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## Conventionalism as a Virtue: A Study of *Powwow Highway*

**DOUGLAS HEIL**

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Academia has long grappled with the relationship between filmmaking form and content. Film history courses are driven, in part, by aesthetic innovation, and it is not uncommon to study the editing advances made by D. W. Griffith and the silent-era Soviet filmmakers, the exploration of deep focus photography by Orson Welles and Gregg Toland, the shift to location shooting by the Italian neorealists, the implementation of jump cuts and freeze frames by the French New Wave, and the long-take sensibility of experimental filmmaker Michael Snow.

The interest in formal innovation is complemented by skepticism toward conventional Hollywood form. Playwright and theorist Bertolt Brecht has impacted academia, and in his theoretical essays, he took dead aim at the naturalist theater co-opted by Hollywood, in which characters must establish their names, relationships, problems, and the play's themes through seemingly casual conversation. Brecht felt that the logically built, well-made play in which a problem snowballs into a nail-biting drama of high suspense and then culminates in a cathartic climax engaged the viewer's emotions without touching the intellect. His alternative approach ("epic theater") sought to block emotional identification while provoking thought. The destruction of stage illusion, he believed, would create a distance between audience and characters, enabling a detached, critical attitude and a better understanding of the human condition.<sup>1</sup>

Brecht's theories have helped shape race- and gender-related film theory. By destroying conventional filmmaking form, one also destroys the unfortunate race, class, and gender bias tied to that form. "New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film," Claire Johnston wrote in the 1970s. "Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/ the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected."<sup>2</sup>

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A decade later Annette Kuhn pushed further in this direction. Referring to Hollywood movies as “dominant cinema,” she notes that a basic feature of dominant cinema is realism. A Hollywood film creates a fictional universe in which you can lose yourself. Conventional movies encourage viewer identification with fictional characters and viewer involvement with the story line. “By means of these identifications,” she writes, “the spectator is drawn into the film, so that when the questions posed by the narrative are resolved by its closure, the spectator is also ‘closed,’ completed, or satisfied.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, Hollywood movies encourage passivity, and because sexism and capitalism are imbedded within Hollywood movies, the “illusionism” of Hollywood movies becomes an ideological operation, encouraging the passive acceptance of sexism and capitalism. To combat this, Kuhn proposed “counter-cinema,” which she defined as “film practice which works against and challenges dominant cinema.”<sup>4</sup> She was especially interested in the creation of a deconstructive cinema that pairs “oppositional forms with oppositional contents.”<sup>5</sup> Like Brecht’s theater, form is used to distance the viewer from the story critically. This leads to reflection and a critical attitude, rather than passive receptivity.

Because minority culture constitutes “oppositional content” that is “commonly ignored or repressed in dominant cinema,” it is not surprising that some minority theorists have also gravitated toward strategies advanced by Brecht, Johnston, and Kuhn. Toni Cade Bambara writes about the students at the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers at UCLA in the 1970s, who “engaged in interrogating conventions of dominant cinema, screening films of socially conscious cinema, and discussing ways to alter previous significations as they relate to Black people. In short, they were committed to developing a film language to respectfully express cultural particularity and Black thought.”<sup>6</sup>

Some theorists, however, have jostled against the alternative cinema bias. If counter-cinema requires its audience to “know advanced film theory in order for them to enjoy, appreciate and ideally, reflect upon what they see,” writes Jane Gaines, then it is doomed to futility. Counter-cinema is, in essence, an argument for modernism, which is “a taste acquired through educational and cultural privilege.”<sup>7</sup> As such, it exhibits class bias. She then cites minority women filmmakers who feel “it is more important to make comprehensible and accessible films than it is to experiment with subverting classical Hollywood narrative.”<sup>8</sup>

Educators sympathetic to Gaines might want to explore the possibilities offered by the 1989 independent film *Powwow Highway*. This movie uses the most conventional Hollywood narrative structure of all while carrying content that is highly unconventional in nature: drawing on Cheyenne history and cultural traditions that are slowly being forgotten, the film argues that we live by the wrong values. In packaging oppositional content with conventional and accessible Hollywood form, the movie connects with a wide range of students, sparking an emotional response and an intellectual curiosity (fueled, seemingly, by that emotional engagement). At eighty-seven minutes, it is also remarkably flexible, fitting perfectly into an hour and a half class session and capable of inspiring productive discussion in four different arenas: courses centering on Native American culture; race, class, and gender courses; film

and literature classes within literary studies; and screenwriting. For educators seeking to bridge theory and practice by offering students the option to write a script or produce a production in lieu of a research paper, *Powwow Highway* offers a helpful template.

The remainder of this article, therefore, will explore how dramatic structure is used in *Powwow Highway* and how this structure accommodates unconventional, personal content. Through understanding the relationship between form and content, this article seeks to inspire the creation of further work that generates curiosity, reflection, and commitment to cultural and social issues outside the experience of the mainstream viewer.

#### DAVID SEALS'S NOVEL

Written in 1979, David Seals's novel *The Powwow Highway* was originally self-published the same year in a limited edition by Sky and Sage Books.<sup>9</sup> His novel details the odyssey taken by two Natives—AIM activist and Vietnam War hero Buddy Red Bird and the slovenly, obese Philbert Bono—as they drive from the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Lame Deer, Montana to Santa Fe. Their objective is to free Buddy's sister Bonnie from prison. Along the way, they stop at Bear Butte (the “Mount Sinai” of Cheyenne legends, where Maheo—the Creator of all physical and spiritual life—bestowed Sweet Medicine with knowledge that became the foundation of Cheyenne culture), participate in a Pine Ridge powwow, pause at Fort Robinson, Nebraska—the scene of tragic Cheyenne events in 1877 and 1879—and socialize with friends in a Denver suburb. Eventually they make it to Santa Fe, where they succeed in liberating Bonnie.

