by the ideal "self" of the dominant culture. Therefore, the "other" is the object of change or, as Newman (1990) puts it, of "conquest" (p.xv). The "other" needs to look at the "model self" in order to be able to live decently. Within the range of the idea of law and order, the "other" has two clear choices: change himself so that he can be accepted in the predetermined society, or, if not, receive punishment and/or perish. The standard "other" is best seen in French's description of the villain:

The villain is the embodiment of evil; dressed in black, rides a dark horse and doomed to die. He is often a rather smooth talker and has lecherous designs on women; he is only concerned with advancing his own cause but beyond that has a positive commitment to destruction. (p.48)

French's description is for a certain kind of "other:" the wicked White or, most commonly, Hispanic. Indians and Blacks are given their own descriptions. I shall, therefore, discuss the wicked White, Hispanic, Black, and Indian as particular embodiments of the "other."

a. *Wicked White as the "Other"*

As in theatre, the most immediate other to the ideal WASP "self" in Western movies is a member of the white society who breaks the society's rules. He is usually a character who is driven by a "recognizable human emotion—greed, either for wealth or power" (Fenin and Everson, 1962, p.32). This character can have any kind of profession: land-owner, banker, businessman, and sometimes even one of the lawmen or sheriffs. Most often, however, he is just a "professional" criminal and nobody knows why he chooses such a life. "The greed was expressed by robbery and murder in the more elementary Westerns, and in the legal manipulation of towns and even territories, in the more elaborately plotted Westerns" (p.32). In Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952), for



instance, the villain, Frank Miller, is a “professional” criminal who once “ruled” the town and who is coming back for revenge. There is not enough explanation/background of why he becomes a criminal. As the embodiment of evil, of course, Miller as the “other” should perish in the end. A similar ending can be seen in John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939). Kid, the hero, punishes the “other” who has killed his brother. Armed by righteousness, the hero wins even in a three-to-one shoot-out.

Stagecoach also presents an interesting twist of the “respectable man turns out to be a crook” plot in the banker’s character. This gives another dimension, since the villain does not have to look dangerous and scary like Frank Miller in *High Noon*. Although white, as long as he does not act in accordance with society’s values, he can become the “other,” who is subject to punishment.

b. The Notorious Hispanic/Mexican

Hispanics, especially Mexicans, are the “others” who usually fill the slot of the villains. Fenin and Everson (1962) describe the stereotypical villain in the thirties as “Mexican, oily, ugly, gross, overdressed” (p.24), similar to the Mexican in Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West*. In the sixties, the villain was usually a “Mexican bandit” (Richard xv) who was sometimes depicted as a man with “unusual stupidity which brings about his downfall” (p.36). We can see an example of this depiction in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) when a bunch of Bolivian robbers (Hispanics like Mexicans) are easily fooled by the anti-heroes, who are also criminals. Occupied by their satisfaction in the result of the robbery, the Bolivian bandits could not even touch their guns in the shoot-out. The whites are always superior, even as criminals.

The Hispanics are also portrayed as physically weak so that “any Texan [could] lick ten Mexicans, single handed” (Richard, 1994, p.xix). In the same film, Butch and the Kid overpower Bolivian sheriffs so that it needs the whole Army regiment to defeat only two “Bandito Yankees.” These images, of course, produced stigmatization of Hispanics as inferior to the whites. Richard argues that the North American National consciousness has long been comfortable with the projection of Mexicans and other Hispanics as slovenly, sinister spics too lazy to work for what the whites possess (p.xv).

Richard further contends that the film industry is to blame in a way. He says, “It would be naïve to believe that motion pictures would not reflect, reinforce and recreate such imagery” (p.xxv). The process of “othering” Mexicans has happened for so long a time that it becomes very complex. “Taken in its totality,” says Richard, “Hollywood’s created Hispanic image from 1898 to 1992 certainly makes a strange sandwich for sociologists or historians to digest. Twenty plus years of acceptable Hispanic stereotyping (from an Anglo point of view) is enclosed on either side by thirty plus years of negative degrading imagery” (p.xxxv).

c. The Marginal Black

The word marginal here is used since, interestingly enough, in Western movies Blacks do not have a special place like Hispanics or Indians. French (1973) argues:

Considering that probably 25 to 30 percent of working cowboys in the nineteenth-century West were Negroes, the absence of black faces during the seventy years of Western history is another case of Hollywood’s failure to accord the country’s black minority an adequate, or even token, representation in the American cinema, beyond acknowledging their presence as house servants. (p.94)

From French's statement we can conclude that in general the Black's role in Western movies is generally as a servant, or at best as a member of the army. Considering how American melodrama in general (not only in movies) treated Blacks as the "other" in the *The Octoroon*, this is understandable. In the melodrama world, the Blacks were at the bottom of the social order.

