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**Dissecting the Commodified: The Frontier
as Hyperreality in Robert Altman's
*Buffalo Bill and the Indians***

Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* premiered on June 24, 1976, days ahead of the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, and almost simultaneously with Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Similarly to Eastwood's picture, though in different aspects, Altman's film is characteristically "strange and daring," to use Roger Ebert's phrase ("*The Outlaw Josey Wales*"), in that it breaks away from the generic formulas of the Western, at the same time attempting a revision of the discourse of mass-culture historiography. Even though Altman shrugged off the notion that he had intended his picture as a befitting commentary on the occasion, it is more than tempting to see *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* as a revisionist indictment thrown in the face of the jubilant nation (a speculation which may, perhaps, help to account for the film's disappointing box office ratings and scant critical acclaim—after all, despite its cinematographic shortcomings, ill timing, and the waning popularity of the Western at the time of its release, it is hard to discard *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* as a failure in filmmaking). Despite the prevailing disregard for the picture as an unfortunate lapse following some of Altman's most renowned projects, i.e. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*, the film's original generic framework may be appreciated as an intriguing, if dragging, merger of a revisionist Western and a behind-the-scenes ensemble piece which peeks into the lives of stage performers to dissect a prevalent epistemological discourse. Not only does such a combination allow Altman to embrace the falsified grandeur of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and uncover the detestable practices beyond the show's heroic rendition of the genocide of Native Americans, amounting to an apathetic "death march of commodified suffering" (Atkinson), but it also serves as a premise to a more general questioning of the mass culture aesthetics of representation through reconstruction.

It is apparent throughout the film that Altman's (re)vision is predominantly informed by the categories of artificiality, appropriation and irony. In this paper, I would like to explore how *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* governs these categories

in its reading of what has become the commodified representation of Frontier history, fabricated by Cody to reinforce his status as America's first mass-culture celebrity and satisfy the ideological requirements of industrialized popular culture (Slotkin 17), as well as to probe the film's interpretation as a critique of America's obsessive discourse of recreation through carnal reproduction. The paper places particular emphasis on Altman's representation of Buffalo Bill as a demiurge historian of Manifest Destiny, dissection of the hyperreal qualities of Cody's enterprise, and the contrapuntal positioning of Sitting Bull as an ironic historian, at odds with the concept of Cody's "object lesson."

Buffalo Bill, the Prophet of Frontier Simulacra

Altman's adaptation revolves around Sitting Bull's four-month stint as performer at William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West. The revue's regulars feature Cody himself, former soldier, buffalo hunter, scout, showman, character from and writer of dime novels, and a self-appointed historian of the Frontier, sharp-shooting champion Annie Oakley and her husband Frank Butler, as well as countless stunts and conjurers. The Hunkpapa chief, misrepresented in nineteenth-century pulp narratives as the "killer of Custer," is invited to the show for a series of guest appearances and, upon tough and tiresome bargaining, decides to accept the offer. However, instead of providing uncritical contributions to the show's program as envisioned by its producer (Salisbury) and owner (Cody), Sitting Bull's presence (mediated through his interpreter, William Halsey) turns out to disrupt the coherent vision of the Frontier's history and mar the ego of its number one star. Not only does Sitting Bull fail to comply with his responsibilities as a performer but he also undermines the ideology behind the script and implements his own political agenda, ending in a futile confrontation with president elect Grover Cleveland, who pays a visit to the camp as part of his honeymoon journey. As the president refuses to hear him, Sitting Bull leaves the show and (following a fast-forward to December 1890), news of his sudden death at the hand of tribal militiamen reach the Wild West, culminating in Buffalo Bill's nocturnal breakdown and its ensuing repression.

