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The Vanishing American represents one of Hollywood's earlier films to address federal Indian policies. Released at a time when Indian supporters and social reformers were attacking inadequate government programs and futile missionary efforts, *The Vanishing American* was sharply critical of the reservation system. Unlike other silent feature pictures that concentrated upon Native Americans, George Seitz's film faulted White agents for the Indian's plight.

Despite its lavish production, *The Vanishing American* looked seriously at the deterioration of Indian reservations and the failure of various presumed "friends of the Indians" to protect their vital interests. *The Vanishing American's* stand against White injustice thereby demonstrated the film industry's response to Indian reform: Hollywood was delayed but not insensitive. Hollywood was a long way from accepting Indians as cultural equals, but it did respond to emerging issues by focusing on a major social problem. Kevin Brownlow (1978:345) concluded that "the problem of the Indian and his betrayal by the government was more clearly etched in this picture than in any other silent film."

Zane Grey's Novel

The Vanishing American's release in late 1925 coincided with much widespread agitation over Native American policies. While reformers were assailing government agencies, obscurantists were defending both the administration's and the missionaries' efforts to "civilize" the American Indian. Heated debates revolved around issues such as land titles, citizenship rights, and reservation conditions. The Indian's plight attracted scholars, writers, and artists as well as social reformers. American writers, disturbed by the Indian's condition, drew poignant and stark portraits of reservations (see Jackson 1973:78). One writer was Zane Grey, a sympathizer with American Indians who often depicted them as victims of White greed and abuse. In Grey's first novel, *Betty Zane* (1903), he argued that White betrayal was responsible for turning peaceful Indians into hostile forces. *Betty Zane* was partly biographical, based upon Grey's great-grandfather and his defense of Fort Henry against Indian attacks during the American Revolution. Grey portrayed Indians sympathetically and noted their neglect in the postrevolutionary years

(ibid.:22-25). Later, in *Desert Gold* (1913), Grey supported the Yaquis and their struggle against the Mexicans, and in *The Rainbow Trail* (1915) he further developed his theme of White injustice against Indians. Not until *The Vanishing American*, however, did Grey write a novel specifically about American Indians and their plight.

The idea for *The Vanishing American* was conceived in 1922 when Jesse Lasky and Lucien Hubbard (editorial supervisor for Zane Grey Productions for Paramount) received an invitation from Grey to visit Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge. The group spent two months in Northern Arizona, where the desert's scenery captivated Lasky; he ultimately suggested it as a background for a motion picture. Grey, who for years had wanted to write a tribute to the American Indian, provided the theme for Lasky's epic and immediately began his task.¹ *The Vanishing American* seemed long overdue, for Grey pondered the topic before actually writing:

I am writing my Indian story, the material for which I have been seeking for ten years and more. It is well started now and has tremendously gripped me. . . . The Indian story has never been written. Maybe I am the man to do it.²

Grey worked from May 5 to June 18, 1922, and the story first appeared in November 1922 as a serial in *Ladies Home Journal*. Harper and Brothers planned the book's publication to coincide with the film's release, but this intensified missionary fears of public criticism. Harper editors responded by suggesting changes in *The Vanishing American*, a move that caused Grey to consider withdrawing his manuscript (Jackson:80-81). Grey defended his novel after the third revision:

I have studied the Navajo Indians for twelve years. I know their wrongs. The missionaries sent out there are almost everyone mean, vicious, weak, immoral useless men . . . and some of them are crooks. They cheat and rob the Indian and more heinously they seduce every Indian girl they can get hold of.³

Grey later stated that his purpose was to expose this "terrible condition," and any ensuing controversy would only point to existing tensions among religious factions (Jackson:81).

The Story

Grey's story of *The Vanishing American* begins on the Nopah reservation prior to World War I.⁴ Nophaie, a young Indian boy, is kidnapped by a group of White women and sent to a special Indian boarding school

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in the East. Eventually, he earns a college degree and a reputation as an athlete. While in college, Nophaie meets a young woman, Marion Warner, for whom he develops a romantic attachment. Nophaie returns to the reservation, where Marion later visits him and works for a time as a teacher among the Indians.

