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COWBOY WONDERLAND, HISTORY, AND MYTH: 'IT AIN'T ALL THAT DIFFERENT THAN REAL LIFE'

WILLIAM G. SIMON and LOUISE SPENCE

“If I wasn’t real,” said Alice—half laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous—"I shouldn’t be able to cry."

“If I hope you don’t suppose those are real tears?” Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.

—Through the Looking Glass

Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson was Robert Altman’s bicentennial film. Released for the Fourth of July weekend in 1976, the film examines the western both as a national myth and as a commercial entertainment form; indeed, one might see the film’s project as an exposition of the ideological functioning of the western, its white male hero, and the Native American in nearly 100 years of American popular culture.

The film stars Paul Newman in the role of William F. Cody, famous Indian scout and buffalo hunter, who, at the time of the story, is co-owner and star of a part- rodeo, part-circus, part-melodrama traveling spectacle known as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. Seizing upon Buffalo Bill’s Wild West as a crucial moment in the historical process through which experience is transformed into the entertainment industries’ myths, the film focuses on the disjunction between what it sees as historical events and the representation of those events in the signs and symbols associated with our national culture, the language of national [be]longing.

Employing the Wild West Show as a late nineteenth-century prototype for the complex of popular entertainment forms that take their source from western historical materials, Buffalo Bill and the Indians dramatizes the creative acts of transmutation and linkage as history is transfigured into the myths that bind our imagined community, the Nation (Anderson 15).1 As such, the film carries out one of the central strategies that Richard Slotkin has since suggested for undermining the ideological power of western myth-making: it demystifies the myth-making process by rehistoricizing the mythic subject and detailing an account of the myth-making enterprise (The Fatal Environment 20).

Focusing on the processes through which the myth of the western hero has been constructed, the film questions the moral authority of the hero and the consequences for Native Americans of western literature, art, drama, and film. Buffalo Bill and the Indians, a ‘historiographic metafiction’ (Hutcheon ix–x, 5–6), confronts us with the politics of history and the politics of historical representation and suggests that the story of the American West is less a tale of civilization, progress, heroic action, and triumph than one of oppression, displacement, exclusion, and defeat.

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Buffalo Bill flaunts the headdress of his Indian ancestry in the Wild West Show arena, in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*. Copyright 1976 United Artists Corporation.

The action of the film takes place between 1885, when Sitting Bull joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West, and 1890, when Sitting Bull was killed at Standing Rock, also the year the census reports said that there were no longer any vast tracts of land remaining for American settlement (Limerick 21) and just a few years before Frederick Jackson Turner would proclaim the close of "the frontier" (Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin 14). The film is set in a period of historical transition during which new symbolic representations are emerging—and Buffalo Bill realizes that both the Indians and the buffalo on which his legend was based are vanishing.

In many ways—since he followed Kit Carson and outlawed George Custer and Wild Bill Hickok—Bill Cody was the last personification of western heroism (Steckmesser 253). Cody himself was not much of a cowboy; he tried working cattle for six weeks or so in 1877 but left pretty quickly (Frantz 122). Nor was he an exceptional scout or hunter (Buscombe 91, 239). But his show set a pattern that has been an enormous influence on the portrayal of the western hero.

The 'Real' Versus the Mythic

In 1922, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, a New Mexico cowboy and writer of western tales, claimed Cody's show was responsible for the major misconceptions about cowboys and the West (Taylor 67). In *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, the cowboy (actually still a hired hand on horseback) was part of a national morality play: sharp-shooting, trick riding, leaping from galloping horses to save numerous virgins riding in "the authentic Deadwood stage" from attacks by painted savages. "The real" seems to have been an important part of the appeal of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, as audiences across America and Europe got...
to see real Indians, real cowboys, and the real celebrity, Buffalo Bill. As an 1892 article in the *London Evening News and Post* put it, “We hear a great deal about realism on the stage, where a working model of a Westend drawing room is hailed as a triumph of art, but the Buffalo Bill show is something more than realism—it is reality” (Blackstone).

*Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson* is concerned precisely with interrogating such effects of “the real.” Consider the film’s opening sequence: before the first image is even seen, a cavalry bugle is heard. Then, as a second bugle call is played, the film’s first image shows an American flag being raised over a western fortress. As the camera tilts up with the flag to snow-covered mountains, the names of the film’s backers (Dino De Laurentiis and David Susskind) are superimposed in lettering that imitates the heavily serifed typescript and ornamental embellishments of nineteenth-century theater programs. The wind howls in the background. The bugle calls, fortress, flag, mountains, and wind invoke a familiar and highly conventionalized motif: the wilderness fort, poised at the edge of the frontier, maintained by the cavalry in the name of American nationhood.

While a third bugle call is heard and the camera pans left across the mountain vista, a playful title appears announcing “Robert Altman’s Unique and Heroic Enterprise of Inimitable Lustre.” Thus, a dissonance of discourses is already suggested. The humorously self-conscious show-business hype of the title is at odds with the traditional archetypal western view in the image. The title names the film’s director and proclaims what we are about to see in hyperbolic and archaic language, resonant of the exaggeration of advertising promotion, indeed, wording that recalls Buffalo Bill’s own posters.

