Consistently *indian* in the Gaze of the Spectator: Urban *indians* in Kent MacKenzie’s *The Exiles*

Christian Metz, well-known film scholar, is compelling because he seeks to combine cinema with the experience and role of the spectator, rather than simply focus on the film itself. In his piece, he asserts the Lacanian psychoanalysis-based notion that “[f]ilm is like the mirror” (Metz 171). In this sense, then, the spectator identifies with something during the watching of a film. According to his piece “Identification, Mirror,” what the spectator identifies with is the camera: “And it is true that he identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at…” (Metz 174-5). The idea of identifying with the camera allows that the spectator is both very close to, and yet distant from the action on the screen; the spectator and the camera, like the mirror, are within a certain “emplacement” (Metz 171). Metz notes a similar contradiction in the gaze of the spectator, calling him “transcendental yet radically deluded” (Metz 176). If the spectator is both transcendent and deluded, one can argue that spectator feels secure—and therefore deluded—in his transcendence, feeling that he can somehow overcome how the film itself actually positions the spectator to see things in a certain way. The 1961 Kent MacKenzie film *The Exiles* sought to break down stereotypes about Native Americans and transcending, if you will, the commonplace representations found in films featuring Native American subjects. And while perhaps the *indian* is portrayed in the film *The Exiles* in a new way, the stereotypes still remain. The removal of stereotypes is only a veneer of honesty. Instead, *The Exiles* only reaffirms common ideas about the place of the *indian*. Like Metz’s spectator, the film’s narrative is deluded, thinking that it transcends emplacement, when it is really only confirms the emplacement of the *indian* in film. *The Exiles*, by showing the characters of Yvonne Williams
and Homer Nish as alienated from the urban world of L.A. only reaffirms stereotypes typical of the portrayal of the *indian*.

Both Yvonne and Homer appear to be defying the conventions of the typical portrayal of the *indian*. Homer has the short, slicked back hair of a greaser and dresses in the fashions of the time. In one of the first times we see him at the beginning of the film, he is reading a comic book. Yvonne has a shorter hair cut and a perm. She wears subdued clothes and makeup, drinks soda, and goes to the market and the movies. They live with their friends in the city, far from the reservations and small towns from which they came. In this sense, *The Exiles* is transcending the typical stereotype. They are not reduced to keepers of the land, tied to and at one with the world of nature. Instead, the film presents to us wide, panning shots of the cityscape: the opening credits of the film rest upon shots of the many-storied houses that the characters live in before cutting to shots of trolleys rolling through an urban world of concrete and crowds. However, the film cannot help but position Homer and Yvonne as somehow more primitive and not a natural part of this world; simply put, the film suggests that they do not belong to this urban world. The film positions the characters to instead be seen aliens in this world, kept at a distance, unable to integrate into this social structure, and ultimately still something to be kept at arm’s length.

The film’s introduction of Yvonne immediately foregrounds a sense of her alienation and incongruence. Wide, panning shots of a busy market, bustling with sharp movements, quick commerce, and rowdy chatter suddenly give way to a quieter, steady shot on a silent and motionless Yvonne. Yvonne’s voice, in the form of a voice over, says “I don’t know what to do sometimes” (*The Exiles*). Immediately, Yvonne is shown as someone that does not belong to this urban scenery. The sudden quiet of the scene as the camera focuses on her creates a direct contrast, informing the audience that she is somehow different from the rest of the crowd. The quick, reflexive movements of the salesmen as they bundle up produce are not at all like
Yvonne’s shuffling walk. Furthermore, her admission that she does not know what to do informs us that she is lacking an understanding of this urban world, as portrayed by the market. As she slowly meanders through the market, she stops by a stand. She shakes her head at the sales woman, indicating that she is not interested. Yet the lingering, hard stare of the woman and the disapproving frown in her heavy, drooping face both demonstrate to us that Yvonne is something to be watched carefully until she finally moves away from the woman’s wares. Despite Yvonne’s modern haircut and perm, subdued clothing, consumption of soda, there is a definite sense of resistance to her presence because she does not belong to this world.

Homer is similarly shown as alienated, even from his friends. Frequently, there are shots of him in the proximity of his friends, but not engaged with them, at a distance, or facing away. At the Columbine, a bar, he sits at a booth by himself: after he is seated there is first a shot of men sitting around a woman at the bar, then a shot of him, alone, glancing about, before cutting to another group of men smoking and drinking. The first and third shots mentioned are crowded, dark and smoky, full of chattering bar-goers talking over the music of a juke box. The shot of Homer, however, is singularly different; the wall behind him is a vast, white expanse, his surroundings just as mute as he is in this scene. Interestingly, the speech of the patrons is quiet and unintelligible, suggesting that Homer is unable to connect to the speech, stories, and lives of those around him. His inability to understand or hear the words of those around him does not seem promising of his integration. That Homer does not belong here is reinforced as he silently plays with his beer bottle, and a voice suddenly rises above the muted background noise to say “’Cause you’re watching me! Ha, isn’t that funny?” (The Exiles). In this sense, Homer is like the spectator—distanced from the action of the scene, only a witness the goings on around him. However, this is Homer’s world, his life, and yet he is unable to connect to it in a personal way, he is only able to watch.
Homer’s distance from his friends is reinforced most potently at Hill X, a hill just outside of L.A. where many of the Native American characters go late at night to act out a discordantly modernized sort of “tribal” ritual (*The Exiles*). They beat upon drums and chant as they sit upon the hoods of their cars and drink beer. In one shot, Homer is by himself, watching the others dance and sing in front of him as he leans against the door of a car. Behind him, the spectator can see the lights of the city against the night. This scene seems to attribute Homer’s distance to the inability to cohesively link together the *indian* and the urban. His alienation, the film suggests to the spectator, is indicative of the impossibility of being both. The film requires that the *indian*, to try to express his tribal heritage, must leave the city of L.A. behind; even then, the *indian* is still alienated from both worlds, never fully integrating into either the *indian* or the urban world but instead lingering in the limbo of Hill X.

In *The Exiles*, Homer and Yvonne’s alienation from modern society plays a very important role in demonstrating the delusions of the spectator. Even as the film’s narrative seeks to show that the *indian* belongs to a modern era, it undermines this position by showing the failures of this attempted integration. Yvonne is frozen into stagnant inactivity, whereas Homer is ultimately unable to push past his own self to communicate with those around him. The *indian*, then, remains the same, unable to transcend the boundaries that stereotypes create. Metz’s “deluded” spectator is believing his own transcendent abilities—thinking he can look at the film and see beyond the conventions it creates—when he is still only falling prey to the structured stereotypes the film puts into place (Metz 176). The spectator of *The Exiles* thinks he is seeing past the *indian*, but this is not the case. The *indian* is not only present, but reinforced in a setting contemporaneous to the film’s creation. By placing the *indian* in a modern, urban setting, the film is informing the spectator that the *indian* is not able to transcend his own nature, but will, like Homer and Yvonne, remain forever alienated from the rest of the crowd.
Works Cited


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