The reservation system, however, has severe problems. The head agent, Blucher, shows his sympathy for Germans during World War I by discouraging Indians from volunteering. Morgan, the head of the missionaries, hides his corruption behind the Bible and commits crimes in its name. When the Indians refuse to comply with Morgan's insistence that they attend church, he punishes them. The Indians are thus caught in a conflict between the inept Indian Bureau and the misguided missionary efforts. As Grey put it:

The agent of the government and the missionary of the church were but little and miserable destroyers, vermin of the devil, with all their twisted and deformed mentality centered upon self. [Grey 1925:225]

Nophaie, too, faces a dilemma: his White education and religious training are incompatible with his desire to retain Indian customs and spirituality. While Nophaie questions his people's indolence, unsanitary ways, and reverence toward medicine men, he faults Whites for their obsession with material pleasures and selfish indulgence (ibid.:113–114). Nophaie emerges as the "marginal man," caught between two cultures and at home in neither society.

Throughout the novel, Grey provides a romanticized yet paternalistic and ultimately pessimistic picture of the American Indian. Indians possess "noble hearts and beautiful minds" and are as "simple as little children" (ibid.:38). The Indian's simplicity and innocence, his respect for nature, and his faith in the supernatural placed him "nearer the perfection for which nature worked so inscrutably" (ibid.:136). Compared to Whites, however, Indians were far behind in their evolutionary progress and "merely closer to the original animal progenitor of human beings" (ibid.:113). In a sweeping echo of social Darwinism, Grey declares that the individual must perish so the species might survive (ibid.:136).

Grey's evolutionary theme extends throughout the novel. As the Indians encounter one disaster after another, their race suffers and slowly vanishes. Morgan attacks a young Indian girl who later falls ill with influenza and dies. During the war, Nophaie enlists in the army and returns from France with many honors; the Nopah reservation, however, begins to crumble as Indians die of starvation and influenza. Nophaie too is stricken and eventually dies. The novel ends on a symbolic note as Shoie, a wounded Indian war veteran, rides against the sunset—diminishing, fading, and vanishing (ibid.:308).

The novel's conclusion was only one of three versions that Grey had written. In *Ladies Home Journal* Nophaie dies of influenza—as a White man: "Nophaie! His eyes were those of an Indian, but his face seemed that of a white man. . . ." In another unpublished version, however, the romance between Marion and Nophaie leads to an interracial marriage, with Nophaie admitting that within time his people will symbolically vanish. This conclusion conveyed Grey's ideal of uniting both races so that their strengths would be combined (Wheeler 1975:181–183).

Background

Grey's assertion of the Indian as noble savage lagging in evolutionary progress was not uncommon, but his exposé of reservations was bold. *The Vanishing American* restated the post-World War I Indian problem: its title alluded to the Indians' declining population since the colonial period.⁵ During the twentieth century the population again rose, but even the Navajo, the largest tribe, suffered greatly. Their growing numbers, however, were offset by poor and overcrowded living conditions: during cold winters a dozen or more crowded into single hogans in which whole families perished. One of Grey's subplots was the flu epidemic that swept through the southwestern Indian reservations, killing thousands. From 1918 to 1919, the mortality rate in Arizona alone rose from 743 to 2,254.⁶

The theme of *The Vanishing American* extends far beyond population figures and mortality rates. Grey faulted Whites for the destruction of Indian culture and failure to provide workable solutions. Agents and missionaries not only robbed Indians of their possessions but stripped them of their heritage. The Indian's plight was part of a grand, inscrutable design of man's struggle for existence; ultimately Whites would eradicate Indians, if not by war and disease then by cultural deprivation.⁷ Grey's application of Darwinism was not an attempt to solve social problems but to expose them.