Simple and episodic, the plot in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* is of minor importance, as the film is primarily a metafiction about America's iconic representations of the past, in this case the popular discourse about the Wild West, particularly the genocide of the Indians of the Great Plains and the rise of America's proto-superhero. Altman's depiction of Buffalo Bill is a transition in which the self-referential character, whose identity revolves entirely around myths, to

the point where Bill no longer distinguishes between his scenic image and his actual life out of stage, proceeds from the mode of self-reassurance to that of self-questioning, gradually losing his faith in the adequacy of the historiographic value of his enterprise. Thus, Altman's Cody is elevated from an unambiguously pompous, self-conscious, fake superman to a figure capable of "metafictional rethinking of epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction" (Hutcheon 121). Altman utilizes the dime novel *oeuvre* surrounding Buffalo Bill the epic demigod to dig deeper and uncover Buffalo Bill the miserable demiurge.

In Altman's film, Buffalo Bill is a repulsive character of immeasurable artificiality, struggling to maintain his make-believe identity. We learn from the context that the film spans the initial period of Cody's activity as the proprietor of and chief performer on the "Wild West" (roughly from 1884 to 1890), which allows Altman to scrutinize the formative years of Buffalo Bill's legend and present him as a figure of totalistic vision, carefully designing his stature and weaving the narrative of his "Wild West Reality." Altman's Cody is a confidence man trampolined to stardom by the efforts of dime novelist Ned Buntline, whom Bill releases of his duties as soon as he discovers his own sufficiency as the show's editor. Carefully disposing of any nay-sayers from the board of editors, Cody surrounds himself with yes-men who cultivate his homogenous vision. A narcissistic (re)creator modeling history in concord with the sweeping ideology of westward expansion, he is the Euro-American child of Manifest Destiny, walking in the footsteps of what Louis Owens takes to be the subject of Whitman's "Facing West from California's Shores": "universalist, self-centered, exclusive of heterogeneity, and pleased and joyous about the whole endeavor" (16).

In crafting his image, Altman's Buffalo Bill can be read as a predecessor of America's passion for the hyperreal. Even though, as his employees observe, "he tells a pack of lies in front of witnesses like it was the truth and takes credit for the acts of heroism that he couldn't have done," he nonetheless passes as seemingly credible to his audiences. For, however incredible, Cody's vision emerges in response to America's desires for a ready-made and easily comprehensible creation story, solidifying its still insecure sense of identity at the end of an era (i.e. the closure of the Frontier). Within the show, Buffalo Bill acts as a heroic compaction of frontiersman qualities and a travel guide for those willing to embark on a vivid, feel-good journey through (the plastic recreation of) history. He nurtures his image, instilling reassurance against the crisis of selfhood of his Wild West consumers, staging his authenticity as a faithful reenactment of pioneer values. These machinations are particularly traceable at Cody's meeting with the newly elected president Grover Cleveland and his wife, to whom Buffalo Bill offers the comfort of his private suite:

President Grover Cleveland: Where will you sleep, Buffalo Bill?

Ed Goodman: You can sleep with me, Uncle Will.

William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody: No, Ed, I will sleep out on the prairie underneath the moon and listen to the lullaby of the coyotes. You see, I ain't always been a comfortable man.

President Grover Cleveland: You know, it's men like that that made this country what it is today!

Evocative of the dime-novel rhetoric and ironically feeding off the code of rugged masculinity, the bombastic dialogue not only further establishes Buffalo Bill's stature in the eyes of America's leader but, through Cleveland's unfeigned admiration for Cody's staged humility, also symbolically anoints him as the nation's moral leader. In fact, even though Bill spends the night drinking himself to sleep in the adjacent bar, his escapist binge and the fact that the very same night he dismisses Buntline, the maker of his myth and a mocking reminder of the unmanageable heterogeneity of Buffalo Bill's "real" story, does not prevent Cody from retaining his unified, public image, for all of this takes place behind the scenes, where access to the consumers of the hyperreal is prohibited.