As the camera continues to traverse the western horizon, another discourse is added. A male voice declaims a second account of what we are going to see: “Ladies and Gentlemen, you are about to experience not a show for entertainment,” but “a revue of down-to-earth events that made the American frontier.” Further increasing the level of dissonance, the voice-over makes claims for a serious historical project that seems at odds with the language of the previous title. The familiar side-show Barker form of address contradicts both the denial of the entertainment mode and the apparent seriousness of the narration’s historical claim (“... real events enacted by men and women of the American frontier”).

As the voice-over continues, intoning the motifs of civilization and savagery, progress, and nationhood, the voice-over seems to generate the images. Immediately after the voice extols the virtues of “anonymous settlers,” the camera pulls back to reveal a frontier family working outside a cabin. Right after it refers to the settlers’ need to survive the “savage instincts of man,” a band of marauding Indians ride in, attacking the family and abducting a young white woman.

While apparently proposing an authorial statement of the film’s intent and conception, the voice itself lacks authority. It is an older man’s raspy voice with a hint of hyperbole and a touch of rhyming oratory; it lacks the conviction necessary for its words to be taken as an authorial paratext. Its status also seems in competition with the film’s public and ostensibly “author,” Robert Altman, just identified in comic show-biz tones. Soon after, the voice will, in fact, be specified as that of the old soldier, a crusty, habitual mythologizer, a role that definitely undermines his status as a reliable authorial voice.

On the soundtrack, over the shouting, neighing, and whooping of the Indian attack, a brass band begins to play a new, upbeat theme redolent of circus music. The cast list rolls over the scene, once
again indulging in self-referential humor as it bills the cast not by character names but by functional identities in the Wild West Show (the Star, the Producer, the Publicist, the Legend Maker, and so forth). The clash of the two seemingly opposing impulses continues: the potential straightforwardness of the historical enactment is sharply attenuated by the interference of the self-referential humor of the music and the cast billing.

This attenuation is further extended as the cast list ends and an unidentified voice shouts, “Cease the action!” followed almost immediately by a second unidentified voice commanding, “From the beginning, one, two . . . ” At this point, the action of the settlers and Indians does stop, suggesting that a rehearsal has been taking place. This is confirmed as the crew credits begin to roll and the camera slowly pulls back to show a wide view of an arena and behind-the-scenes activities. But is it a rehearsal for a nineteenth-century show or for Altman’s bicentennial film? The film’s opening titles end on a new one, a diegetic one, a sign for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, and we hear that one of the actors has really been injured; but, of course, we know that what we see is not real blood for, after all, we have just seen the titles telling us that this is a movie.

The next scene begins in a crowded interior. A voice speaks about finding a scrawny kid sleeping under a wagon, but as the camera slowly zooms in closer, we realize that this is not another voice-over narrator but a man on screen telling how he created a legend: “So I tell the kid, from now on your name is Buffalo Bill.” The film cuts immediately to another man, a scraggly old soldier (whose voice is retroactively recognizable as the narrator of the settlers and Indians act) telling a story to a small group of Native American women and children: “I was so impressed that I nicknamed him Buffalo Bill.”

Before we even see the central character of the film, two men claim to have “created” him, to have discovered and named him Buffalo Bill. The introduction of two initiating legends provokes us to question the veracity of both, however. Because both men claim to have been the originators, they call attention to the arbitrariness and instability of the legend-building process. (The first storyteller has confessed he had some plots that needed a hero.)

A Star Portraying a Star

Before we actually see the movie star who plays Buffalo Bill, we hear several people speaking about the character and see multiple representations of him. A cameo of Bill adorns the sign that identifies his show grounds. His nephew addresses a likeness of Bill painted on a canvas partition in the Wild West’s headquarters. Margaret, Bill’s mezzo-contralto paramour, sings a salute to another portrait, a painting of Bill heroically mounted on a rearing white horse that dominates his private quarters. The camera remains on his image as Margaret leaves the frame. When we finally see the “real” Buffalo Bill, 13 minutes into the film, it is only after he has been announced, “William F. Cody: Buffalo Bill . . . ”; it is another teaser, his portrait on a drum head being beaten by a mallet, and then he’s one of several characters in an extreme long shot. This is hardly the way we expect to be introduced to a hero or a star.

Images of Buffalo Bill are everywhere in the Wild West, and Bill is often shown contemplating his image in portraits and mirrors as if to evaluate whether he measures up. At other times, he assumes the poses suggested by the idealized icons, heroically clasping his arm across his chest, with his hand on his shoulder, as he stares off into space. He seems to be taken in by his own legend, a consumer of his own image.