Grey's concept of an Indian-White marriage and his attacks on missionaries were more than what many Christian establishments could accept (although Nophaie does convert to Christianity in the original version). Combined pressures from both religious and social groups convinced Harper editors to alter the story before publication. While the novel lost some of its original impact, it accurately portrayed Indians as victims of White injustice. *The Vanishing American* was written during an era of extensive muckraking over Native American policies; both sides resorted to public accusations and intense campaigning. Most of the debate began in the early 1920s, when Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall, advocate of private ac-

From *The Vanishing American*. This scene was most likely taken from the lengthy prologue. It does give an indication of the large production effort by Paramount to attract the audience and to capture the realism of the terrain. The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

cess to mineral and petroleum resources on Indian lands, ruled that executive-order reservations were available to developers. (Fall's order consequently opened 22 million acres of reservation land to drillers.) In 1922, Fall's support of the Bursum Pueblo Land Bill launched bitter criticism when Senator Holm O. Bursum, of New Mexico, introduced a bill confirming squatters' rights to Pueblo lands, requiring Indians to produce proof of title. The bill attracted widespread interest, and reformers made public appearances across the nation appealing for preservation of Pueblo life. One petition supporting the Indians' cause contained signatures of many scholars and writers, including Zane Grey (see Downes 1945:331–354; Gibson 1980:532–535).

The question of land titles was only one problem Indians faced. Crucial to *The Vanishing American's* theme were the ineffective reservations, which, according to Grey, destroyed the Indians' integrity and fostered an unhealthy dependence. Intense debates revolved around reservation conditions, and from 1922 to 1924 countless articles brought the Indians' plight to the public's attention. *Survey*, *Current History Magazine*, *Collier's*, *The New Republic*, and other publications carried exposés denouncing federal Indian policy; the titles themselves resembled accusations: "Deplorable State of Our Indians," "Sad Case of the American Indian," "Let My People Go," "He Carries the White Man's Burden," and "Tragedy of the American Indian."⁸ In one article, John Collier (Executive Secretary of the newly formed American Indian Defense Association) called the Administration of

Indian Affairs a national disgrace: he accused it of constructing a policy designed to rob Indians of their property, destroy their culture, and eventually exterminate them (see Collier 1923:771). Collier's attack was not unlike Grey's denunciation.

Indian commissioners and administrators, eager to defend their government jobs, heightened the controversy. Moralists charged that Indian cultural practices (especially dancing) were lewd and destructive. Hubert Work, who succeeded Fall in 1923, claimed that the Indian Bureau was not attempting to prohibit dances, but he suggested that Indians would eventually be reasoned away from practices that destroyed higher instincts (see Work 1924:92). Others attacked Indian religion, especially missionary groups, whose goal was to Christianize every pagan tribe so that "newborn infant souls may enter Christian instead of Pagan environments."⁹ The National Indian Association defended missionary efforts to civilize and Christianize the Indian and charged that critics "would prefer to see him remain in his primitive, backward condition." The association claimed that the title *The Vanishing American* was misleading: it failed to account for the educated and civilized Indian who had replaced the Indian of paint and feathers.¹⁰ The debate culminated in the spring of 1924, when Indian Commissioner Flora Seymour declared that the government adequately provided for Indians, while author Mary Austin argued that government education only lowered the Indians' social and economic status.¹¹

Reform efforts failed to bring about any noticeable changes. Interior Secretary Work, responding to growing public pressure, invited a committee of one hundred leaders of Indian welfare to assemble in Washington in December 1923. John Collier deemed the committee's resolutions innocuous, and nothing was accomplished. In 1925, Work called upon the Board of Indian Commissioners, an advisory board, to investigate further the Indian problem; the board's unpublished report, however, was a whitewash and offered no solutions (see Downes 1945:340–341; Gibson 1980:535). Even the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, which provided that all noncitizen Indians born within the nation's territorial limits were citizens of the United States, did little to improve Native American conditions (see Stein 1972:269).

The Film

Grey's theme of social Darwinism seemed to serve as a warning: White greed and power would determine the Indians' fate. Like the numerous exposés and other reform activities, *The Vanishing American* brought the Indians' plight to the fore. Lasky's epic was more than a grandiose production; it attempted to convey a significant social theme to a larger and wider audience.

