



I have argued at length (in *Movie 21*), that Altman's work – maddeningly uneven, frequently confused, pretentious and dislikeable, sometimes brilliant – is central to the movement of the American cinema of the past decade; even before Watergate, he was the ideal post-Watergate director. He is an artist who is no longer able to believe in anything, and scarcely even wants to; his tendency, therefore, is to ridicule rather than to seek. In this respect, his work is in marked contrast to that of the other central figure of contemporary Hollywood, Arthur Penn: the release of *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* just two weeks after *The Missouri Breaks* makes for a most instructive comparison.

Both directors are deeply involved in America and Americanness; where Penn repeatedly searches for tentatively proffered alternatives to established American society, Altman can only heap on his contempt – the ending of *Nashville*, with the crowd's mindless chanting of 'It don't worry me', after the assassination of one star and the arbitrary, pointless birth of another, epitomises his view of his country. The individual is never cleanly separable from the ideology within which he exists – it is deeply structured within him. Consequently, merely to despise one's country is merely to despise oneself; the cynicism out of which Altman's films are made is basically a form of self-hatred, which his arrogance thinly masks.

He has said that *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* is about his contribution to the bicentenary celebrations; in relation to his career so far, it is a perfectly appropriate one. The film tells us little about the Indians, but a great deal about the effect on the white psyche of their subjugation. It is obvious enough (the Western has demonstrated it repeatedly) that to the American national consciousness the Indians are more than a people and a fact of history: associated with nature, freedom and the wilderness, and representing a whole different intuitive perception of life, they are also internalised as the libido repressed by the Puritan consciousness. The destruction of the Indian was the destruction, symbolically, of the instinctual self, a murder to which the skyscraper is, in its dehumanisation and its rejection of the earth, a fitting memorial.

The fact that, even in these days of attempted atonement, the Hollywood cinema remains quite impotent to create a sense of an authentic Indian culture is in itself extremely significant. In his film, Altman presents white American civilisation as a hollow shell, emptied of all reality and authenticity: only Sitting Bull has access to reality, and the

film can present him only as an enigma, remaining external to him like the participants and managers of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. The film is about the construction of the American ideal, the American hero validated by his suppression of the Indian, the Ideal raised on the denial of all instinctual life, hence spurious, fraudulent, self-deceptive.

The Wild West Show is precisely that: a spectacle, a mere surface display. With the denial of the Indians and all that they represent goes the ludicrous attempt to annexe to the sham heroic ideal the superficialities of European culture, in the persons of the succession of continental sopranos Buffalo Bill (Paul Newman) imports, as mistresses and status symbols. None of the whites is satisfied: Altman shows each at some point (and Buffalo Bill repeatedly) caught in moments of failure, self-doubt, vulnerability, with the sense that it is ultimately themselves that they are cheating. In humiliating the Indian the white man humiliates himself; in destroying the Indian he destroys himself. The white men, inwardly recognising their own emptiness, are trapped in awareness of time and transience; for the Indian, able to live intuitively, in harmony with the earth's movement, time doesn't exist. Two key scenes in the film beautifully sum up this opposition: Sitting Bull's ride out from camp to observe a ritual, totally oblivious to the chaos and panic his unexplained temporary exodus precipitates; Evelyn Lear's rendering of 'The Last Rose of Summer', moving all the white people to futile, essentially self-pitying tears.

Only Anne Oakley (Geraldine Chaplin) feels any degree of empathy with the Indians, as the Show's only woman performer struggling to assert herself in a man's world. Hence the beauty of the film's last shot. Earlier, with the troupe posed for a photograph, Sitting Bull and his Indian interpreter Halsey attempt to stand beside Annie; Buffalo Bill, having tried unsuccessfully to force them to stand with the other Indians, is cynically arranging to have white faces pasted over their when the news of the presidential visit disrupts the sitting altogether. At the end of the film, Sitting Bull is dead, Halsey has sacrificed his integrity by acting Sitting Bull in the show, and we are left with Buffalo Bill's fixed mad smile of triumph in the arena. Then the final credits are run over the photograph that was never taken: Sitting Bull and Halsey standing in stoic pride beside a smiling Annie: a wish fulfillment made poignant by our knowledge of its impossibility.

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