During many of the behind-the-scenes activities (grooming, romantic entangle-
ments, rehearsals, contract negotiations, photo sessions, the planning of specific acts, and so on), Bill seems to be performing his heroic role. At other times, however, these poses and performances are in conflict with Bill’s self-serving and less than honorable (or brave or accomplished) behavior. For example, Bill objects to the two Native Americans, Sitting Bull and his interpreter William Halsey, standing next to Annie Oakley in a cast photo (“The fans won’t like it.”). He suggests that the Indians be given slower horses; he is afraid of his lady friend’s pet canary; and when he leads a group of men to track down Sitting Bull, he is unable to locate him. On stage and in many of his backstage activities, he is introduced in splendidly different terms, dressed in full “western” regalia, sometimes elaborately embroidered with American flags. At other times, he is hung over, in his long-johns, without his flowing blond Custer-style wig, juggling opera-singing lovers (one of whom he disappoints sexually), beset by accusations from his estranged wife, haggling over money and contracts, and dealing with demanding performers in an ill-tempered manner.

Bill is represented through numerous, often contrary modes: what people say about him, what people write about him, what he thinks and says about himself, artists’ images, publicists’ blurbs, Wild West performances, mirror images, dreams, and hallucinations. By the film’s end, Bill has been presented in so many ways that he himself no longer has a firm grasp on his identity. And the film’s spectator is left to question the representational status and signification of many of the film’s scenes. The dissonance and disjunction between images and actions raise central questions about the relationships between reality and spectacle, identity and performance. In a perfectly Pirandellian moment, when called upon to perform an actual western piece of action, to go out into the wilderness and bring back the apparently escaped Indians, Bill rummages through his closet exclaiming, “Goddamn it! Where’s my real jacket?” This dynamic of competing discourses, irony, and the calling into question of the very status of “the real” is the basic aesthetic method of Buffalo Bill and the Indians.

Paul Newman’s performance as Buffalo Bill compounds the polyvalent complexity of the character. It also adds a critical dimension to his representation. Robert Altman, at a press conference and preview of the film held in New York City in May 1976, said that he had wanted a movie star, not an actor, to play Buffalo Bill (Mermey 11), and in an interview during the editing of the film, he explained that this was partially to secure backing but also because “stardom is part of what we’re talking about in Buffalo Bill... a very conscious deflating of not only Buffalo Bill but Paul Newman, Movie Star” (55).

Newman told the press that symbolically “Cody was the first star, someone who became a legend but couldn’t live up to it” (Mermey 11) and described his character as “a combination of Custer, Gable, Redford, and me. In that order” (Christian Science Monitor 17 June 1976). Newman acknowledged the tension he personally felt between himself and his screen image: “There’s no way that what people see on celluloid has anything to do with me” (Rottenberg 84).

In many ways, Newman’s performance is built on this tension, this inscribed conjunction and disjunction between actor and role. Jean-Louis Comolli suggests that there is an inevitable “interference, even rivalry,” in a historical film when a well-known performer plays a well-known historical figure (44), that there is a “double affirmation,” an “improbable conjunction of two identities,” and an “oscillating to-and-fro movement” in the spectator’s experience of character as familiar historical personage and character as familiar movie actor (47–48).
In *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, this tension includes the spectator’s prescient knowledge and prior interpretations of Buffalo Bill gained from other textual practices and representations. It also includes what we know about the star who plays the historical person. The Buffalo Bill of dime novels, stage melodramas, and the Wild West Show, the Buffalo Bill who impersonated himself in 15 films and was represented in more than 30 others by assorted performers (Monthly Film Bulletin 43.10 [Oct. 1976], is now played by someone we know even better, Paul Newman, popular anti-hero (who not long ago had been Billy the Kid, Rocky Graziano, Butch Cassidy, and Judge Roy Bean), a noted political activist, supporter of liberal and environmental causes.

Newman, unlike a lesser-known actor, brings a constellation of intertextual cues to his role. A key one is his persona as someone who is outside the Hollywood system, a self-proclaimed easterner who defines himself at a distance from the Hollywood apparatus. This allows him to play at being a star in this performance with a certain ironic detachment, an awareness of playing the role of someone playing a role.

The film foregrounds the double affirmation and interference that Comolli attributes to any historical film by self-consciously frolicking with multiple superimpositions of stardom: Paul Newman, movie star, performing the role of William F. Cody, performing the star role of Buffalo Bill. Newman is at a sufficient distance from his character that he is able to inscribe an ironic dimension consistent with and central to the film’s project. The hyperbolic self-consciousness of the performance helps to keep us aware of Buffalo Bill as a constructed image. It diffuses the character, making him, simultaneously, character and representation of character. In the casting of Buffalo Bill, Altman seems to have wanted this extra-load of reference inscribed in the film experience. He seems to have calculated a viewing process that would necessarily be discursive. By choosing a twentieth-century celebrity to play a nineteenth-century celebrity, any strategies that attempt to evoke history weave a topography of potential schism.

The lack of synchrony between Paul Newman and Buffalo Bill, the appearance of players familiar from other Altman films (Geraldine Chaplin, Shelley Duvall, Bert Remsen), and the many references to “the real” all function to subvert the film’s sense of illusion, drawing us away from the story toward the way it is presented. There is a certain irony in the film’s carefully controlled colors, reminiscent of nineteenth-century tintypes (Henry), evoking authenticity while the film’s casting and performance style undermine any fictional coherence and its approach to history casts suspicion on the very possibility of “accuracy.” In *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, a film about fictive illusion, we are never able to become submerged in any illusion or any fiction. The film constantly questions what reality is by declaring its own artifice as well as its own confusion. When Sitting Bull arrives at the Wild West, Buffalo Bill assures him that he will like show business, “It ain’t all that much different than real life” (Kopit 40–45).