In preparing *The Vanishing American* for the screen, Paramount made several major changes in Grey's plot and characterizations and somewhat tempered his indictment. The theme of social Darwinism, in particular, troubled the story department:

The story is one of heart-rending distress, in which injustice, greed, and the baser passions are invariably triumphant and *remain unpunished*. . . . Every character (without exception) that earns the respect of the reader is either dead or left in a pitiable plight at the end of the story; and the miscreants who are the authors of this misery and death, are smugly hale, hearty, and prosperous. . . . It is difficult to see how, in view of the harrowing character of the story, it could be made available for pictures without radical revision.¹²

The studio's solution was to preserve the idea of Darwinism but eliminate the key villain in the story's conclusion. In fact, the producers chose to accentuate the Darwinian theme by removing the initial reference to Nophaie's Eastern education and replacing it with a half-hour prologue illustrating man's evolutionary history. The opening quote from Herbert Spencer sets the tone: "We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong . . . a survival of the fittest."^{13a} The film then traces the history of human life, beginning with cavemen, followed by basket makers, slab house people, and cliff dwellers.

From *The Vanishing American*, with Richard Dix (right). The film questioned government reservation policies, and in doing so brought the Indian problem to the fore. The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

Invaders from the north drive the cliff dwellers from their lands and claim they are mightier than any other people in the world. Fate, then, takes a turn: the Spaniard's arrival in the sixteenth century marks the gradual decline of Indian power and conquest. Three hundred years later, Kit Carson tells the Indians not to oppose the government and to live on reservations, but those who follow his advice are left with meager, unfertile lands. The story continues to the present—the period just prior to World War I.

The remainder of the film dramatizes the Indians' struggle for survival. The story's villains emerge as ruthless characters who enjoy humiliating Indians. The most corrupt is Booker (Noah Beery), assistant to Indian agent Amos Halliday (Charles Crockett). Halliday represents the epitome of bureaucracy: he is too obsessed with documenting and filing ("efficiency is his motto") to notice his assistant's cheating. Booker fits Grey's description of White agents: he kicks elderly Indians aside when they block the door; he cheats the Indians out of their horses; he shoves children away; he sexually attacks Marion; and he starves the Indians and relocates them to poor lands. Paradoxically, Booker is promoted to head agent when Halliday is transferred, but in keeping with the story department's request he is ultimately killed by an arrow.

In contrast to Grey's novel, no missionary appears in the film; Booker instead embodies all that is evil. When Nophaie returns from the war in France, he discovers a degenerate reservation with Booker as its new head agent. Booker relocates the Indians to poor lands so he can profit from the fertile soil, and the Nopahs fall ill and some die. In one scene, an Indian veteran envisions a family homecoming but returns to find an empty hogan and a deceased wife. The major crime is that the federal government allows men like Booker to thrive.

The relationship between Nophaie (Richard Dix) and Marion (Lois Wilson) becomes in the film more condensed and restrained. Because all references to the East were removed, the romance begins on the reservation where Marion is employed as a school-teacher. Unlike the novel, the film stresses Nophaie's cultural "lag"; Marion, for example, must teach him to read the Bible. Nophaie's lack of White education eliminates deeply rooted conflicts, and he does not truly encounter White culture until he enlists in the army.

The film's conclusion examines the Indians' fate in White civilization. Particularly significant is Nophaie's death from a gunshot wound. In this scene, the Indians gather en masse to put an end to Booker's cheating; Booker and his men open fire with a machine gun, and the Indians retaliate. Nophaie, who believes that violence will solve nothing, tries to stop the fighting but is accidentally shot by a shell-shocked Indian soldier (the Shoie character in Grey's novel). Presumably the idea of Nophaie succumbing to the flu lacked the spectacle and grandeur movie audiences expected; moreover, death by disease as a sign of cultural weakness seemed to justify White supremacy. The hero, instead, is killed by his own people when an Indian soldier suffering from hallucinations unknowingly fires into the crowd.

Nophaie's death represents a new era for the Nopahs. As soon as Nophaie is shot the fighting ceases, and as Marion holds him, he sees a vision of his people returning to their homelands. Marion reads from the Bible that he who loses life will receive it—a symbolic reminder that Nophaie's death will save the Nopahs from mass extermination. As Nophaie's body is carried through town, the closing titles appear: "For races of men come and go . . . but the mighty stage remains."

