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Paul Newman, right, portrays Buffalo Bill

—UPI Telephoto

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## 'Buffalo Bill' a fitful film

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By **DESMOND RYAN**

Knight News Service

"Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson" is a fitful and always fascinating film that is unbalanced by Robert Altman's pressing desire to do the teaching and the vagueness of the symbolism he uses.

As a further essay on illusion, reality and the amalgam of forces that shape our beliefs and perceptions, it naturally invites comparison with Altman's last inspired creation, "Nashville." "Buffalo Bill and the Indians" is less successful because the world of Nashville was a metaphor and the boisterous arena in which Buffalo Bill operates is a similitude.

For that reason, Altman is, as Byron said of Coleridge, at pains to explain his explanation. A Greek chorus continually appears in the person of Ned Buntline (Burt Lancaster), the dime novelist and creator of the Buffalo Bill legend, to italicize what the film already has made obvious.

Altman, who co-authored the screenplay from Arthur Kopit's drama "Indians," will not allow Paul Newman's finely judged portrayal of the shambles behind the legend of Buffalo Bill Cody to stand on its own. He makes him say the obvious — "Buffalo Bill's Wild West. It ain't all that different from real life."

And lest we miss the point, Buntline is there to intone, "When his senses fail him, maybe he'll see things as they really are."

Our perception of how things really are and how they are manipulated is the subject of this well-acted, rambling discourse of a film. "Buffalo Bill and the Indians" is not propelled by narrative advancement; rather, it is a collation of characters and attitudes sprawled around the Cody encampment.

Newman's Bill surrounds himself with high-range sopranos, schooners of whisky and fraudulent props like a false blond mane and scattershot pistols that can't miss the target.

As the first product of "the new show business" in America Newman is a perfect choice, a superstar actor somewhat disgruntled with the demands of his position and appalled by what people believe. He plays Cody with spirit and conviction and his performance relieves the film's more tendentious moments.