**The Quiet Gravity of Buntline, the Quiet Dignity of Sitting Bull**

The inclusion within the film’s cast of characters of the historical figure Ned Buntline, the pulp author who “discovered,” developed, and promoted Buffalo Bill, serves as another means of highlight-
ing the degree to which Buffalo Bill is a constructed myth. The gently aging Buntline, identified as the Legend Maker in a separate line in the film’s opening titles, plays the role of debunker, constantly reminding characters in the film and spectators in the audience of the fictional nature of Buffalo Bill: “No ordinary man would have had the foresight to take credit for acts of bravery and heroism that he couldn’t do. And no ordinary man could realize what tremendous profits could be made by telling a pack of lies.”

Buntline also illuminates some of the contradictions in Bill’s status as show-business star and points out Bill’s imperfections: his drinking, his lack of wilderness skills, and so on. Buntline’s commentaries, delivered in the bar room, are frequently edited into the film so that they function as voice-overs, ironically framing Bill’s performances both in the arena and with his admiring entourage. Buntline’s dialogue plays against the heroic image of Bill that the Wild West strives to project, rehistoricizing the mythic subject and undermining Bill’s heroic posturing by reminding us how his image has been constructed and how that image, as Walter Benjamin said of history, is “filled by the presence of the now” (261) and serves the values and aspirations of our national culture. This understanding is represented as a threat to the Wild West’s functioning, and several of the characters voice concern that Buntline is on the premises.

Significantly, Buntline is given special authorial weight in the film. He is contemplative, distant, physically removed from and resistant to the show-biz ethos woven by the Wild West’s illusion-making process. What he says tends to be confirmed by the ways in which Bill and the other characters behave. Consequently, the character can be understood as a spokesman for the film’s authorial perspective, for its overall attitude toward the film’s subjects.

Buntline is played with quiet gravity by Burt Lancaster, at the time the film’s only well-known star other than Paul Newman. Lancaster combines the pedigree of his long career in Hollywood as an action star, including numerous roles in westerns, with the reflective intellectual persona Luchino Visconti created for him in his middle and later years. In sharp contrast to the performance style of Buffalo Bill’s show-business acolytes, who are always skittering about and speaking in empty show-biz double talk (“In enlarging the show, we may have disimproved it”), Lancaster is given almost sculpturesque authority; he is almost always static and speaks with concern for the politics and poetics of his words. (For example, explaining why the army would be willing to transfer the captive Sitting Bull to the Wild West, Buntline says, “They can’t shoot him. Not till they get those Sioux treaties signed. So they put him in a wild west show. A rock ain’t a rock once it becomes gravel.”)

Buntline is specifically contrasted with rival dime novelist Prentiss Ingraham (played by the lesser-known Allan Nicholls) in his vocabulary, his physical stature, and his penetrating understanding of Buffalo Bill’s enterprise. Toward the end of the film, just before the climactic scenes, Buntline and Bill meet in the bar and reflect on their time together (“The thrill of my life to have invented you!”). Bill assures him that he’d like to have him back with the show, “except that frankly, Nate can’t stand the sight of you,” and Buntline rides off into the night as if to signify the final passing of an era.

Buntline and the battery of other legend-making characters in the film (the old soldier; Bill’s partner, Nate Salsbury; Prentiss Ingraham; “the Publicist” Major Burke; Bill’s adoring nephew; and William F. Cody himself) relate to a significant motif in many post-World War II westerns: the inscription within the film of the western myth-making process itself, either
by the inclusion of a journalist or novelist within the film’s story (such as The Left-Handed Gun [Arthur Penn, 1958] and The Shootist [Don Siegel, 1976]) or by the self-conscious acknowledgment of popular culture’s perpetuation of the falsification of historical accuracy (the “print the legend” motif in, for example, John Ford’s Fort Apache [1948] and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance [1962]).

The presence of so many of these figures in Buffalo Bill and the Indians attests to the importance of myth-making as a central subject of the film. Moreover, there is a significant oppositional dichotomy between these characters and Buntline. Whereas it is the job of the employees of the Wild West to enhance and bolster Buffalo Bill’s image, Buntline exposes the circumstances and nature of their operation. The inclusion within the film of both myth-making and its demystification suggests the degree to which disparate and contradictory proposals of fact, story, image, and the contestation of narrative authority are at the center of Altman’s narrative method.

Of all the strategies the film deploys to interrogate and criticize the authority of Buffalo Bill as western hero, the strongest is his systematic comparison with Sitting Bull. This oppositional structure, the continuous “duel” between Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill, is first posed by the film’s two titles.