*The Powwow Highway* represents a melding of trickster lore with the picaresque novel. It was inspired, in part, by the literary genre rooted in such sixteenth-century Spanish novels as the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), Mateo Alemán's *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599), and Francisco de Quevedo's *La Vida del Buscón*, translated as *The Swindler* (written c. 1608; published 1626). In the picaresque novel, an appealing “have-not” travels through various locales in an episodically structured narrative. Through his or her interactions with a variety of people (often satirically rendered), a societal snapshot emerges. *The Powwow Highway* joins a literary tradition forged by the likes of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), later revised as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990), also draws, in part, from this tradition.<sup>10</sup>

One facet that makes *The Powwow Highway* particularly interesting is its purity as a picaresque novel: it appears to draw inspiration not from the English-language descendents but from those earliest Spanish narratives. Although later picaresque heroes are low-status outsiders who generally strive to do the right thing, the original Spanish protagonists were downright rogues. According to translator Michael Alpert, the word *picaresque* derives from the Spanish word *pícaro*, which means crafty or good-for-nothing. “The

*pícaro* is usually a cynical youth,” he explains, “brought up the hard way and determined to treat others as cruelly as he has been treated himself. His aim is to *burlar* others: to deceive and play cruel tricks on them, and indeed cruelty is one of the dominant motifs of these novels, which reflect a world where the rule is ‘every man for himself.’”<sup>11</sup> After suffering several humiliations, the narrator in *The Swindler* puts this principle into play. “As the proverb says, when in Rome, do as the Romans do, and how right it is,” he tells us. “After thinking about it, I decided to be as much a tearaway as the others and worse than them if I could.”<sup>12</sup> This spirit pervades *The Powwow Highway*, and Buddy, Philbert, and Bonnie do not make any attempt to adhere to conventional morality. Buddy, for instance, plans to pay Bonnie’s bail by using a check that he knows will bounce, and, at gunpoint, gratuitously humiliates two officers by forcing them to strip in public. Philbert takes pleasure in terrifying the tourists at the Custer Battlefield, is a willing brawler in a Buddy-triggered melee outside a bank, and later knocks a snowplow driver unconscious so he can commandeer his snowplow. Buddy and Philbert also contemplate robbing a store at gunpoint: “It had occurred to both of them to stick the gun in that jerk’s face back there and demand a case of bourbon, a truckload of pretzels, a barrel of beer!”<sup>13</sup> Bonnie, meanwhile, peddles drugs for a living and lives the good life while neglecting her children. At the end of the narrative, all three decide to become cocaine dealers.

One difference between *The Powwow Highway* and the Spanish picaresque novels is the distance between author and protagonist. “Pablos [the “hero” of *The Swindler*] is basically nasty,” observes Alpert. “Even the author [Francisco de Quevedo] seems to have no sympathy for him.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Seals is an apologist for his characters. For example, he justifies Bonnie’s drug dealing as a conscious, political rebellion against the dominant culture. “Nothing wrong with enjoying the benefits of capitalistic industry, as long as you knew they were bullshit. This made Bonnie pure within herself.”<sup>15</sup> He also romanticizes his characters. From the start, Buddy powers what Linda Seger has defined as a “prescriptive” narrative, in which “the hero acts out how we would like to be”:

[In this kind of narrative], your character might be the class leader or the football hero. Physically, he’d probably be strong, tall, and good-looking, the kind of guy who always looks terrific no matter what he wears. Psychologically, he’d probably be very confident, not have a care in the world, and believe that he can do anything he sets out to do. Emotionally, he’s probably steady as a rock, impervious to pain and fear, and nothing fazes him.<sup>16</sup>

In the novel, Buddy succeeds at everything. He still holds the state football records for rushing and punt returns. He secured a scholarship to Yale, won three Bronze Medals in Vietnam, and distinguished himself as an AIM leader. At one point, Seals even refers to him as “the star of the tribe.”<sup>17</sup> Bonnie is also flawless, and her drug dealing and promiscuity are basked in a golden glow: “Smuggling became a tremendous adventure. It was the stuff of outlaws, Billy the Kid bravado that all Americans openly desired. Bonnie was beside herself.

She made love to Mexicans, Texas cowboys, sailors in Mazatlán, surfers in Galveston, and even an Indian in Hermosillo, Sonora, one hot afternoon.”<sup>18</sup> Bonnie not only is a drug dealer but also a drug user. Seals describes her consumption of drugs as follows: “It was profound. It was subtle, ecstatic, terrifying, mellowing, funny, tiring, ugly, and beautiful.”<sup>19</sup>

Beyond these rationalizations, the novel is permeated with Native American ethnocentrism, and Seals can be guilty of sweeping generalizations driven by race. With few exceptions, he heaps scorn upon any non-Native. In describing Buddy’s ability to manipulate people, Seals writes, “He need only remind the weaklings of the white and the black and the brown races of their bad record with the red race, and any amount of cowering was possible.”<sup>20</sup> In discussing Bonnie’s imprisonment, he writes, “She was an Indian; therefore [the Caucasians and Hispanics] had been ready to nail her as soon as they saw her ancient face, which drew a veil of fear and ignorance over their insecure and atheistic heritages. The strength of her culture reminded them of the weakness of theirs.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast, his generalizations about Native Americans are congratulatory. He begins chapter 3, for instance, with a meditation on the innate tribalism of Indians and their disinclination to form a united front. “It was always every man for himself and it still is. . . . Nobody ever, *ever* told an Indian what to do. And nobody ever will.”<sup>22</sup>

David Seals shares common ground with Native Renaissance author Gerald Vizenor, whose first novel, *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart*, was published a year before *The Powwow Highway*. Both utilize the picaresque narrative and hurl outsized characters into outrageous situations, and critic Louis Owens’s observation that *Bearheart* offers “a scathing expose of white hypocrisy, brutality, genocidal, ecological murder and greed,” could easily have been applied to *The Powwow Highway*.<sup>23</sup> A key difference between the two novels centers on those sweeping racial generalizations found in *The Powwow Highway*. When he succumbs to them, Seals morphs into Vizenor creation Belladonna Darwin-Winter Catcher—the character condemned to death in *Bearheart* for buying into romantic generalizations, or “terminal creeds,” concerning Natives: “I am different than a whiteman because of my values and my blood is different. . . . Indians have more magic in their lives than whitepeople.”<sup>24</sup>

If character rationalizations and racial generalizations make one flinch, the novel still offers many attributes. Throughout, Seals imparts his knowledge of Cheyenne myth and history, enlightening readers about Sweet Medicine, Wihio the Trickster, tragic events of the nineteenth century, and the origins of the Cheyenne tribal name (it was triggered by a Sioux misreading of Cheyenne hand signs).<sup>25</sup> He also has the astute eye of a cultural anthropologist, and whether he describes a post-powwow drunken revelry, or serves as a trail guide for Denver and its suburbs, he brings insight to every milieu.<sup>26</sup> Finally, *The Powwow Highway* is graced with vivid writing. For the reader, this can function as a pleasurable end in itself, as when he describes Philbert’s gluttony at the Cheyenne Café: “Pounds of cheeseburgers began again their semi-automatic evaporation within the cavernous estuaries of Philbert’s digestive system.”<sup>27</sup> When he harnesses it to his anthropological impulse, however, he is capable of generating transcendent literary moments. Note, for example, how he

details the cultural dissonance when Buddy and Philbert enter Sheridan—ablaze with Christmas festivities and music: “Secretly desperate to be a part of it all, and yet openly incapable of being anything but above it, they sank with scorn to be below it all. They did not belong, they could not accept it, they could not understand it. So they made fun of it. It was the way of all the disenfranchised folk who were only tributaries to the great mainstream.”<sup>28</sup>

### CINEMATIC CHARACTERIZATIONS

In their book *Successful Script Writing*, Jurgen Wolff and Kerry Cox note that a script is often rejected due to flawed characterizations. This problem is usually conveyed through several standard script reader responses:

- I didn’t care about the characters.
- The hero wasn’t somebody I could relate to.
- I didn’t believe in these people.
- I couldn’t figure out what makes these people tick.<sup>29</sup>

Consequently, in adapting *The Powwow Highway* to the screen, coscenarists Janet Heavey and Jean Stawarz had to ensure that viewers did care about, relate to, and believe in Buddy, Bonnie, and Philbert. For the film to function as mainstream entertainment each of three major characters had to sustain a greater degree of rooting interest than he or she did in the novel.