Such a "sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn't suggest something . . . the insane abundance that makes the place believable," as Eco puts it in his famed essay on America's infatuation with realistic recreation (23), is indeed tempting to Buffalo Bill's propensity for magnitude, eventually prevailing in Cody's struggle for his own identity. Throughout the consecutive episodes of the film, Cody expands his superhuman repertoire by implanting his on-stage self with the attributes of general George Armstrong Custer, the cultural sublimation of white America's fearful fascination with the Frontier and a personified justification for the completion of the extermination and dispossession of the Plains Indians. Cody craves Custer's fame, knowing it will boost the attendance at his performances, add splendor to his own figure and lend historical credence to his figurative representations of the past. He stages countless reenactments of the battle of the Little Bighorn starring himself as Custer and, later on returning as Buffalo Bill to avenge the general's death in a duel with "the killer of Custer," i.e. Sitting Bull (in the actual Wild West performances, the role of the savage scape-goat was ascribed to Yellow Hand, a Cheyenne warrior killed in an accidental skirmish with Cody, who served as an army scout following Custer's fatal attack on the gathering of tribes at the Little Bighorn), taking the symbolical "first scalp for Custer" and providing the audience with a sense of closure. To successfully establish himself as the righteous heir of Custer's status in popular imagination, and to construe a sign that

will simultaneously be the thing, Altman's Cody attempts to mold himself into Custer's incarnation, growing facial hair, wearing a blond toupee and buckskin jackets, riding a white horse (an awful rider that Altman makes him to be), even adopting Custer's "Indian name" of Pahaska-Long Hair, and reassuring himself of one day becoming as genuine as "the real thing" ("Some day, my hair's gonna be as long as Custer's").

Thus, it is tempting to take Buffalo Bill for the foremost exponent of American mass culture's infatuation with history through carnal reproduction. To paraphrase Eco (7), in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, Cody constructs a full-scale model of Custer, with special care paid to the material (physiognomy, clothing, gestures, and—however unconsciously—character), but with everything more polished, shinier, protected against deterioration. He helps to absorb historical information through the reincarnation of the infamous general. Willing to speak of things he expects to be connoted as real, Cody spares no pains to make them seem real. Cody ultimately achieves the goal of positing himself as a chronicler of "real history" when, in the frenzied finale, he scalps "Sitting Bull" (played by William Halsey, in the eyes of the beholders, a more polished, shinier incarnation of the Hunkpapa medicine man, thus more convincing than Sitting Bull himself). The "completely fake" creation is identified with the "completely real" qualities and absolute unreality is offered as real presence.

Altman undermines Buffalo Bill's evolution as mythmaker and chronicler of fake reality in numerous episodes which strip Cody of his arduously developed aura of a man on familiar terms with "the real thing." Attempting to maintain his stage image outside of the arena and thus blur play and illusion into oneness, Cody's life is marred by absurdity and itself becomes a farcical reincarnation of his adventures, contributing to the ultimate fragmentation of Bill's identity. Two episodes are particularly indicative of his charlatanry as the prophet of Frontier simulacra, both of which challenge the idiosyncratic ideology adopted by Buffalo Bill in his "history lesson." The first is what Cody haughtily calls "a tough posse" in search of the aging Sitting Bull who has secretly left the show. In a brief, three-minute sequence, Altman piles up absurdities, exposing the conmanship behind the show's efforts to authenticate Bill as a paragon of Frontier skills and virtues. "Looking for an old man, a giant and five boys," Cody throws himself into a real-life staging of his revue, transforming the "absolute unreality" of the chase into a "real presence" of a makeshift Indian war and setting it up as another cowboy-and-Indian showdown in which Sitting Bull allegedly attempts to "outfox the fox" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). Cody leaves the camp in a Custer-like aura, accompanied by a farewell march of his orchestra, standard bearer carrying a customized Wild West banner, and fueling the paranoia of besiegement among