Buffalo Bill and the Indians is the showbiz title designed for the theater marquee. It grabs the ticket buyer’s attention by highlighting the film’s famous hero and, not coincidentally, reduces his antagonist to a racial category. The alternative title, Sitting Bull’s History Lesson, personalizes and individualizes the antagonist and associates him with the pedagogical, the teaching and learning of history, defined in the film as what really happened. Sitting Bull is essentialized as the real’s unproblematic presence, the representative of the liberal humanist notion of “truth.” Buffalo Bill’s Wild West representations, and by extension our nation’s popular memory of the West, are reciprocally defined as distortions, as molding “truth” to the interests of the myth-making business and the ideology of nationhood. After Bill fires the Chief for suggesting an enactment in which soldiers slaughter every man, woman, child, and dog in the village on Killdeer Mountain, Annie Oakley informs Bill that Sitting Bull “wanted to show the truth to the people. Why can’t you accept that, just once?” Bill replies angrily, “Because I have a better sense of history than that!”

The comparison of Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull is elaborated on several levels. For instance, Sitting Bull does not conform to the popular notion of the physical presence of a star persona. He is tiny and retiring in nature (Sarris 108). When he first arrives in the Wild West, virtually the entire cast and crew (except Annie and Ned Buntline, who already know him) mistake his huge spokesman, William Halsey (who has the physical stature and bearing expected of a star), for the Chief. Not only does Sitting Bull not conform to the appearance of a star (“Golly, it’s the runt!”), he refuses to perform the star act. While Bill wants him to reenact the Wild West’s conception of his dramatic role in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull insists instead on performing a modest horse act, “making the big grey dance,” which the Wild West’s audience initially jeers in disappointment but soon cheers for its grace and simplicity. This act is strikingly different from Buffalo Bill’s heroic horse riding.

Crucial to the contrast is the comparison of their respective wilderness skills, a central criterion for the evaluation of a western hero (Cawelti 40; Slotkin, The Fatal Environment 374–75). For example, Sitting Bull laughs as he fires Buffalo Bill’s pistol and discovers it is loaded with buckshot instead of bullets. (Halsey says, “Sit-
ting Bull thinks you are a great marksman. He can see how you killed so many of his buffalo!”) When Sitting Bull decides to establish his camp on the ridge across the river from the arena, a river that members of Bill’s troop assure him is impassable (“We’ve already lost three horses, six Blackfeet Indians, and a barge load of show equipment valued at . . .”), the Chief and his companions easily cross to the other side. And, most important, when Bill is called upon to perform the kind of action upon which his legend was built—gathering a posse of the best men in his company to go after Sitting Bull and his companions after they have taken off to the mountains—Bill goes out into the wilderness accompanied by a musical fanfare and, even though the Indians were in sight when they set out, returns empty-handed, his bedraggled posse betraying his men’s utter inability to carry out the simple tracking task. Sitting Bull and Halsey return to the Wild West of their own volition, explaining that they had not tried to elude their pursuers but were simply visiting the sun in the mountains as they do each month during the day of the first moon.

Another significant area of comparison between Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull is their respective use of language. Bill and the other members of the troop speak in hyperbolic, empty show-business language that varies from producer Nate Salsbury’s malapropisms (“We just signed the most futurable act in our history” and “Gentlemen, I don’t think that it’s inappropriate to play a personal chord here”) to press agent Colonel John Burke’s flamboyant alliteration (“Buffalo Bill, Mon-arch of the West, it delights me to present this compellingly cornucopious canary, this curvaceous cadenza in the compendium of classical chanson”). The Wild West’s language is marked by its elaborate introductions, celebratory extravagance, and double-dealing.

Sitting Bull, by contrast, gains immeasurable dignity simply by not speaking. He is portrayed as moving, fragile, and poignant, a “mute victim condemned to the loss of pastoral innocence,” which, as Stephen Greenblatt suggests, is one of the central prototypes of Native American representation. William Halsey, identified in the opening credits as “The Interpreter,” speaks for the Chief. His language is measured; he chooses his words carefully and actually to the point. Although the film’s representation of Native Americans is a variation of the Noble Savage theme, the “argument” between Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull privileges the Native American perspective. The effect of the extended comparison is to critically parody Bill, to expose the gap between his image and his reality.

On the story level, their duel is best understood as Bill’s attempt to colonize Sitting Bull. Buffalo Bill’s possessive, like his portrait, is stamped on everything in the show (banners, drums, tents, props, press box). The first time we hear his voice, he is saying that “anything”—later corrected to “everything”—his is. Sitting Bull rejects having the possessive applied to him. Bill continually tries to conquer Bull by bending him to the Wild West’s image, and Bull consistently refuses to be co-opted. During the dream sequence near the end of the film, Bill tries to convince Bull of the naiveté of his outlook with a logic that betrays his self-interest: “In one hundred years, I’m still gonna be Buffalo Bill, star! And you’re gonna be the Indian.” Buffalo Bill’s legitimacy—and financial gain—are premised on the construction of natives as degraded and dangerous Other. Sitting Bull’s refusal to play that part—indeed, the metaphysical clarity of his existence—is a transgression against the image of Buffalo Bill and the frontier myth.

**Illusion and Reality in the Arena of Bad Dreams**

Bill’s dream sequence, along with the final Wild West performance, raises on the
diegetic level some of the questions provoked by the storytelling at the beginning. That is, the questions of illusion and reality raised by the way the story is told at the beginning of the film become part of Bill’s own confusion at the end, the arena of bad dreams where the characters themselves cannot distinguish between story and storytelling.