Bonnie went through the most substantial retooling. As constructed in the book, the drug-dealing, child-neglecting sexaholic could, at best, appeal to only one demographic: young men unencumbered by parental responsibility. Consequently, Heavey and Stawarz transform her from a male fantasy figure into a sentient human worth saving. In the film, she no longer peddles drugs, no longer uses drugs, and doesn’t drink. She doesn’t smoke eight packs of cigarettes a day.<sup>30</sup> She doesn’t sleep around, masturbate in prison, and nod “agreeably to herself” in response to seeing two women pleasuring a man in a hot tub.<sup>31</sup> She no longer aspires to get rich by any means necessary. Instead, what propels Bonnie is the deep love she sustains toward her children. She is also fundamentally kind, which is vividly dramatized through a flashback that does not appear in the novel. Consequently, the viewer is outraged when officers plant drugs in her car, arrest her, and tear her away from her children.<sup>32</sup>

Unattractive facets are also sheared from Philbert. His violent streak evaporates along with his penchant for pornography. His appetite for dominant culture pop music is diminished. Meanwhile, his spirituality is strengthened. Early in the book, Seals establishes Philbert’s fundamental complacency: “Philbert was not a seeker, for he had already found what made him the best possible Philbert. He was a Cheyenne, and all the shit of the world could not erase that.”<sup>33</sup> His nonseeking nature is later dramatized as he drives by Crazy Woman Creek, where Lieutenant MacKenzie had ambushed Crazy Horse’s camp. Philbert takes no note of the landmark because he is fiddling with a Leon Russell tape, singing with the music, and popping open a six-pack.<sup>34</sup> This scene could never take place in the motion picture, because from the start, ciné Philbert is a seeker. He has an insatiable hunger for learning traditional



Cheyenne culture and history, and he is an intensely spiritual being who perceives the continuity between past and present. This Philbert has not been completely remade, in that Seals's Philbert does decide to become a tribal soothsayer during the odyssey ("the first time in his life that he had ever set any kind of goal for himself").<sup>35</sup> But instead of imbibing limitless quantities of alcohol and marijuana, the ciné Philbert hovers over his CB radio, gleaned Native cultural information from other drivers.

There is one other significant change in the movie that pertains to Philbert. In the book, he falls in love with Angel Taylor while growing up—a character who is never mentioned again.<sup>36</sup> In the movie, Bonnie has displaced Angel. We first get an inkling of Philbert's feelings when Buddy angles for a ride to Santa Fe:

BUDDY. Whose car is this, man?

PHILBERT. This is Protector, the war pony.

BUDDY. So it's yours, right?

*(Philbert nods proudly.)*

BUDDY, *satisfied*. Good, because we have to go to Santa Fe.

PHILBERT. Santa Fe, New Mexico? You and me?

BUDDY. That's right.

PHILBERT. There's a powwow in Billings.

BUDDY. Who gives a shit? My sister just called.

*Bewildered, Philbert puts the car in gear.*

PHILBERT. Bonnie . . . ? She's been gone so long.

BUDDY. She got busted down in Santa Fe. Pigs pull her over and suddenly there's two pounds of Colombian under the spare. Got any heat in this thing? . . . Whadda ya say? Can I count on you, or what?

PHILBERT. Notame. . . . We are Cheyenne.<sup>37</sup>

All we see for now is the tip of the iceberg, and Heaney and Stawarz wisely resist unleashing a torrent of "psychobabble" in which Philbert explains why he has a soft spot for Bonnie. Instead, the film waits for a more dramatic moment to reveal their backstory, and it does this with images as opposed to words.

Buddy, meanwhile, is stripped of his superhero status. There is no mention of his still-standing state football records. This Buddy, apparently, did not go to Yale on a scholarship. Instead of preserving the "prescriptive" hero of the novel who beats the dominant culture at its own game, Heaney and Stawarz understand that a slab of Kryptonite makes Superman twice as interesting. In the movie, the "Kryptonite" is found inside of Buddy. Buddy becomes a "descriptive" character—one whose strengths are intertwined with limitations he must learn to overcome. This conforms to conventional Hollywood practice. Linda Aronson, for example, in her book *Screenwriting Updated*, writes, "The protagonist is the person with whom we identify . . . the character that changes and learns most as a result of the action."<sup>38</sup> A character cannot change and learn if he is already flawless, so Buddy is burdened with



flaws. He is not a good listener, jumps to conclusions, and has a hair-trigger temper. He is too quick to embrace violence as a solution and doesn't think out the consequences of his actions. Most importantly, he is indifferent to his tribe's culture and spirituality. Despite these flaws, he is a tremendously appealing character who remains the "star of his tribe"—a dynamic and charismatic leader who won a Purple Heart in Vietnam and fought on the front line against the goon squads at Pine Ridge.

Many of the novel's subordinate characters are erased from the film. Gone for good are Buddy and Bonnie's parents, Bonnie's two husbands, mobster Tony Parelli (who romances and betrays Bonnie), Big Lester Mardewcki (the affable hot-tub-dipping drug dealer), and Lester's girlfriend Doris. The one person retained from Bonnie's backstory is Rabbit LeLouche, the dealer who initiates Bonnie into drug peddling. In the movie, however, she is no longer a drug dealer; instead, she is Bonnie's firecracker best friend—distinguished by her brazen personality and ferocious loyalty. Philbert's cousin Manny is whittled down to a single scene: he's the bartender who serves Philbert. In the film, it is Philbert, and not Manny, who goes to the dealer and buys the Buick.

There is purpose to clearing out nearly all of the subordinate characters: it leaves time to deepen the relationship between Buddy and Philbert (see fig. 1). As the narrative progresses, oppositions between them become increasingly apparent. These differences exacerbate their conflict over how to rescue Bonnie, which in turn powers the middle portion of the movie.