the staff, vowing to hunt down “the dangerous ones” (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*) and “protecting” his nephew from participation in the pursuit (“Down off that horse! Your mother would never forgive me”). For all its pomposity, the chase is bound to turn into a spectacular debacle, with Cody unintentionally yet brutally reducing himself to a parody of the myth he tries to live. His discomfort with the adopted hyperreal identity is apparent as he sourly regards the polished and shiny buckskin Custer jacket when preparing for departure (“Where the hell’s my real jacket?”). As one of Bill’s wingmen falls off the horse, the “escaped” Lakotas disappear on the horizon only to return on their own terms, forcing the posse to get back to the camp empty-handed. Reporting the event to the authorities, Cody’s henchmen swiftly come up with a makeshift excuse for the failure, blowing the Hunkpapa’s leave out of proportions (“Sitting Bull escapes in the middle of the night after first trying to burn down the arena”) and nourishing the myth of the savage killer of Custer, still capable of endangering the civilized center. Meanwhile, Buffalo Bill disgruntledly gazes at his portrait, a look of quiet doubt and disbelief on his face, as if grudgingly recognizing that the sign cannot become the thing.

The second sequence features the aforementioned staged fight between Cody and Halsey-Sitting Bull, entitled “Challenge for the Future. Buffalo Bill vs. Sitting Bull,” which might be read as the showman’s further questioning of the adequacy of his enterprise. In the film finale, the camera closes up on Cody’s face as he presents Halsey’s war bonnet to the raucous crowd. The artificiality of Buffalo Bill’s grin is ambiguous, strongly hinting at a sense of defeat, bitterness and terror, as if he comprehended the enormity of fabrication attained by the Wild West in its search for veracity. Buffalo Bill’s triumph and the complete fakeness of the duel’s scenario abolish the show’s pretense to absolute authenticity and turn Cody into a proto-celebrity fed by the desires of the masses and disjointed from the real he so meticulously seeks for. Cody’s fabrication has just become a self-perpetuating simulacrum, and Paul Newman’s face is that of a demiurge haunted by the vacuity of his creation.

A Failed History Lesson: The Futility of the Discourse of Carnal Reproduction

In the opening credits of *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, the venture is labeled “Robert Altman’s Absolutely Unique and Heroic Enterprise of Inimitable Lustre,” an ironic jab at the stilted rhetoric utilized by the original Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, and a foretold of Altman’s dissection of Cody’s discourse of carnal re-

production. Indeed, one of the film's main achievements is its ability to critically scrutinize the historical conditions conducive to the demand for productions in the grain of Buffalo Bill's show. After all, in Altman's retrospective it is not Cody who is the villain, for—as he maintains in one of the trademark monologues of Newman's career—Bill merely “give(s) them what they want” (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). Supplying the American imagination's demand for “the real thing,” Altman's Buffalo Bill resorts to the rhetoric of authenticity and coherence (controlled and reinforced by the Announcer's voice flowing from a bullhorn in the stands), which is mainly attained through the appropriation of Otherness within the narrative founded on the ideology of Manifest Destiny. His prospective audience is that of an insecure “country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a “real copy of the reality being presented,” as Eco puts it (4). The audience's craving for the real may have resulted from America's troublesome sense of identity as a former colony established in defiance of the British rule, attempting to anchor itself in history and tradition despite its youth, yet simultaneously struggling with its expansionist drive. This self questioning was no doubt deepened by the resonance of the concurrent announcement of the closure of the Frontier by F. J. Turner. In view of these ambiguities, Cody's show offered a comforting reassurance in its preservation of the familiar and relatively unambiguous system of reference which propelled the prevalent narratives on the history of the US within the context of its westward expansion.