Just before the dream sequence, the report of Sitting Bull’s death circulates around the arena. Everyone is afraid to tell Bill. As if to verify the story, the camera leaves the Wild West for the first time for a long and eerie zoom in on a burnt-out campfire; Sitting Bull’s wooden cross and string of beads are recognizable on the circle of stones (his remnants as relics, fit for a museum) and “naturalistic” bird (hawks, crows, ravens), animal (buffalo?), and wind sounds are on the soundtrack. The sounds of nature merge with a creaking noise as the film cuts to Bill asleep in his tent. He seems to wake up, but the long shot also has a supernatural quality. These are two of the few sequences in the film that do not have music or overlapping dialogue. Could it be a dream? Or is it an ongoing nightmare? In the eight-minute sequence, unmarked by any specific temporal cues, Bill wanders about the Mayflower, his headquarters and living space, drinking, rummaging through mementos, looking in the mirror, contemplating his life, speaking to and searching for a silent and often invisible Sitting Bull, the phantom Other.

Sitting Bull’s appearance and disappearance through the magic of editing create a visual uncertainty that parallels Bill’s own crisis of focalization. The dream itself is a soliloquy of confusion in which Buffalo Bill questions betrayal and self-deception and the part both have played in the creation of his legend and stardom. In trying to make sense of his life and history, his legend begins to unravel. Like Alice in Wonderland, Bill is in an unknown world full of ominous confrontations, correspondences, and nostalgia, and, like Alice, he struggles for an identity. Caught in a tangle of the heroic as an ideal and the hero as “good fellow” or “everyman,” he is perplexed about his own image. He must be right, or why (he says, with an accusatory glance toward the camera) would people have taken him for a king? “God meant me to be white,” his voice wanders off, “God meant me to be white and it ain’t easy. I’ve got people with no lives living through me.” He feels he has to give his fans what they expect and he tells Sitting Bull, “You can’t live up to what you expect and that makes you more make-believe than me because you don’t even know if you’re bluffing.”

The dream posits difference as a prior condition of identity but at the same time challenges the assumed superiority of the white man’s power and cultural dominance. Buffalo Bill explains to Sitting Bull, with a reasoning that reveals his insecurity, that “the difference between the white man and the Indian in all situations is that the Injun is red, and the Injun is red for a real good reason, so we can tell us apart!”

In the dream, there is a preoccupation with what things mean, yet the speech and the editing often provoke us to question the security of meaning: the relation between word and referent and, in a larger sense, the relation between image and referent are often unclear. Different and dissonant logic systems play, diverge, and compete. Time and sequence are in abeyance. Did he kill that buffalo when he was 9 or when he was 11? He tells Sitting Bull, “You want to stay the same; well, that’s going backwards.” Recollection and narrative requirements are confused. In Bill’s dream, Custer did the Indians a favor by giving them a reason to be famous. Bill renegotiates history, disrupting sentiment and nostalgia; past events and past desires are recognized for their use-value, their ability to be transferred into real rewards. Bill’s virulent self-defense is both a ques-
tioning of and an attempt at protecting his fragile identity. He wonders whether his "self" can ever live up to his "performance": "My Daddy died without ever seeing me as a star—tall, profitable, good looking." Bill looks at his portrait: "My God, ain't he riding that horse right?" The switching between first person and third complicates any notion of unitary meaning or centered subjectivity. At the same time, it inscribes and destabilizes both the subject and the narrative.15

This confusion about history, spectacle, illusion, and real life is part of the story, the storytelling, and the spectatorial activity: a superimposition of belief and disbelief. Bill's problem with his identity is associated with his estrangement from his image, a bit like Alice thinking of sending her feet a pair of shoes for Christmas. In his muddle, Bill questions Sitting Bull's image: it's not right, so Bull can't be real. He declares that Halsey doesn't mean a word he says; "that's why he sounds so real." In Bill's enterprise, fiction engenders truth; as Nate had declared earlier, they are in the "authenticity business." Buntline, however, admits the Wild West is just "dreamin' out loud."

The reverie evaporates (or does it?) as the sound of the final scene of the film overlaps a tight, frontal close-up of Sitting Bull, a shot so emphatic that it seems to be an authorial assertion of his posthumous power: "Ladies and Gentlemen..." Buffalo Bill is once again in performance, engaging in "the Challenge of the Future," fighting the great Chief Sitting Bull (in lowered tones), "played by William Halsey..." staged with spectacular real-ism." Out rides Halsey dressed in battle regalia (bare-chested, in war bonnet and war paint); the curtain parts again and out rides Buffalo Bill with smiling bravado to the tune of his by now familiar Wild West theme song. As the curtain parts, we see the purple mountains in the distance and the anemic mountains crudely painted on the backdrop in the foreground. The two warriors face off to a dramatic drum roll; they dismount, then wrestle briefly. Bill easily pushes Halsey over and, with the enthusiastic approval of the crowd, triumphantly brandishes his knife and "The Chief's" ornate headdress in the air. With Halsey's performance of the act, the honorable, wise, proud, noble, moral "savages" have irrevocably disappeared.