#### **Buddy Red Bow<sup>39</sup>**

Leader with volition  
Lean, athletic, quick  
Tormentor as child  
Lives in present  
Politicized  
Cynical  
Instinctual  
Combustible  
Prosaic  
Embraces violence

#### **Philbert Bono**

Ostracized loner  
Slovenly and slow  
Victim as child  
Rooted in past  
Spiritual  
Naive  
Contemplative  
Self-contained  
Imaginative  
Rejects violence as "bad medicine"

These many oppositions are crystallized in a superbly compact argumentative beat after they reach Santa Fe. Philbert exhorts Buddy to "trust the powers." Buddy responds, "I trust my instincts."

There is also an intriguing difference pertaining to motivational objectives. Buddy has three objectives in the film: he wants to protect Native land from exploitation, needs to purchase bulls for his tribe, and must rescue his sister Bonnie. Philbert, meanwhile, has two motivational objectives: he seeks to gather spiritual power and endeavors to help Bonnie. The shared Bonnie objective is the glue that binds these two characters together. But Buddy is up against it, because each of his objectives creates an obstacle for the other two, generating complications within the film narrative. In contrast, Philbert's objectives are bound to each other: he is convinced that gathered spiritual power will help liberate Bonnie (see fig. 2).



**FIGURE 1.** *The film documents at least ten different character oppositions between Buddy Red Bow (left) and Philbert Bono (right). The conflict over these differences becomes the relational-centered B-plot that powers the second act. Copyright © 1989 Warner Bros. Inc.*



**FIGURE 2.** *Within the B-plot, Philbert gathers spiritual power to help achieve the A-plot objective. Here, he leaves an offering at the top of Bear Butte, sparking viewer interest in this cultural tradition. Copyright © 1989 Warner Bros. Inc.*

## ADAPTING THE NOVEL INTO A CONVENTIONAL FILM NARRATIVE

It is possible to make a commercial movie built upon the episodic structure favored by picaresque novels. *Easy Rider* did it in 1969. *Stranger than Paradise*, the 1984 independent movie that launched Jim Jarmusch's career, is another vivid example. So is *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Most Hollywood screenplays, however, are built upon a three-act structure. A strong opening image launches this kind of narrative. Then, after the principal characters are introduced, a "catalyst" or "inciting incident" sets everything in motion, forcing the protagonist out of his or her routine. (In the thriller *Witness*, the catalyst occurs when an undercover policeman is murdered in a public wash-room and the only witness is a young Amish boy.) The first act, which typically runs for thirty minutes, is considered the "setup": characters are established, the problem is defined, and wheels are set in motion. Usually an objective-oriented A-plot dominates the first act. (In *Witness*, the A-plot is to discover who murdered the undercover cop.) Throughout the first act, action points, also known as plot points, push along the narrative. An obstacle thrown in the path of a protagonist, a complication that may cause problems later on (such as developing a crush on someone you have met), or a dramatic reversal are all examples of action points. A reversal is the strongest kind of action point, and a powerful reversal takes place at the end of the first act in conventional Hollywood films: this special action point is called the turning point. (In *Witness*, the first-act turning point is when Harrison Ford discovers the killer is another police officer, who then shoots Ford.)

The second act is longer than the first or third. The protagonist experiences additional barriers, complications, and reversals. During this act, the objective-oriented A-plot is put on hold while a relational-centered B-plot assumes prominence. The B-plot might be a romance (as in *Witness* or *It Happened One Night*), a friendship (as in *Ride the High Country*), a rivalry (as in *Toy Story*), or a mentor/novice relationship (as in *The Karate Kid* or *Kung Fu Panda*). Often the B-plot is used to explore the principal theme of the script. In *Ride the High Country*, the friends argue over whether it is more important to be successful or to live right. At the end of the second act, a second major turning point reignites the A-plot and moves the narrative into its final act and climax. (In *Witness*, this takes place when Harrison Ford's character punches out a youth, revealing where he is hiding out. The villains then swoop in for the kill.) The third act typically runs twenty to thirty minutes in length.

*Powwow Highway* opens on two juxtapositions. The first is visual: an idealized nineteenth-century Cheyenne warrior rides his horse in slow motion. This image is displaced by tracking shots across the ugly squalor of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in *Lame Deer*. At first, one assumes the film is marking how far the Cheyenne have fallen from their glorious, star-crossed past. But later, we will learn this dialectic holds a denser meaning.

The second juxtaposition is character centered. Buddy—the "star of his tribe"—is first unveiled as he plays pool in a local bar (this scene has no equivalent in the novel). In their screenplay, Heaney and Stawarz describe the action as follows: "An eager crowd is mesmerized by a handsome Cheyenne who dominates the match. Chalking his cue, BUDDY RED BIRD leans across the table.

He's lanky and strong, with an intense face."<sup>40</sup> He dubs a ball with the name of a tribal enemy or with an enemy-generated by-product polluting their territory (such as a coal mine or a pipeline) prior to each shot. Then he erases the ball from view by driving it into a pocket. The scene establishes Buddy as politicized and charismatic—a dynamic hero we will have no problem rooting for.

As Buddy leaves the bar, he crosses paths with a big lummoX who is just entering—Philbert Bono. Buddy barely acknowledges the man, making it clear they are acquaintances who never fraternize. Surprisingly, the camera switches from Buddy to this new character and follows him to the bar where he sits alone. The bartender aside, no one talks or even looks at him. He scrapes the bottom of the Cheyenne social ladder.

Philbert is indifferent to the ostracism because he is so absorbed by the commercial playing on TV. A Caucasian huckster ludicrously bedecked in a Native headdress exhorts viewers to buy cars. "How, folks!" he obnoxiously barks. "Come down off the ranch or the rez and pick your pony!"<sup>41</sup> One can only imagine Buddy's outraged reaction to the ad, but Philbert is unperturbed. The metaphor resonates; it has validity. Soon Philbert is at a used car dealer, where he surveys a landscape of disintegrating wrecks. He smiles, and we see the cars from his perspective: they have morphed into galloping horses. The dialectic between ponies and cars parallels the earlier juxtaposition between noble warrior and crumbling "rez": either this man is insane or else he's tapped into some connection between past and present that eludes his peers. He picks his "pony," whoops with delight, cleanses it by tossing its Mother Mary icon out the window, and then rides away on his new steed.