Paramount's conclusion is romanticized and idealistic: as Grey indicated, one individual's death saves the entire race. Nophaie is, in a sense, sacrificed for his people. *The Vanishing American* offers a Christian-like solution to Native American problems while avoiding a pragmatic explanation. If this appears too contrived, it is not due to the film's weakness, for *The Vanishing American* hardly purports to solve anything; rather, it exposes a problem and forewarns the audience. By informing the public of the Indians' predicament, the film accomplished its initial task.

Production

The Vanishing American was Paramount's potential successor to James Cruze's 1923 epic *The Covered Wagon*; the studio employed thousands of Indians and engaged in extensive location work. The film's prologue and conclusion called for a large-scale ef-

fort to capture Native American life on the screen. Believing that its labor would affect box-office attendance, Paramount plunged into massive production work. A clause in Zane Grey's contract stipulated that his stories be shot on location, so Paramount transported approximately 500 people to Arizona (see Brownlow 1978:344). *The Vanishing American* was six months in production, and every scene (except the modern war sequence) was filmed on location in northern Arizona and Utah. In addition to its large crew, Paramount employed 10,000 Indians and established major camps at 200-mile intervals across the Navajo Reservation.^{13b}

Producing *The Vanishing American* involved several phases. The Government Post of Mesa was built at Moenavi, and materials for the site's twenty-six buildings were hauled from Flagstaff. The production's largest phase was Sagi Canyon, where cliff dwellings were built for the film's prologue. Lasky recalled that the crew brought 24,000 feet of lumber by truck from Kayenta and an additional 28 miles by mule pack to the canyon. The last phase required the transportation of fourteen cars and ten truckloads of Indian extras and their families to Monument Valley. The crew spent four months in Arizona, battling obstacles such as 135° temperatures, blinding sandstorms, quicksand traps, and a dam break that sent costumes and props a half mile into the desert.¹⁴ If the environment was not bad enough, Lois Wilson remembered that water was rationed and several meals were missed because there was nothing to eat.¹⁵

Promotion

Paramount capitalized on its extensive production efforts to lure the public to its American Indian epic. Program notes boasted of the location shooting: "Filmed two hundred miles from civilization amid the wild and majestic Arizona canyons," and the souvenir book contained five pages of production information.¹⁶ The major advertising theme was the film's tribute to the American Indian, which Paramount pushed to the hilt. The *Exhibitor's Trade Review* advised theaters to "stress the Indian stuff," and local ads glorified the Indians' struggle against White civilization (see Cruikshank 1925:35). The film's original ad, an illustration of "The Story of the Red Man's Stand Against Civilization," showed Nophaie standing in the foreground waving his hand toward the city's horizon.¹⁷

Paramount's campaign conveyed a plea to sympathize with the Indians' fate. The cover of one program showed Nophaie kneeling with his hands outstretched toward the sky, while another portrayed a slumped warrior on a horse, adapted from Fraser's famous statue *The End of the Trail*. An essay by A. P. Waxman depicted the Indian's noble departure as he saluted civilization and bequeathed his country to the

Whites.¹⁸ The studio, in keeping with its Indian theme, planned an intensive campaign for *The Vanishing American's* world premiere in Charlotte, North Carolina. The town's Imperial theater served as a "trial horse" for important Famous Player pictures, and the film was booked for a week during a "Made in Carolinas" exposition. Prior to the film's opening, a streetcar covered with twenty-four publicity sheets toured the city, men in Indian costumes distributed rotos and readers, and a 40-foot banner hung across the town's main street. The film's first showing—on Sunday, September 20, 1925, at exactly one minute past midnight—was supplemented by Lois Wilson's appearance and a young woman (in Indian costume) singing "The Indian Love Call."¹⁹ The publicity proved effective: the film grossed \$9,000 the first week, and the *Charlotte Observer* declared it "greater than *The Covered Wagon*."²⁰