The camera's authorial zoom in to an extreme close-up of Bill in the next to final shot of the film seems to reveal both joy and terror in his eyes; the emotions attached to triumph, already soured, are charged with both longing and melancholy. The last western hero and the first western star seems to understand his part in the construction of a genre, as he finally gets to "sculp" "Sitting Bull," once again enacting the idealized moral violence that had become so marketable. A cut to a long shot of the Wild West from behind the arena breaks the spell of the star's magical sway. The end credits begin to roll as the camera pulls back until the arena and encampment are very small, a lone outpost in a wilderness, and we see the beautiful mountains once again in the background.

How are we to understand this scene? What is its narrative and representational status? Is it to be taken as a depiction of Buffalo Bill's subjectivity, his obsession with Bull, a continuation of the dream sequence? Or does it escape the character's perspective and function on a different level?

To a certain degree, the scene can be taken as a representation of Buffalo Bill's interests and desires: Custer's Last Stand is performed in the Wild West as he had wished, with Bill standing in for Custer and Halsey replacing Sitting Bull—and with the outcome of the battle remedied. Buffalo Bill's identity with Custer is suggested early in the film by his makeup, costume, beard, and long blond wig ("Someday it will be as long as..."
Custer’s”). He had tried before to convince Sitting Bull to perform “his Custer act” and had even demonstrated the scenario in a mocking travesty of Little Big Horn in which the smallest actor in the Wild West played Custer, his too-large coat, vest, and hat and his obviously fake wig and beard mocking the hero’s image (Kopit 4)16, and an African-American played “the heroic villain” (“Oh, Chief, we got a colored stand in place for you ‘cause he’s the closest thing on our staff to a real Indian.”). Sitting Bull refuses to perform the act; Halsey, speaking for him, notes simply, “Sitting Bull says the battle did not happen that way.”

Understood in these terms, this scene could be seen as a representation of Buffalo Bill’s fantasy, his desire to “possess” Sitting Bull. Unlike the dream sequence, however, there are no visual or aural cues to mark this scene as Buffalo Bill’s consciousness. Understanding it as merely a projection of Bill’s desires is a limited reading.

It might be more fruitful to think of the final scene in metaphoric symbolic terms, as representing a highly significant and ironic statement on the nature of historical and racial representation in the western. Don Russell claims that the Battle of the Little Bighorn is the most frequently depicted event in American history (Custer’s Last 3). Slotkin argues that Custer’s Last Stand is one of the central metaphors of the frontier myth (The Fatal Environment 32). Its importance lies in the ways the legend encapsulates a conception of American history as a heroic-scale Indian battle with “progress achieved through regenerative wars of extermination against a primitive racial enemy” (The Fatal Environment 477). Because Custer was killed in the battle and his cavalry company wiped out by the Sioux, the Last Stand myth has attained a special status from the threat that, as Slotkin puts it, “the race war might really end up in victory for savage darkness” (The Fatal Environment 477).

In addition, the myth gains special resonance from its two principal protagonists. Custer is a contradictory figure, admired as a tragic hero in conservative interpretations and as a blatant villain by others. Sitting Bull has been traditionally portrayed as a potent example of the “great antagonist,” the Indian who sees clearly that “the advance of the whites means doom for Indians’ power and even their existence” (Slotkin, The Fatal Environment 101). It is his bridging of the two cultures, especially his learning political conspiracy and corruption from whites, that makes the “great antagonist” a danger.17

The final scene of Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson could, then, be understood as a representation of an event that has played an extensive and highly significant role in western symbolic conceptualization. It is one more version of the Last Stand myth. What can we say about this particular version? Most obviously, that it is ironic; it rewrites history, reversing what we know to have been the outcome of the battle.18 As an example of catachresis (literally, “misuse”), which Hayden White describes as a “manifestly absurd Metaphor designed to inspire Ironic second thoughts about the nature of the thing characterized,” it affirms tacitly “the negative of what is on the literal level affirmed positively” (Metahistory 37): Sitting Bull is easily and ignominiously defeated, and Custer/Buffalo Bill is heroically triumphant.

The sequence’s status as the film’s closure is highly ambivalent; it is even more temporally unstable than the dream sequence. With no clues to place it clearly as the representation of a unique or specific action within a causal chain of narrative events, it seems more iterative in nature. It may be helpful to think of the scene as representing not only Buffalo Bill’s fantasy of the Custer act but also the continuing way that the Last Stand myth, and, on
a more metaphoric level, the relations of white man and Native American, have been represented in the western over the course of most of the twentieth century. The representation of a collective national fantasy, a "social imaginary," it triumphs even though everything we have seen in the film up to this point denies its validity. As a synecdoche for the western as national myth, this "closure" points to the future, the future of a particularly American mode of entertainment.19

The film interrogates the logical system of narrative causality that permeates most Hollywood film and challenges the image of the hero in the western, where conflicts are usually resolved through the actions and effectiveness of the movie’s star. If the classic Hollywood western builds a coherent and authentic narrative world, Altman’s film deploys ambiguity, contradiction, and interference to destabilize these conventions. It employs irony as a self-critical discursive trope to debunk and demystify the central motifs and icons of the genre. The film’s narrative structure both problematizes and exploits the convention of conclusive closure (Russell, The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill 253).20 And, if the classical Hollywood western emphasized story so it could entertain, the episodic structure of Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull’s History Lesson draws our attention away from story toward plotting and, in particular, to how a nation and a hero have been built by their histories, endowed with illusory coherence by the way their stories have been told (White, The Content of the Form ix).