In the book, Buddy is described as a tribal activist, but this facet is never dramatized. The movie corrects this by showing a tribal council meeting in which a lobbyist tries to persuade the tribe to sell off more mining rights. Buddy provides the opposition that topples the plan:

You talk about jobs. How come since [your company has] been on the rez, unemployment's gone up, not down? . . . It's always the same deal, ain't it? You get what you want and we get the shaft. . . . 75% of our people living below the poverty line and you tell us that stripping off what's left of our natural resources is going to change that? Maybe you better tell us something different. This ain't the American dream we're living; this here is the Third World.<sup>42</sup>

By the end of the scene, Buddy has been established as an appealing, dynamic leader with extraordinary volition: he makes things happen; he has an edge.

The catalyst takes place when Bonnie is arrested. After she puts in a call to her brother for help, Buddy is entrusted with tribal funds to purchase cattle. This is a superbly constructed scene that features clashing beats. While the tribal president gives purchasing instructions, a distracted Buddy—preoccupied with his sister's plight—looks out the window and sees Philbert in his new car. A lightbulb flicks on.

In short order, Buddy leaves the tribal office, flags down Philbert, and persuades him to drive to Santa Fe. Theoretically, this is the turning point

that terminates the first act and launches the narrative in a new direction. But Buddy so effortlessly persuades the seemingly half-witted Philbert, the scene lacks the requisite dramatic kick for an act closer. As a consequence, it is harnessed to another scene taking place at the thirty-minute mark in the movie—the most conventional placement for a first-act turning point. Although the Philbert persuasion scene directly relates to the narrative's A-plot, the subsequent Radio Shack scene lays the foundation for the narrative's B-plot, which dominates the second act.

Leery at the prospect of driving hour after hour with a person he can barely tolerate, Buddy decides he will use the tribal funds to buy a music system for Philbert's car. He easily manipulates Philbert into agreeing, and so they go to a Radio Shack store. Once inside, the salesman soon flaunts his lack of respect for Buddy and Philbert—and for Natives in general:

SALESMAN. Maybe this is what you're after?

*Sniggering, he lifts a dainty pink portable from a pile of children's radios.*

*Buddy's pissed off. He yanks a box from the front display.*

BUDDY. This one. With speakers.

SALESMAN, *dumbfounded*. That's our top of the line. You no getum special deal, chief.<sup>43</sup>

Infuriated that he has been consigned to a Native stereotype, Buddy impulsively, recklessly buys even more gear. (The novel also has a Radio Shack scene, but there is no initial conflict between Buddy and the salesman, and no racism that spurs Buddy into buying a system beyond his means.) Once Buddy and Philbert are back in the car, Buddy again allows himself to be ruled by emotion. Too impatient to read the manual, he uses guesswork in making the sound system operative, and when it doesn't work, he concludes that he has been ripped off. He storms back into the store and confronts the manager. Meanwhile, Philbert remains in the car, patiently reads the manual, and then flicks a switch: the music blares on. Back in the store, all hell breaks loose, and Buddy ends up trashing the store and shattering the window. He and Philbert barely escape as the salesman futilely shoots his gun after them.

In contrast to the real turning point, this scene has a monster dramatic kick and it's a mega crowd-pleaser, as well, because the swaggering, sniggering, racist salesman gets a complete comeuppance. But the scene also accomplishes something more important: it reveals major chinks in our white knight's armor that require patching. It also shows, for the first time, that the knight's squire (that is, Philbert) might really be the better dragon slayer. In short order, the table has been set for the second act.

#### THE SECOND ACT: PROBING CHEYENNE CULTURE

A film cannot be sustained alone by an objective-oriented A-plot. It also requires relational-centered subplots. The principal subplot dominates the

second act and is characteristically referred to as the B-plot. In the first edition of *Making a Good Script Great*, Seger discusses the important role this kind of plot can play within a film narrative:

Chances are, if you're writing a script, you have something to say. There's an idea that's driving you or a statement you want to make. Thankfully, the dramatic form leaves room for a very specific way to carry your theme—the subplot. It has been said that the plot carries the action, but the subplot carries the theme. Some people say that the subplot is what the story is “really about.” Ask writers why they wrote their script, and they will probably start talking about the subplot.<sup>44</sup>

*Powwow Highway* perfectly illustrates this contention. After defining Buddy and Philbert in so many opposing ways, the filmmakers harness them together through their shared A-plot objective (freeing Bonnie) and then imprison them within the same Buick. They now have to sort out whose values will be followed in order to accomplish their objective. Driven by outrage and impatience, Buddy wants to get to Santa Fe as soon as possible and then use any means necessary to free his sister. He even brings the ultimate “big stick” to help out: a loaded gun. Philbert, in contrast, believes their mission is doomed to failure unless they can first gather spiritual power. This will necessitate taking a more circuitous route to Santa Fe with spiritual detours in order to achieve this crucial subobjective.

By degrees, the viewer realizes that despite Buddy's strength, passion, intelligence, and Herculean volition, Philbert has even more volition. At virtually every stage in the odyssey, the two clash over what they will do, with Philbert winning.

Location	Philbert's Plan	Buddy's Plan	Outcome
Bear Butte, SD	Detour to holy mt.	Drive straight thru	Philbert climbs mt.
White River, SD	Enter river and sing	Keep driving	Buddy joins Philbert and sings
Pine Ridge, SD	Attend powwow	Bypass powwow	They attend powwow
Pine Ridge, SD	Participate in dance	Remain in bleachers	Buddy dances
Fort Robinson, NE	Visit historic site	Remain in car	Buddy joins Philbert
Aurora, CO	Rest and refuel	Push on	They stay

Some of these struggles do not occur in the novel: Buddy does not swear at Philbert and does not resist entering White River, for instance. He also does not leave the car and join Philbert at Fort Robinson. There is a clear evolutionary progression in these dogfights that does not take place in the novel: (1) Buddy does not join Philbert in climbing up Bear Butte; (2) he finally wades into White River and falteringly joins Philbert in song, but his



participation is bookended by profane oaths and complete vexation; (3) he resists attending and then dancing at the powwow but ends up immersing himself in the rituals (even smiling while he dances); (4) he joins Philbert at Fort Robinson after an objection and is visibly moved by the spiritual presence; and (5) he caves in at Aurora after only a token resistance.

The final confrontation between Buddy and Philbert comprises the turning point between the second and third act. Just outside of Santa Fe, Buddy discovers a huge spider in the glove compartment. Before he can kill it, Philbert deliberately swerves the car off the road, spilling Buddy onto the shoulder and saving the spider (he believes it embodies the spirit of Wihio the Trickster, who historically is associated with spiders). In the process, Buddy's handgun is broken.

BUDDY, *pissed*. You dump me on the road to save a fuckin' insect?

PHILBERT. We must keep our medicine good.<sup>45</sup>

This line is delivered with rock-solid conviction, and Buddy never again revisits the notion of using bullets on behalf of his sister. It is also the last time he challenges Philbert. With the B-plot resolved, the stage is now set for the third-act climax.

