Films Won't Change Image of Indians

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Contact: Dick Kubik

FILMS WON'T CHANGE IMAGE OF INDIANS

DAYTON, Ohio -- Despite the Oscar-winning "Dances With Wolves," movies probably won't change the average American's image of the Indians, says a University of Dayton expert on the American Western.

"It's easy and reflexive to applaud 'Dances With Wolves' as the new sensitivity, " says F. Anthony Macklin, associate professor of English and former editor of Film Heritage magazine.

"But while times change, institutions and biases remain constant. As an educator and an idealist, I'd like to think films change the way we look at others. But as an educator and a realist, I have my doubts."

Macklin points to such Oscar-winning films as "The Deer Hunter" and "Platoon," both of which dealt with the Vietnam experience but which, Macklin feels, did very little to effect any change.

"What did we learn from such films in a positive manner? Probably very little. My students don't know about My Lai," he says.

Macklin, who published an in-depth interview with John Wayne while editing the journal Film Heritage, says that "Wayne is an easy target for revisionists, but his work is vastly misunderstood and underrated.

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300 College Park  Dayton, Ohio 45469-1679  (513) 229-3241  FAX: (513) 229-3063
"In 'Stagecoach,' directed by John Ford, Wayne did shoot once and several Indians fell down. But in 'The Searchers,' a film many feel is the best Western ever made, Wayne played Ethan Edwards, an alienated racist, who wound up without family or friends at the end.

'Fort Apache,' another Wayne/Ford film, was a very ironic portrait about the illusionary image of heroism. And in 'Cheyenne Autumn,' directed by Ford in 1964, an elegaic portrait of the heroic flight of the Cheyenne to their homeland was presented to the movie-going public."

But that film also did very little to change the average American's view of the Indians.

"While we like to say we are for freedom, against propaganda and skeptical of government, during the recent Gulf War we came out against freedom of the press, we thirsted for propaganda and we were almost totally dependent on government word.

"What we said to ourselves was that if there were any new My Lais, we didn't want to hear about them. We didn't learn much from the films about Vietnam, and I doubt that we will learn much from 'Dances With Wolves.' It's always been that way."

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For media interviews, contact F. Anthony Macklin at (513) 229-3434.