Altman's picture uses the revision of Buffalo Bill's legacy as an occasion to question the adequacy of the historicizing discourse of mass-culture based on carnal reproduction, founded on the mainstream ideology of progress which obscured America's genocidal and racist practices. To use Linda Hutcheon's words, such a strategy “does not move the marginal to the center. It does not invert the valuing of centers into that of peripheries and borders, as much as use that paradoxical doubled positioning to critique the inside from both the outside and the inside” (69). Contrary to the viewer's expectations, the film—as an ensemble composition—does not feature a clear-cut central character and thus eludes a crude, revisionist flip of the center/periphery coin. Rather, as Hutcheon posits, Altman uses postmodernist poetics to reassess the futility of the myth of the Frontier internally and externally, respectively through his rendition of Buffalo Bill's artificial settlement as a degenerate utopia and by the insertion of Sitting Bull as the unwelcome co-narrator dodging Cody's overbearing efforts.

In his essay on Disneyland, Louis Martin defines a degenerate utopia as “an ideology realized in the form of myth” (qtd. in Eco, 43). In the light of this concept, Buffalo Bill's Wild West may be seen as first among America's numerous

attempts to implement a degenerate utopia, a trend launched by Cody and maintained by his successive peers in sweeping vision and imitative determination, crowned by such contemporary jewels of self-reference as the Neverland Ranch, Deadwood Historic District or Holy Land Experience. Paraphrasing Martin, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was a hyperrealistic undertaking, intended by Cody as "a picture to the eye" which no longer made its audience believe that what they witnessed was a mere reproduction of reality, but rather "the real thing" itself. Watching Altman, however, it is evident that Cody's vision is merely a seemingly coherent simulacrum of the past, a consumable sublimation of Euro-American desires and phobias, petrifying the aesthetics of the dime novel despite its best intentions to present "the foundation that was not built from heroes, but from the anonymous settlers, their home but a shack roofed in the sod" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). Altman's account of Buffalo Bill's theatricality exposes the appropriation of Otherness and the overriding of any encountered inconsistencies. The Wild West has been pronounced dead, yet Cody strives to salvage its experience by encapsulating it in his private microcosm, pierced through the pervasive nostalgia for the past palpable throughout the film.

Altman's Wild West show could also serve as a case in point of Baudrillard's claim that "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning . . . there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (qtd. in Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* 25). Sensing the end of an era and an ensuing ideological crisis, Buffalo Bill's revue offers consolation through the fabrication of myths (the posse and the duel with Sitting Bull) and a multiplication of semblances of the real. Altman's Cody struggles to attain the sense of reality by constructing a miniature Frontier bowl as envisioned by the canonical signifiers of colonial historiography. The show's premises are a conflation of Wild Westerners-turned performers: former scouts, gunslingers and sharpshooters, cowboys and Indians, buffalo hunters and buffaloes themselves, conmen and dime novelists who mastermind the operation, as well as material tokens of the past (the Deadwood Scene, Settler Cabin, Indian Village). Both the former and the latter are appropriated to Buffalo Bill's vision and certified as "the real thing" by Cody's protection of "all photographic rights and historic" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*), his careful selection of the Lakota employees ("I'm buying no ordinary Indian"), and the labeling of the displayed artifacts (each of the teepees on the show is authenticated by an enormous "Buffalo Bill's Indian Village" stamp). Peeking behind the Wild West's scenes, Altman's film gradually unveils a critique of the mainstream industry of historical reproduction and re-enactments as a product of ideological appropriation and preservation of the dominant discourse under the veil of objectivism. Altman shows the inner life

of the enterprise as a recreation of the fantasy of settler America, inhabited by Euro-American colonists, Native tribes and blacks, the latter two neatly segregated and governed by the implicit laws of racialism and miscegenation taboos. In one of the film's more hilarious and yet still bitter scenes, Altman gives a metafictional, parody account of the circumstances in which the famous group picture of the troupe was taken. The personnel pose for a group photograph, ominously reminded that "a hundred years from now, this picture will still be in existence, remember that. This is the way people will remember you" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). The show's editors painstakingly stage the photograph to be remembered as a faithful representation of the group, but the carefully devised composition is spoiled by Sitting Bull and his interpreter Halsey stubbornly standing directly next to Annie Oakley.