Because Philbert keeps winning each relational conflict, one assumes that Heavey, Stawarz, and director Jonathan Wacks endorse Philbert's viewpoint. They do, and while Buddy's views are often laced with righteous eloquence, over and over again, Philbert is allowed to have the final say in an argument. This enables his viewpoint to resonate longer in the viewer's mind, moving each viewer by degrees closer to Philbert's point of view. A good example takes place during the scene at a roadside rest area in Wheatland, Wyoming. While Buddy "glares bitterly" at "an enormous GASIFICATION PLANT—a belching, farting atrocity," Philbert regales Wolf Tooth and Imogene with a Cheyenne myth about Wihio the Trickster. Both are captivated. Buddy is not.<sup>46</sup>

BUDDY. Too bad those stories don't tell us how to keep our reservations from turning into sewers like that one over there!

*All eyes turn to the gasification plant.*

PHILBERT. But they do—

BUDDY. Look Phil, I don't mean to tromp on your show, but white America ain't gonna hold off much longer. They're hungry, man. They want our coal, oil, and uranium and they're gonna take it. Wherever it is.

PHILBERT. No, they won't.

*A moment's pause, for effect.*

PHILBERT *continues*. Wihio the Trickster won't let them, for Wihio is also the Creator of the Universe. He will play a little trick on the whiteman, you wait and see.<sup>47</sup>



Both Buddy and Philbert make predictions, but by ending the scene on Philbert's line, it is given more weight, and the viewer begins to anticipate a payoff in the impending third act.

If Buddy must learn to draw from the past in order to solve the problems of the present, he also must learn how to become more human. Buddy is a person with limited reserves of compassion and without empathetic tendencies. Full of righteousness, he neither forgives nor forgets. Nor does he suffer from pangs of guilt. These dimensions—or more precisely, lack of dimensions—were also in the book, and they clearly earned Seals's admiration. Heavey, Stawarz, and Wacks, however, are troubled by Buddy's lack of humanity and couple it to his impatience with the past; both flaws must be overcome before Buddy can achieve his objectives.

The startling revelation generated during the catalyst is that Buddy has not talked to his sister in ten years and does not know she has two children. The reasons behind their estrangement are never provided; it is simply a rift that requires healing. Then early in the second act, Buddy's cruel streak is revealed. Angry that Philbert has detoured into South Dakota, Buddy turns on him, grabbing him by the jacket. In response, Philbert lifts him "straight off the ground" and fires back, "Nobody grabs me no more."<sup>48</sup> This incident triggers a flashback memory in which Buddy recalls how, as a child, he abusively taunted Philbert to tears. There is a parallel scene in the novel with key differences. In the book, Seals talks about how all the children made fun of Philbert: "They couldn't help it. It was impossible not to tease the moronic slob. He was a total pig. That was a fact."<sup>49</sup> Buddy does not feel guilty about apparently joining the pack. Instead, he is flummoxed by the fact that Philbert has just intimidated him: "This guy, this laughingstock of the tribe, this lowest of the low, this most certifiable loser of *Lame Deer*, had flat coldcocked the psyche of number-one *Macho Warrior* and spooked him out of his shorts!"<sup>50</sup> He also has trouble absorbing that the two of them have ended up as allies ("God, how could it be?").<sup>51</sup> In contrast, the motion picture Buddy does not simply join the other children in taunting Philbert; he is the principal tormentor. Unlike the book, Buddy is "sobered" by his memory and can no longer concentrate on his surroundings as they drive.

PHILBERT. Mount Rushmore's back in there.

BUDDY. Philbert . . . when we were kids, was I . . . what do you remember?<sup>52</sup>

It turns out Philbert remembers the exact same incident but with a different emphasis. Instead of dwelling on Buddy's cruelty, he remembers Bonnie's kindness, and how she comforted him and shared her lunch with him. This second flashback—which does not occur in the book—serves three narrative objectives: it helps us understand why Philbert would drive across the country to help free a nonrelative (in the book, he is simply flattered that the "star of the tribe" has sought his company); lays the initial groundwork for Philbert to fill the husband/father void in Bonnie's family; and underscores how Buddy

needs to learn Bonnie's compassion. It is the first time Buddy experiences guilt in the narrative, and throughout the second act, Buddy gradually learns to become more human. At the Pine Ridge powwow, for instance, he first trashes this cultural tradition: "I hate these goddamn things. Look at them—traipsing around a basketball court. They act like a few lousy beads and some smelly feathers are a big deal, a culture."<sup>53</sup> But when Jimmy Campbell—a fellow Vietnam veteran—turns on him and tells him he has gotten mean, Buddy is again forced into a reassessment:

*Buddy looks hard at Jimmy. He hesitates, then abruptly lurches off the bleachers. Down on the floor, he stands beside the swirl of Oglala, Arapaho, Blackfeet and Cheyenne. Slowly, stiffly, Buddy Red Bird begins to dance.*<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, Buddy is at first incapable of empathizing with Wolf Tooth, who has been driven out of Pine Ridge by harassing, violent goon squads. In another one of his rash moments, he emasculates his old friend:

BUDDY, *exploding*. While you're playing parlor games in fucking condoland, the fight's still going on out there.  
 WOLF TOOTH, *vehement*. Well I'm through bleedin' for it, Buddy. I got a kid on the way. You wanna fight every day of your life, you live at Pine Ridge.<sup>55</sup>

After this exchange, Buddy "stirs restlessly" within his bed, and the next day he initiates reconciliation with Wolf Tooth.

The final step in Buddy's makeover takes place when he meets Bonnie's friend Rabbit. In a heated exchange, she argues that interpersonal issues are just as important as political ones: "You think you're such a hot shit. . . . Bonnie told me nobody ever gave a damn about her when she was a kid."<sup>56</sup> The remark stings Buddy, and he becomes defensive:

BUDDY, *rueful*. Bonnie ran away when she was 17 and she's had nothing to do with us since.  
 RABBIT. Didn't ya ever wonder why she took off?  
 PHILBERT. And didn't come back?  
 BUDDY. I was in Nam getting my ass shot at when she split. When I got back, it was the same thing at Wounded Knee. I didn't have time to worry about her teenage insecurities.  
 PHILBERT. You must've had time to miss her.<sup>57</sup>

By adding Philbert to the mix and by once again ending a scene on his line, the screenwriters substantiate Rabbit's perspective: Buddy has been too remote.