Audience Response to the Film

The initial success in Charlotte encouraged Paramount to continue planning road shows for *The Vanishing American*. The studio booked the film at one theater in each city, beginning with the Criterion in New York and later openings across the country.²¹ The New York premiere, on October 15, included an elaborate display of Navajo rugs, Hopi pottery, and Zuni baskets in the Criterion's lobby.²² The publicity was of little avail; several days later, *Variety* warned exhibitors that the film "failed to live up to advance work done for it." While the trade journal believed the picture would bring money, it was far from a box-office winner.²³ *Variety's* prediction appeared accurate: after a week's showing at the Criterion, *The Vanishing American* peaked at \$10,735 on October 24, and by December 12 the weekly gross fell to \$6,000.²⁴ Box-office records indicate other films in New York pulled in larger weekly audiences: for example, *Phantom of the Opera* (Astor) grossed \$14,000 on September 12; *The Merry Widow* (Embassy) reached \$10,600 on November 7; and *Stella Dallas* (Apollo) brought in almost \$15,000 the week ending November 28.²⁵

One can only speculate why *The Vanishing American* lagged. Perhaps its content lacked the excitement and inspiration movie audiences expected in early Westerns. Several critics chided the film's melodramatic story line, faulting Zane Grey's overwrought theme. John Grierson, the controversial English publicist, accused Paramount of failing to turn a second-rate story into a first-rate picture. Grierson was especially critical of the film's "cheap and trivial" love story and of Marion's treating Nophaie "like an imbecile" (Grierson 1926:1755–1756). Others cited the film's

poor editing and endless subtitles and recommended reconstructing the narrative.²⁶ A few critics even reproached the film for failing to expose the other side of the story—the Oklahoma Indians living in luxurious squalor on huge oil royalties.²⁷

Indian educators criticized the film as unfair to both Native Americans and government agents. One reservation teacher was annoyed that Nophaie was uneducated and sought out the schoolteacher for religious instruction. Presumably the critic believed that adult Indians were well educated and familiar with Christianity. The film's presentation of a pagan Indian who retained his heritage was offensive to some reservation employees; furthermore, the critic also claimed that the picture's title was a misnomer because the Indian population was steadily increasing (see Hannon 1926). In their enthusiastic effort to convert, few teachers and missionaries could understand White exploitation of Indian acculturation.

Attacks against *The Vanishing American* were minimal. Most reviewers grasped the film's social theme and praised Hollywood for a bold effort. Newspapers lauded the film's departure from the Indian's image as the antagonist: the *Chicago Herald and Examiner* observed that the film was rather unusual and gave Indians a "lucky break"; the *Los Angeles Times* explained that the Indian was no longer a heavy menace but the story's protagonist; and the *Newark Star Eagle* commended Paramount's frank depiction of the White man's inhumanity to the Red man.²⁸ Local advertisements attempted to sell the theme of the Indians' plight while blaming White aggression against the "first Lords of the Western continent."²⁹ One paper warned Whites that the film would reveal unpleasant things about themselves.³⁰

Several reviewers who endorsed the film hinted that the story would appeal only to a certain group—those interested in Native American history and policies.³¹ Paramount's audience may have been limited: the fact that some people sympathized with Indians hardly indicates an entire nation's concern. Perhaps the studio's effort to publicize the Indian's plight failed to reach Americans unfamiliar with Native American conditions. Viewers who expected another "Western spectacle" were probably disappointed. Following its long prologue, *The Vanishing American* lapsed into a dramatic tale of individual relations that was tedious to the average audience. While Indian reform was a significant issue, many Americans were unprepared to accept the Indians' predicament as entertainment. The lack of attendance may have indicated that Paramount had overestimated the public's interest; yet this assumption does not belie the studio's attempt to illustrate the destruction of a people's heritage.

Consequences

The mild reception accorded *The Vanishing American* prompted Paramount's release of *Redskin* four years later. Unlike *The Vanishing American*, *Redskin* avoided a melodramatic tale and concentrated on clashes of cultures against hostile environments. The main character—a Navajo Indian—is rejected from both White and Indian societies but defends his people in a battle over oil claims. The hero wins the land title and allocates the wealth to Navajos and Pueblos, thereby avoiding an intertribal war. *Redskin* offered what *The Vanishing American* lacked: action and excitement accompanying the portrayal of Indians in a positive light.