William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody: I don't wanna Sitting Bull standing next to Annie Oakley.

Nate Salisbury: Why?

William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody: Because I don't wanna Sitting Bull standing next to Annie Oakley. Fans won't like it. He should stand over there with the other Injuns.

William Halsey: Sitting Bull will stand by Annie Oakley.

...

Nate Salisbury: What do you want to do?

William F. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody: Let him stay where he is. We're gonna put Halsey's head and the hat on Buck Taylor and Sitting Bull's on Johnny Baker and vice versa. That way, those two Injuns will be over there with the other Injuns. And don't show'em the photograph!

The photograph scene succinctly ridicules any claims of Buffalo Bill as to the authenticity of his enterprise. The picture passes over the black handymen on the show, consequently immortalizing them quite literally as invisible men, their contributions to the show taken for granted, while the Lakotas, despite their cunning resistance and bargaining, are neutralized in their efforts to subvert the policy of miscegenation. If we assume what Hutcheon posits—"to parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it. . . . It opens the text and challenges its canonical reading" (126)— then, instead of reading the picture canonically as commemorative of "the only producers with courage to show the red and the white without taking sides" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*), we may decode the picture as an artifact of racist editing and a simulacrum devoid of its actual referent and marking the absence of what it

seemingly represents. In Altman's film, Buffalo Bill's segregationist plotting and bizarre editing which surround the landmark photograph forebode Snyder Act, disenfranchisement and segregation, at the same time serving as a metafictional sneak preview of Hollywood's hyperreality of eugenics and photo editing. As for the authenticity of the show's methodology of historical recreation, it "is not historical, but visual. Everything looks real, and therefore it is real; in any case the fact that it seems real is real, and the thing is real even if, like Alice in Wonderland, it has never existed" (Eco 16). Still, just as history, so does the show's multiplicity escape Cody's absolutism. The camp buzzes with a chaotic rumpus of voices, an effect of Altman's signature overlapping dialogues, a polyphony of disjointed, personal narratives which inadvertently anchor the show in history. The real thing is there, albeit uninvited.

"Bad Bull," or an Ironic History Lesson

In an interpretation of Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* as a critique of attempts at historicization with the aid of carnal reconstruction, it is impossible to overestimate the significance of the Lakota tandem of Sitting Bull and William Halsey. Within the scope of such a critique, their role in Altman's ruminations on history is seen as twofold. First, the two constitute a contrapuntal current to the discourse of historical appropriation implied by the formula of the Wild West. Second, Sitting Bull's and Halsey's intrusion allows Altman to suggest a different, far more complex and inclusive reading of history with the use of irony.

In *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, the eponymous Indians stand out from among the ensemble thanks to their ability to undermine the epistemological value of Cody's enterprise and transcend its racist typology. They are the Others that the historiography produced by the desires of mass-culture fails to convey. Defying the expectations of the dominant narrative, the two are "anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, peripheral figures," criticizing the center from the outside (Hutcheon, 114). Contrary to the projections of the show's personnel, Sitting Bull turns out to be disappointingly devoid of the aura of savagery and nobility that his employers project on him. Dwarfed by the towering Halsey, he is a "little fella," seemingly "getting smaller every year" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). The Hunkpapa chief challenges the notion of the epic Indian, bound to perish, inscribed in the past and reduced to a commodity in the present. Instead of meekly playing out his role as scripted by Buffalo Bill and serving as the show's mascot, he remains a thorn in white America's Frontier fable—a "bad Bull," as Cody's nephew mockingly names him, scolding the chief