By the time the climax arrives, Buddy has opened himself to the traditions and spirituality of the past, and he has learned to become more human. In scriptwriting parlance, he has completed his character transformation arc. Significantly, at the climax, he is willing to sacrifice himself so his friends and relatives can escape the police. As he faces the onrushing police car armed with only a dislodged car window, he is finally able to channel the past:

*Buddy pivots, his breath coming in heaves. The cruiser's glaring headlights splash over him.*

*His stiffened arms swing toward the black sky. He faces the oncoming foe, body rigid in the gaudy spray of light.*

*BUDDY STORMS THE CRUISER, hands high above his head. For a single, frenzied moment he becomes:*

*CRAZY HORSE*

*Face streaked with war paint, charging recklessly ahead. With a terrifying WAR WHOOP, he lets his tomahawk fly—*

*PROTECTOR'S WINDOWPANE whistles through the air.*

*SMASH! Safety-glass flies like confetti. The squad car's windshield SHATTERS into a giant fractured web.*

*Wailing like a wounded beast, the cruiser SKIDS out of control, FLIPPING OVER on the asphalt.<sup>58</sup>*

## CONCLUSIONS

In classic Hollywood style, loose ends are tied up cleanly at the end of the third act, and the audience is sent out of the theater with a feel-good ending. Every dramatic question has been answered: Bonnie has been freed and will end her self-imposed exile from her Cheyenne tribe; the estrangement between Buddy and Bonnie has been healed; Philbert has gathered his final sacred object and completes his quest to become Whirlwind Dreamer (a spiritual warrior); Buddy now fully understands how the present must draw power from the past; Philbert will clearly step into the paternal void within Bonnie's family; and Buddy has recovered his depleted funds, enabling him to buy cattle for his tribe.<sup>59</sup> With a new unity, and accompanied by tribal president Joseph Mahtasooma, there is also no doubt that the proposal to sell off more mining rights will be defeated. All's well that ends well.

That is the problem, Brecht and his theoretical descendants would argue. Because all the questions have been resolved, the viewer, as Kuhn has argued, "is also 'closed,' completed, or satisfied." This is a recipe for passivity and the status quo. But something different happens to the viewer who watches *Powwow Highway*. Because there has been emotional and intellectual engagement, the viewer continues to think about the film after it is over. Character and plot issues have been resolved, so the mind climbs backward through the narrative to that second-act B-plot. What has not been resolved is the viewer's

own incomplete knowledge pertaining to the places, people, and history referenced during this part of the narrative. Questions proliferate. Where, exactly, is Bear Butte? What is the meaning of the objects that have been tied to trees at the top of Bear Butte? Does this landmark have significance for other Native tribes? Who is the Cheyenne leader referenced over Philbert's CB radio, and why is he "like Jesus to the Cheyenne"?<sup>60</sup> What are some of the other legends involving Wihio the Trickster? Why was there a civil war at Pine Ridge? What exactly happened at Fort Robinson? In search of answers, the viewer pillages the atlas, encyclopedia, and Internet.

During the past ten years, there have been a growing number of mainstream films that have opted, like *Powwow Highway*, to marry conventional form to unfamiliar content. Educators hoping to inspire a new generation of writers and filmmakers could opt to analyze *Three Kings* (1999), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), or *Blood Diamond* (2006) instead of *Powwow Highway*. Another fascinating exercise would be to analyze one of these films in conjunction with *Powwow Highway*. *Blood Diamond*, for instance, has remarkable structural similarities to *Powwow Highway*: it pairs a manipulative, flawed character with a straightforward, "pure" character who has strong, paternal instincts; it features an odyssey in the second act during which the pure character begins to impact the values of the flawed character; and it builds to a big third-act climax in which the flawed character demonstrates his newfound values through self-sacrifice. Its ultimate impact on the audience is also similar: it infuses the viewer with curiosity about the people, culture, and history of Sierra Leone, and it motivates postscreening research.

*Powwow Highway*, however, remains an ideal launching pad for this kind of endeavor.<sup>61</sup> "Perhaps I could do something like this, myself," a student might ponder after a screening. There is really no reason why he or she cannot.

## NOTES

The author gratefully thanks Jean Stawarz for sharing her final draft screenplay of *Powwow Highway*, and for her thoughtful answers to a wide variety of questions pertaining to the film's development and production.

1. Brecht writes that "It is a common truism among the producers and writers of [the Aristotelian play] that the audience, once it is in the theatre, is not a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob, which must be and can be reached only through its emotions; that it has the mental immaturity and the high emotional suggestibility of a mob. The [learning play] holds that the audience is a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and of reasoning, of making judgments even in the theatre; it treats it as individuals of mental and emotional maturity." *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 79. For an exceptionally helpful (and historically influential) introduction to Brecht's theory, see also Martin Esslin, *Brecht: The Man and His Work* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1974), 126-53.

2. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*, ed. Patricia Erens (New York: Horizon Press, 1979), 140. See also Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*,

*Screen Pamphlet 2*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: Society for Education in Film and Television), 1973.

3. Annette Kuhn, "Textual Politics," in *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 157. See also Kuhn, "Textual Politics," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 251.

4. Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 157; see also Kuhn, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, 251.

5. Kuhn, *Women's Pictures*, 161; see also Kuhn, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, 254.

6. Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: Daughters of the Dust and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 119–20.

7. Jane Gaines, "Women and Representation: Can We Enjoy Alternative Pleasure?" in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 363–64. See also Gaines, "Women and Representation: Can We Enjoy Alternative Pleasure?" in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 82. An earlier version of this essay served as the introduction to a special section on women and representation in *Jump Cut* 29 (February 1984): 25–27.

8. Gaines, *American Media and Mass Culture*, 364; see also Gaines, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, 83.

9. In conjunction with the 1989 film it received mainstream publication in March 1990 through Plume, a branch of Penguin Books.

10. For a discussion of the literary pretexts *Braveheart* draws upon, see Wolfgang Hochbruck, "'The Last of the Oral Tradition in Electronic Word Processing': Traditional Material and Postmodern Form in Gerald Vizenor's *Bearheart*," in *Traditionalism vs. Modernism: Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English, Essen, 12–15 June 1991*, ed. Erhard Reckwitz, Lucia Vennarini, and Cornelia Wegener (Essen, Germany: Die Blaue Eule, 1994), 91–92.

11. Michael Alpert, introduction to *Two Spanish Picaresque Novels*, trans. Michael Alpert (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 7.

12. Francisco de Quevedo, *The Swindler (El Buscón)*, in *Two Spanish Picaresque Novels*, trans. Michael Alpert (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 112.

13. David Seals, *The Powwow Highway* (New York: Plume, 1990), 69.

14. Alpert, *Two Spanish Picaresque Novels*, 14.

15. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 28.

16. Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great*, 2nd ed. (Hollywood, CA: Samuel French, 1994), 124.

17. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 134.

18. *Ibid.*, 28.