Other silent feature films presented sympathetic portrayals of Indians. Many, like Helen Hunt Jackson's story *Ramona* (remade in 1928), dealt with half-breeds and their struggle for identity within antagonistic societies. Films such as *The Great Alone* (1922) and *The Half Breed* (1922) portrayed educated half-breeds battling White prejudices. *The Golden Strain* (1925) and *The Flaming Frontier* (1926) depicted White agents who cheated Indians out of food and other supplies. In *Drums of the Desert* (1927), the U.S. cavalry arrests a White who seeks to swindle Indian land for its oil.

The standard "marginal man" theme emerged in several films. In *The Scarlet West* (1926) an educated Indian returns to his reservation where he is scorned by his own people. The Indian becomes an army captain and falls in love with a White woman but gives up both to return to his native homeland. Alan Hale's *Braveheart* (1925) best illustrated the educated Indian's dilemma, with the main character defending his tribe's fishing territories while averting hostilities against his White background. The Indian's love for a White woman was thwarted by his skin color; ultimately, she returns to her own people and he becomes the tribe's chief. In *Braveheart*, the Indian is the hero, settling racial disputes and relinquishing White civilization.³² *Braveheart* showed that the Indian as noble savage seldom adapted to White culture.

The Vanishing American's power lay in its ability to isolate the Indian problem; while White injustice was a common theme, other silent features avoided dealing with it as a major issue.³³ Paramount chose a controversial topic in the midst of reformer's discontent and gambled with its public appeal. The film's social statement accurately described the Indians' situation: in 1928, the federal government confirmed what reformers had been protesting for years. After seven months of extensive fieldwork, the Institute of Government Research released the "Meriam Report," which stated that the majority of Indians were extremely poor and not adjusted to the economic and social system of White civilization. The report cited several major problems: poor health among Indians

as compared to Whites; living conditions that were conducive to the spread of disease; the destruction of the economic basis of Indian culture by White civilization; and too much suffering and discontent among Indians to believe they were reasonably satisfied. In addition, the report criticized the Indian Service for its lack of adequate personnel and absence of trained superintendents (see Meriam et al. 1928:3–14). The Meriam Report called for the government to alter its stance and thereby laid the foundation for eventual social and economic improvements within Indian reservations.

The Vanishing American represents Hollywood's response to the reform issue. The film required its audience to examine Native American conditions and to consider the Indians' predicament. While the film portrayed Whites as the dominant race and Christianity as an alternative solution, it addressed a controversial issue in an outspoken manner. *The Vanishing American* epitomized Hollywood's early ambivalence toward American Indian policy, revealing an industry grappling with racial attitudes while attempting to redefine Native American images.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

- 1 "Producing Indian Film Was a Stupendous Task," *New York Times*, 20 September 1925 and *The Vanishing American Souvenir Program*, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, New York City.
- 2 Frank Gruber, *Zane Grey* (Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Company, 1970; 2nd printing), p. 176. Gruber quoted this passage from Grey's diary of 7 June 1922.
- 3 Jackson quotes Grey from his letter to William H. Briggs, 23 May 1924, p. 81.
- 4 Nopah is a fictitious name, referring to the Navajo tribe.
- 5 For a survey of Native American population since the colonial period, see Henry F. Dobyns, *Native American Historical Demography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).
- 6 Edward Everett Dale, *The Indians of the Southwest: A Century of Development under the United States* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), pp. 207–208. Dale quotes his statistics from "Tuberculosis Among the North American Indians," 65–69, Senate Committee Print, 67 Cong., 4 sess., Washington, D.C., 1923.
- 7 Jackson argues that Grey was a close student of Darwin and incorporated many evolutionary themes into his novels. See *Zane Grey*, pp. 58–62.