Self-consciously calling attention to its historicity as well as fictionality, the film compromises the assumed correspondence of history to experience and narration to event. Disrespect for the dead, as Sitting Bull had called history, has been transformed into a spectacle for the future, making ambiguous whether the "lesson" of the film’s second title was taught by Sitting Bull or learned by him.

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Notes

1 Benedict Anderson points out that "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members . . . yet in the midst of each lives the image of their communon." It is the "style in which they are imagined" that distinguishes communities. As an exploration of the relations between the entertainment industries' heroes and the social construct "America," Buffalo Bill and the Indians might be seen as an extension of the ideological project of Altman's 1975 film, Nashville.

2 Revisionist historians have problematized the criteria, cultural themes, and periodizations employed in describing "the West." Patricia Nelson Limerick, for example, sees the "quaintness of the folk" and "the popularization of tourism" as an important indication of the "closing of the frontier." William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin suggest that one telltale sign of the transition between "frontier" and "region" was a feeling among the inhabitants that they were "no longer inventing a world but inheriting one" (23).

3 Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 address to a gathering of the American Historical Association at the World’s Columbian Exposition would become the dominant model of western historiography for generations. Turner’s explanation of American history was based on the idea of "free land," ignoring the legitimacy of Native American claims to the continent. See Turner and also Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin (14). Interestingly, at the same time that Turner was addressing scholars at the exhibition, Cody was performing his own interpretation of history in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West outside the Chicago fairgrounds.

4 Rhodes was speaking to a group of filmmakers. The BFI Companion to the Western (Buscombe) states that William F. Cody’s experiences as an army scout were no different from those of dozens of others (91). Richard Slotkin, in an extensive discussion of Buffalo Bill, identifies Cody as "a minor actor on the stage of Western history until 1869," when he was "discovered" by Ned Buntline (The Fatal Environment 69).
There is a slight variation: Altman declared his enterprise “unique,” whereas Cody claimed his was “original.”

These are the central themes scholars of western legend have long identified as its core thematic material; see Turner and, more recently, Henry Nash Smith, John G. Cawelti, and Slotkin (The Fatal Environment).

This is true of at least these white middle-aged academics. While we certainly would not want to position ourselves as ideal spectators or to suggest a monolithic response to the film, we will be arguing that a simultaneous engagement with and reflection on the spectacle is suggested by the film’s narrative methods and its publicity and exhibition strategies, that is, the film’s text and intertexts.

Included in this list are Douglas Fairbanks, Roy Rogers, Charlton Heston, Joel McCrea, and Michel Piccoli.

More recently, spectators know him as the philanthropic king of salad dressings, salsa, and marinara sauce.

In Arthur Kopit’s 1968 play Indians, which “inspired” the film, in the middle of a performance for the president of the United States and the First Lady, before Buffalo Bill has a chance to rescue the virgin maiden from “torture, sacrifice and certain violations,” he feels obliged to explain to Wild Bill Hickok (who has begun to get highly humiliated impersonating himself) that they are really doing something quite ennobling: “Ya see, Bill, what you fail to understand is that I’m not being false to what I was. I’m simply drawing on what I was... and raisin’ it to a higher level. (Stage direction: he takes a conscious pause.) Now. On with the show!” Both the film and the play problematize the relations between spectacle and reality by provoking a dystopian sense of distance toward representation. Although both question the role western heroes have played in the values and aspirations of our national culture, the play comments ironically on the possibility of progress and improvement, whereas the film is more an exploration of illusion and disillusion.

Walter Benjamin’s comments in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.”

Interestingly, the representation of Buntline within the film is at odds with what we know about him from historical sources. By idealizing him as a source of wisdom, Altman is, in effect, mythologizing the demythologizer. See Smith for an account of Buntline.

The film’s title valorizes Buffalo Bill in a way that Kopit’s title, Indians, avoided.

As an example of the pervasiveness of this association of heroic stature with size, see Andrew Sarris’s complaint that Paul Newman is too short for the role of Buffalo Bill.

Linda Hutcheon describes this dynamic as one of the main projects of the poetics of postmodernism.

In the play, Bill is less ambiguous about Custer, in the first scene calling him, “one o’ the great dumbass men in history.”

In the film, Sitting Bull offers to move away from Annie Oakley in the photo session “for 25 American dollars.”

As defeat reinterpreted as victory, it is interesting to compare this with the myth of the Alamo, its historical glorifications and recent contestations.

In the cynical art house culture of 1976, the irony and moral tone of the scene certainly suggested that the end of that tradition might be warranted.

Dialogue in the film discusses the narrative structure of a Wild West act: “What’s the plot? String the pearls together and devise us a nice little Buffalo Bill fable, uniquely original.” Cody once described one of his five-act frontier melodramas as “without head or tail,” making it possible to start the performance with any act.

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