A good example of how a Black is treated in Western movies is given by Fenin and Everson (1962) when they discuss a minor film, *Soothing Square* (1925). In the marriage of the hero and heroine a preacher is called, who happens to be Black. "His clothes are ill-fitting and he speaks—subtitles of course—in traditional stereotyped fashion" (p.26). Knowing this the heroine cried and said, "How can you treat me like this?" And the reconciliation is: "I didn't know he was black" (pp.26-27).

d. *The Savage Indians*

Leslie Fielder once suggested that all Americans can be divided into Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western; and that stories set in the West which do not involve Indians are "unfulfilled for myth rather than myth itself" (in French, 1973, p.76). It indicates that Indians are an integral part of Western literature. In Western movies, although some films do not use Indians at all, the presence of Indians makes the idea of the "wild west" more vivid.

On the stage versions of American melodrama, Indians are considered as part of the wild nature that the cowboys need to conquer (Basuki, 2000). French (1973) argues that Indians are mostly presented in groups as a symbol of their being part of nature—like buffalo or wild horses—instead of as individuals. They become "a stereotype: a figure to be confronted and defeated in the name of civilization, dramatically a terrifying all-purpose enemy ready at the drop of a tomahawk to spring from rocks and attack wagon trains, cavalry patrols and pioneer settlements" (p.79). In *Stagecoach*, for example, this approach is used to develop the dramatic tension, exactly as French suggests. The notoriously savage Geronimo, who is mentioned oftentimes as a potential threat, is never personalized. When finally there is an attack, no character of Geronimo is involved. Instead, the Indians charge as a group with arrows, guns and tomahawks, and one by one fall down as they are shot. The Indians who come in hundreds are finally taken care of by cavalry who come just at the right moment. "So, for all the fine liberal sentiment, the Indian remained one of the pawns in the western game, to be cast in whatever role the film-maker chose" (p.80).

Commenting on such treatment, Fenin and Everson (1962) say that in reality the American audience missed the real depiction of the Indians:

The tragedy of the Indian tribes, pushed backwards and backwards again in violation of treaties and agreements, their confinement on reservations where unscrupulous Indian agents exploited them shamelessly, the disintegration of their fighting spirit and their desire to live in peace with the white man—all these were aspects of Indian life which American audiences were seldom able to witness, evaluate, and reflect upon on the screen. (p.37)

The Indians are never seen as "normal" individuals. The remark that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" was first spoken by a general named Sheridan in 1869 (French, 1973), and it has almost become an accepted reality. Tuska (1985) recorded how the Indians are treated as a group, or even a herd, in *They Rode West* (Columbia, 1954). When somebody says, "I saw some people moving around," the captain, the hero of the



film, replies, “People? You *mean* Indians!” (pp.248-249). In Western movies, worse than the Blacks who at times belonged to the hero’s circle—although as servants—an Indian was just depicted as the savage “other” in the wild, much less than human (the WASP standard) and a little more than a rattlesnake or a coyote.

The whites told only one side.

Told it to please themselves.

Told much that is not true.

Only his own best deeds, only

The worst deeds of the Indians,

Has the white man told.

--Yellow Wolf of Nez Perce (In Tuska, 1985, p.vii)

2.3 The Coming of the Conscience

The stereotypical approach to the “other,” however, has gradually changed in American movies. The discovery that a “conscience” about racial problems can be profitable box office—proved by Elia Kazan’s *Pinky* and by other films dealing with African Americans—had made some filmmakers try to exploit racial themes (Fenin and Everson, 1962). Filmmakers started to explore racial themes between Whites and Indians especially because the “Indian question” was “far less touchy and controversial” (p.281) to the society. They give *Broken Arrow* as an example. Although finally the Indian bride had to die, “[it] not only presented the Indians for the first time in years as sympathetic human beings with a genuine grievance, but it set a vogue for Indian heroes [Jeff Chandler played Chochise] which has been continued ever since” (p.281).

The treatment of Hispanics and Blacks also started to undergo some change. Some Hispanic characters were transformed into socially acceptable people who were allowed to woo and wed attractive white Anglo women (Richard, 1994). Although such Latinos “happened to be handsome and wealthy” (p.xvi)—which makes us wonder if it was actually the conflation of a Hispanic with a white “self” or a Hispanic as he actually was—it was a change that started to give Hispanic characters a decent place.

However minor, some films also placed Blacks in a more respectable role, even as heroes. French (1973) mentions *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) and *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972) by Sidney Poitier as examples. Heroes, therefore, do not have to be exclusively white anymore. In fact, “as the Western hero became ever more inseparably a part of American society, his defining traits grew increasingly at odds with the world of reality, with common sense requiring that the image acknowledge the imperatives of technology, the society, and the changing world” (Erishman 169).

The simple good vs. evil theme was also gradually challenged (French, 1973). Started by the “Freudian Western,” more and more psychological and sociological Westerns have been produced. “Moreover,” French continues, “the Western has come in recent years to challenge the very concept of heroism—not necessarily to destroy it, but to bring its traditional nature into question” (p.52). “Recent” in French’s book was in 1973 when it was published. In the years since 1973 there has been more and more challenge to the concept. Yet, up to the 1990s, fewer and fewer Western movies have been produced. Is it because the Western melodramatic “self” is not appealing anymore to today’s audience? It seems that unless a Western film treats the “other” in a respectful way such as in *Dances With Wolves* (1990), starring Kevin Costner, it does not appeal to today’s audience as it did in the past. *Dances With Wolves* still uses a melodramatic plot, yet its treatment of Indians is different from its predecessors’.

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