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The American
Film Heritage

— KATHLEEN KARR, ET AL (EDS)

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THE VANISHING AMERICAN

Famous Players-Lasky. 1925.

Director: George B. Seitz.

Screenplay: Ethel Doherty, based on the novel by Zane Grey.

Adaptation: Lucien Hubbard.

Cast: Richard Dix, Lois Wilson, Noah Beery,
Malcolm McGregor, Nockie.



Richard Dix in *THE VANISHING AMERICAN*.

*It's easy to see only the forest when some of the trees are missing. Fortunately, many can be found again. Now in the AFI archives is the only known complete 35mm print of a 1925 film that defied stereotype, questioned tradition, and told a palpable story as well: **THE VANISHING AMERICAN**. Until it was acquired with a group of other Paramount silents, it seemed to have vanished, too. The film deserves to be known. And now, it has been made possible that it will be.*

American Indians have not, as a rule, been treated fairly, even decently, in sound films. In thirties Westerns, they were usually portrayed as savage and uncivilized scalphunters. Silent movies of the twenties, however, tended to give Indians a bit more respectability. Of these, **THE VANISHING AMERICAN** (1925) is one of the best and most beautiful.

George B. Seitz had an unspectacular directorial career (including the 1922-1923 serial "Plunder," with Pearl White) until **THE VANISHING AMERICAN**. Instead of depicting him as a wanton savage, the screenplay by Ethel Doherty, from a Zane Grey novel, tried to invest the Indian with a tragic stature and correct the myths about his warrior impulses.

The attempt seems noble in retrospect, though the film, viewed through contemporary eyes, looks just as racist as a lot of other pictures from the past. Its theory that one race replaces another, that each progressive race is superior to the last, seems a trifle fascist besides. But in its time, **THE VANISHING AMERICAN** was no respecter of the usual clichés.

In addition, it has a rather awesome sense of history as a pageant played out across vast vistas—the vistas strikingly photographed by C. Edgar Schoenbaum and Harry Perry. Titles refer to "the mighty stage," a setting that will remain after all the races kill one another off. Looking at life in grand terms like this was typical of the silent epic, but the film has a humanity and credibility that make it seem somehow more honest and immediate than many films of its era.

THE VANISHING AMERICAN begins with an elaborate prologue in which one race dissolves into

the next—from cavemen to basket makers to the cliff dwellers, who herd turkeys and wash in mud. And then, from “no man knows whence,” cometh the Indian, “terrible and swift as a pestilence,” we are told. In one of the film’s most effective outbreaks of spectacle, the Indians sweep down a river valley, overwhelming the cliff dwellers in a semi-poetically filmed battle. Before it ends, a cliff dwelling priest will intone a curse: “May Paya the Father drive you into darkness, as you drive us! May he send a stronger race to grind you into the dust and scatter you through the four worlds of lamentation.” You’ll never guess who that stronger race turns out to be.

In the film’s view, the Indian is truly mistreated, but that is just the nature of things, the law of civilization, the relentless onward trudge of mankind. *THE VANISHING AMERICAN* was ahead of its time, but it was no *LITTLE BIG MAN*. In the 1925 film, the Indian is most laudable when he is most convincingly mimicking the white man—reading the Bible or joining the U.S. Army to help fight World War I. The villainy perpetrated against him, we may thus infer, is despicable only because the Indian was trying to be as good as white folks are and wasn’t given enough

of a chance. Compared to the attitudes expressed in other films, however, this was progress.

Richard Dix plays the Indian Nophaie with dignity and credibility, even when the script calls for him to submit in deferential piety to the wonders of the New Testament. When he returns from the war to find his people cruelly cheated by unscrupulous whites, he goes out to pray to his gods. This, he decides, will get him nowhere; his religion is “foolish,” and he casts it aside, relying instead on the Bible given him by white woman Marion Warner (Lois Wilson). Finally, when he dies (even though the Bible in his pocket has partially deflected the fatal bullet), he asks that the Scriptures be read to him and, expiring, gasps, “I . . . think . . . I understand.” This is apparently to assure us that he has earned a ticket to white man’s heaven—his redemption is due to his acceptance of the dogma of a “superior” race.

Sociological limitations seem minimal, however, when compared to the physical luster and narrative power of the film. *THE VANISHING AMERICAN* has not vanished; it remains—compassionate and impassioned cinema.