for starting Buffalo Bill's private jukebox at daybreak and waking everybody up. Sitting Bull's defiance in Altman's film is driven by his awareness that "these bosses think they know what an Indians should look like. He should be tall and lean. He should have nice clothes. He should look only into the distance and act as though his head is in the clouds. . . . Of course, he knew it was all fake" (Welch 51). There is a striking contrast in Altman's depiction of Sitting Bull as a member of the show's cast and as Buffalo Bill's nocturnal projection of Indianness. While the actual Sitting Bull is a withered, skinny aging man, shabbily clothed, mounting a scraggy horse, yet empowered by his resistance to subjugation, the hyperreal Hunkpapa becomes its direct opposite as Altman's gaze turns into that of Cody's, cladding Sitting Bull with imposing "Indian" attributes (such as the richly embroidered buckskin shirt, flamboyant war bonnet, and a bone breastplate; to top all these, the Hunkpapa is fiddling with the standard of the 7th Cavalry) and reducing the chief to an aestheticized fantasy and a mute witness to Cody's hallucinatory monologue. Sitting Bull successfully counters this misrepresentation by continuing to venture what the white personnel deems as unthinkable, failing to accept his defenselessness against the exclusive practices of Buffalo Bill's "history lesson." His unpredictability as guest star on the show is a reminder of the inconvenient truth of genocide and dispossession accompanying the progress of Euro-American civilization, which the epic history misconstrued by Cody obfuscates, even if this reminder is repressed and "doesn't make any difference," as president Cleveland argues, obstinately refusing to recognize the subjectivity of Sitting Bull and preferring to conveniently discard the chief by labeling him "a wonderful comedian" (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*).

The second function traceable in the presence of Sitting Bull and William Halsey in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* is their significance in Altman's subversion of the commodified history of the Frontier. Altman's critique of the legacy of Buffalo Bill's Wild West is pervaded by irony. To identify its origin, we may refer to Hayden White's seminal hierarchy of figurative modes of historical discourse, among which particular importance is attached to irony, a superior mode of language thanks to its links to self-awareness, critical distance towards one's own claims, and its origins in the dissatisfaction with a reality which failed to fulfill high expectations sparked by revolutionary ideas (Domańska 17). In Altman's picture, irony stems from a profound dissatisfaction with the ideology of Manifest Destiny, implying the obliteration of any obstructions to America's westward expansion. The Lakota duo in *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* act as ironic commentators on Cody's coherently emplotted history of the Wild West, questioning what a common consumer of Buffalo Bill's "object lesson" takes for granted. Their skeptical language is utilized by Altman to dissect the fallacy of

mass-culture representation of US development into a superpower at the expense of marginalized minorities. According to *Sitting Bull*, such a version of history is “nothing but disrespect for the dead” (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). As their irony often employs ambiguity, the Lakotas’ apt commentary on the inadequacy of Bill’s enterprise is trivialized as “murky logic” (*Buffalo Bill and the Indians*). Dismissed by *Buffalo Bill* and his entourage, this murky logic of irony still exposes the numerous faults of a homogenous approach to history and rejects the appropriation of the periphery on the verge of annihilation. In *Sitting Bull’s* and Halsey’s bitterly ironic interludes, we may encounter traces of Gerald Vizenor’s concept of “Postindian warriors of simulations” (*Fugitive Poses* 4) struggling for the retention of tribal presence in the discourse of the center, employing the simulations of fake Indianness contrived by that discourse to combat cultural subjugation and restore a sense of empowerment to their people.

As a revisionist western, Altman’s work is flawed, mainly due to its formal ambiguity and the “murky logic” of its narration. *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* fails to deliver what may have been expected of it following the success of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. And yet, even if its resonance was initially drowned by more powerful pictures of the period, *Sitting Bull’s History Lesson* may still be appreciated for its unique, if flawed, composition, as well as its attempt to incorporate tricksterism into the Hollywood mainstream, a notable figure of speech usually overlooked in Euro-American representations of the Native American genocide. Continuously worthy of attention is also the film’s extensive portrayal of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* as a pioneering enterprise in the nationwide business of reproduction of history, propelled by America’s obsessive quest for “the real thing.”

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