19. *Ibid.*, 29.

20. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

21. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

22. *Ibid.*, 40.

23. Louis Owens, "'Ecstatic Strategies': Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart*," in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 141–42.

24. The hunter with the orange beard seemingly speaks for Vizenor when he

grills Belladonna: “Tell me about this Indian word you use, tell me which Indians are you talking about, or are you talking for all Indians. . . . And if you are speaking for all Indians then how can there be truth in what you say? . . . An Indian is an Indian because he speaks and thinks and believes he is an Indian, but an Indian is nothing more than an invention.” Another character makes the following pronouncement: “[Belladonna] is a terminal believer and a victim of her own narcissism.” Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 194–98.

25. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 92–93, 95–98; 201–2; 180–88; 199–200.

26. *Ibid.*, 159–63; 211–13.

27. *Ibid.*, 54.

28. *Ibid.*, 59.

29. Jurgen Wolff and Kerry Cox, *Successful Script Writing* (Cincinnati, OH: Writers Digest Books, 1991), 46.

30. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 19.

31. *Ibid.*, 28.

32. When asked about Bonnie’s retooling, coscenarist Stawarz responded, “We loved the outrageous quirkiness of the characters, but we really felt Bonnie needed grounding or she would not work as someone Philbert could possibly care for. And we needed her to care about her kids in a way that audiences could relate to, or else we risked alienating the audience.” Jean Stawarz, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2007.

33. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 5–6.

34. *Ibid.*, 94. When asked about these differences, Stawarz responded, “I really related to Philbert and saw him as a seeker and that was the essence of the story. He didn’t need to be violent to get things to happen and that was the beauty of Philbert as we saw him.” Jean Stawarz, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2007.

35. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 93.

36. *Ibid.*, 6.

37. Janet Heaney and Jean Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway* (screenplay), September 1987 draft, 12–13. The word *Notame* is short for *Notame-ohmeseheetse* (Northern-eaters), which is an appellation for the Northern Cheyenne. According to Stawarz, “Philbert is struggling to own his heritage and gets things in his Philbert-esque way, which doesn’t always mean perfect pronunciation or translation.” Stawarz, e-mail message to author, 25 March 2009.

38. Linda Aronson, *Screenwriting Updated: New (and Conventional) Ways of Writing for the Screen* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2001), 63.

39. After the screenplay was written, Buddy’s name was changed to Buddy Red Bow for legal reasons; there was a real person named Buddy Red Bird. Stawarz, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2007.

40. Heaney and Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway*, 1.

41. *Ibid.*, 3.

42. *Ibid.*, 6. Within scholarship, it can be a tough call as to whether to quote dialogue as it appears in the script or on the screen. In rehearsal or on the set, the writer, actor, and/or director typically modify dialogue. It can also be deleted during postproduction (sometimes reluctantly in order to achieve a more desirable running time), and it can even be modified in postproduction by using automatic dialogue replacement. Overall, *Powwow Highway* is remarkably faithful to its screenplay, but

some scenes have been deleted (often for budgetary reasons; sometimes as a result of further character refinement), and some dialogue exchanges have been modified. When action is quoted in this article, the author always uses action descriptions found in the screenplay. Whenever dialogue is quoted, this article favors the screenplay version if differences are minimal. In this particular scene, however, the revisions are more pronounced, so the dialogue has been transcribed from the DVD. *Powwow Highway*, DVD, directed by Jonathan Wacks (1989; Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2004).

43. Heaney and Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway*, 25.

44. Linda Seger, *Making a Good Script Great* (Hollywood, CA: Samuel French, 1987), 26.

45. Heaney and Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway*, 76. Stawarz verified Philbert's preeminence in the narrative: "Chief Joseph saw Buddy as the tribe's future, but really, Philbert was the one who could best insure the tribe's future." Stawarz, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2007.

46. Heaney and Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway*, 65.

47. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

48. *Ibid.*, 38.

49. Seals, *The Powwow Highway*, 134.

50. *Ibid.*, 133.

51. *Ibid.*, 134.

52. Heaney and Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway*, 49.

53. *Ibid.*, 59.

54. *Ibid.*, 59.

55. *Ibid.*, 71.

56. *Ibid.*, 83.

57. *Ibid.*, 84.

58. *Ibid.*, 97.

59. In the screenplay, Buddy sanctifies this achievement by giving Philbert his elk bone necklace with the Bronze medals (which Philbert had so admired at the Pine Ridge powwow). This gesture also takes place at the end of the movie, but it is largely obscured by the rolling end credits. Attentive viewers will be rewarded!

60. Heaney and Stawarz, *The Powwow Highway*, 32. In the screenplay, Philbert and the trucker converse about Sweet Medicine, an important mythological figure in Cheyenne culture (a recounting of the legends surrounding Sweet Medicine can be found online at [http://www.members.tripod.com/~Glove\\_r/Sweet.html](http://www.members.tripod.com/~Glove_r/Sweet.html), accessed 2 March 2009). David Seals objected to the CB radio scene in general and to the linkage of Sweet Medicine's name to a trucker in particular, so according to Stawarz, in a political compromise, Sweet Medicine's name was changed to "Light Cloud" (Stawarz, e-mail message to author, 21 August 2007).

Despite the unfortunate friction, the CB radio scene is brilliant in its command of storytelling craft. The brief conversation establishes Philbert's motivational objective, advances his depiction as a spiritual seeker, and advances his nonjudgmental habit of usurping spiritual sustenance from hackneyed dominant culture artifacts (as he had done earlier with the racist car ad, and as he will do later with the silent film jailbreak scene). It also logically sets up his detour into South Dakota and Bear Butte Mountain. In short, it is a cinematic solution for efficiently disseminating a wide range of noncinematic material from the source novel.



61. The theoretical foundations of mass media cultural studies do include some roots in theory promulgating alternative forms. Not surprisingly, therefore, some critics pull back from the conventional aspects of *Powwow Highway*. An interesting example is found in Ted Jojola's article "Absurd Reality: Hollywood Goes to the Indians," published in *Film & History* 23 (1993): 9. But in their book *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor ultimately find the "cultural hybrid" nature of the film to be invigorating.

*Powwow Highway* typically operates by grafting an American Indian—predominantly Cheyenne—point of view or sensibility onto what is essentially a conventional Hollywood formula. . . . [It] delights viewers who find, perhaps for the first time, a narrative that allies them with various Native American points of view while also acknowledging various non-Native ways of seeing, primarily in the formal demands of generic storylines. . . . [It] Americanizes Native Americans and Native Americanizes the movies, while at the same time respecting the sacred traditions of both the Hollywood Western and the Cheyenne Indians.

Rollins and O'Connor, *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 137–52.