- 8 See, for example, the following issues: *Current History Magazine* (July 1923), pp. 630–636; *Review of Reviews* (April 1926), pp. 435–436; *Outlook* (18 November 1925), pp. 441–444; *Collier's* (12 May 1923), p. 13; and *Scientific American* (January 1926), pp. 5–7.
- 9 Mrs. Otto Heinigke, "Address of the President," The National Board of Young Women's Christian Associations, Proceedings from the meeting held 4 December 1925 in New York, pp. 28–29, Huntington Free Library, Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, New York.
- 10 John W. Clark (Executive Secretary), *Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the National Indian Association*, Published by the Executive Board, December 1925, pp. 5–6, Huntington Free Library.
- 11 Flora Warren Seymour, "Our Indian Problem I—The Delusion of the Sentimentalists," *The Forum* 50, No. 3 (March 1924), pp. 274–280 and Mary Austin, "II—The Folly of the Officials," pp. 281–288.
- 12 Lathrop, M.C., "Story Synopsis and Comment," 8 April 1923, Paramount Collection, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA. Correspondence from the Paramount Collection is the courtesy of John E. O'Connor of the New Jersey Institute of Technology.
- 13 a. George Seitz, dir., *The Vanishing American*, with Richard Dix and Lois Wilson, Paramount, 1925. This 16mm print is the courtesy of Paul Killiam of New York.
b. Production information was taken from Lucien Hubbard, "How *The Vanishing American* Was Made," in *The Vanishing American Souvenir Program*, 1925, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, and *New York Times*, 20 September 1925.
- 14 Hubbard, "How *The Vanishing American* Was Made," and *New York Times*, 20 September 1925.
- 15 *Picture Play*, January 1926, p. 91.
- 16 *Program Note for Accadia Theater*, 1925 and *The Vanishing American Souvenir Program*, 1925, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.
- 17 "Clippings from *The Vanishing American*," original 1926 ad for the film, Museum of Modern Art Film Studies Center, New York City.
- 18 *Program Notes for the Accadia and Criterion Theaters*, 1925, and *The Vanishing American Souvenir Program*, 1925, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.
- 19 The early morning Monday screening was due to Sunday closing laws in Charlotte.
- 20 "Indian Picture Has Premiere in Charlotte," *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, 3 October 1925, p. 19; "Vanishing Gross \$9,000," *Variety*, 7 October 1925, p. 35; and "Vanishing American Stunts Pulled on Big Scale," *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, 24 October 1925, p. 32.
- 21 "Dix's *Vanishing American* to be Famous Player Road Show," *Variety*, 30 September 1925, p. 31.
- 22 "Criterion Turns Indian Lodge for *Vanishing American*," *Exhibitor's Herald*, 24 October 1925, p. 30.
- 23 Rev. of *The Vanishing American*, *Variety*, 21 October 1925, p. 34.
- 24 "Variety's First Run Box Office Records," *Film Daily Yearbook*, 1926, p. 253.
- 25 *Film Daily Yearbook*, 1926, pp. 249, 253. Admission prices for the New York theaters ranged from \$1.65 to \$2.20. The Astor and Apollo had a seating capacity greater than 1,100; the Criterion and Embassy could seat only 600.
- 26 *Mirror*, 16 October 1925 and *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, 2 March 1926 from "The Richard Dix Scrapbook": *The Chamberlain & Lyman Brown Theatrical Agency Collection of Dramatic Scrapbooks*, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center. All local newspaper reviews were taken from "The Richard Dix Scrapbook" unless otherwise indicated. Due to partial deterioration, portions of newspaper titles and dates were illegible.
- 27 *Variety*, 21 October 1925, p. 34 and *The Boston Traveler*, 1 December 1925.
- 28 *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, 2 March 1926; *Los Angeles Times*, 13 March 1926; and *Newark Star Eagle*, 16 January 1926.

- 29 See, for example, the following advertisements: *Washington Times*, 12 December 1925; *Providence News*, 2 December 1925; *Canton Repository*, 26 December 1925; *Akron Times Press*, 11 January 1926; and *Atlanta American*, 31 January 1926.
- 30 *Graphic*, 16 October 1925.
- 31 The following newspaper reviews promoted the film's historical and social value: *Washington Post*, 14 December 1925; *Sun*, 21 November 1925; *Telegram*, 16 October 1925; *Detroit Times*, 23 January 1926; and *Graphic*, 19 January 1926.
- 32 Alan Hale, dir., *Braveheart*, with Rod La Rocque and Lillian Rich, Pathé, 1925. Courtesy of Yale University Film Study Center.
- 33 It was not until 1933 that Hollywood again dealt with corrupt agents in Alan Crosland's *Massacre*, a story of White exploitation of Native Americans during the Depression.

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