

## *The Red and the Black: Race in the DEFA Film 'Osceola'*

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*"The white man shall not make me black.  
I will make the white man red with blood;  
and then blacken him in the sun and rain..."*

Chief Osceola, on the 1832 Treaty of Payne's Landing

In 1971, two events took place in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that prompted the question of how to frame foreign policy and issues concerning race for a European country whose majority-white populace was not permitted to travel internationally. The first occurred on May 3, 1971, when Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht as the First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party's (SED) Central Committee. He ushered in a foreign policy shift from continuous polemics against the Hallstein Doctrine<sup>1</sup> to a centrist economic reconciliation with the West as well as high-minded outreach directed at socialist-inclined Third World countries like Cuba.<sup>2</sup> The second event, a month later, was the inauspicious Berlin debut of Konrad Petzold's Totalvision ORWO-color western *Osceola* (1971), an international co-production between the *Deutscher Filmaktiengesellschaft* (DEFA) working group "Roter Kreis," the Bulgarian Cinema Center in Sofia, and the renowned Cuban film company *Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* (ICAIC) in Havana. On the one hand, the appointment of Erich Honecker was accompanied by an overnight cultural liberalization within the GDR that flourished until the Western émigré Wolf Biermann's exile in 1976. On the other hand, however, the *Indianerfilm* caused nary a stir on either side of the Iron Curtain, although many of the reviewers noted the film's curious race politics. For example, a reviewer in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote:

Das von der DEFA angerichtete Kasperltheater ist, nimmt man es so ernst wie es sich selbst nimmt, so lachhaft, daß man den möglicherweise authentischen Ansatzpunkt des Films - die ökonomischen Hintergründe der Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Weiß und Rot - so gut wie aus den Augen verliert. (Habel 84)

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1 The Hallstein Doctrine was the foreign policy of West Germany that refused diplomatic and economic recognition of any state that recognized the GDR as a legitimate German power, isolating it from large portions of the global community.

2 By 1971, 28 countries diplomatically recognized the GDR, with Salvador Allende's Chile joining their ranks shortly before Honecker's ascension to power and serving as the new Latin American model for the Solidarity movement within the GDR.

Although critics in West Germany panned the film, those in the GDR openly questioned how two of the film's few ethnically German actors, Horst Schulze and Gerhard Rachold, might be so easily stamped as „Standardfiguren für weiße Bösewichter.“<sup>3</sup> This international co-production provoked discomfort about its position on race conflict, despite the fact that the film unambiguously adheres to a Marxist-Leninist paradigm by indicting the United States as the site of historically verifiable racism against multiple peoples via a racially hierarchical, capitalist authority. Genre kitsch had simply been mobilized to portray the GDR's redoubled engagement with the Third World in Manichean terms as a defensive measure against white-capitalist exploitation.

If, however, we consider Ann Laura Stoler's thesis of socially constructed "racisms" existing within specific historical and spatial contexts (Stoler 370), a broader question emerges, namely; namely, how did cliché-driven cultural products such as *Osceola* exemplify the GDR's own problematic representation of race and world history to their own citizens? The question is pressing in that, as of now, no comprehensive work on the construction of race and racism in the GDR exists, though recent interdisciplinary efforts have begun to break ground on the topic.<sup>4</sup> With the former East Germany as a fertile breeding ground for xenophobic politics today, this question still remains politically relevant.<sup>5</sup> The collapse of the ostensibly anti-racist GDR—which attributed racist discourse to the West by mythologizing the struggles of African Americans, Vietnamese and Palestinians in terms of global class struggle—did not simply create a psychological vacuum into which the present-day residents have imported racist ideology from Western Europe and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the well-meaning socialists may have unintentionally

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3 George Antosch in *Der neue Weg*, Halle, 23 July 1971. Cited in Habel, 83.

4 Among the prominent post-*Wende* efforts to this effect include Irene Runge. *Ausland DDR: Fremdenhass*. Berlin: Dietz, 1990. Arlene Teraoka *East, West and Others: The Third World in Postwar German Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996, Peggy Piesche's "Black and German? East German Adolescents before 1989 – A Retrospective View of a 'Non-Existent Issue' in the GDR." in Leslie Adelson. *The Cultural After-Life of East Germany: New Transnational Perspectives*. Washington: AICGS, 2002., and Ulrich van der Haydn's *Zwischen Solidarität und Wirtschaftsinteressen: Die "geheimen" Beziehungen der DDR zum südafrikanischen Apartheidregime*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2005.

5 For example, see Eckhardt Zimmermann's statistical evaluation of increases in right-wing violence in Thuringia and Northrhine-Westphalia since the year 2000 (Zimmermann 223).

6 The best work on the anti-racist practice of the Solidarity movement to date was written by the former General Secretary of the *Solidaritätskomitee der DDR*. Achim Reichardt. *Nie vergessen - Solidarität üben! Die Solidaritätsbewegung in der DDR*. Berlin: Kaiser Homilius-Verlag, 2006. See also Barton Byg's article "Solidarity and Exile: *Blonder Tango* and the East Germany Fantasy of the Third World," which

perpetuated a functional racism that Goldberg calls "racial historicism" or "the set of claims that those other than European or descended from Europeans are not inherently inferior but historically immature or less developed," as opposed to the distinctly biological taxonomies of "naturalized racism" (Goldberg 46). This essentially Hegelian notion of Europe as the locus of world history—a concept which in turn defines all non-European cultures as *Volk ohne Geschichte*—was implemented as domestic cultural policy toward the Third World. The goal of this article is to closely examine the constructs of race which inform the art, film and literature of the DDR, a society which viewed itself as "anti-racist."

*Osceola* thus presents us with a crude—albeit illustrative—example of this ostensibly anti-racist, racial historicism in action. The film's loose portrayal of an actual 1835 scenario betrays the patriarchal race hierarchies and tokenism inherent in the GDR's international project of solidarity with Third World nations, particularly its "Bruderstaat" Cuba, by framing interracial conflicts based on racial historicist stereotypes, including that of the "noble savage" and the "superstitious negro." *Osceola* exacerbates these stereotypes by drawing on a variety of racial physiognomies. Moreover, the GDR's Marxist-Leninist logic collapses as it confronts early 19th Century American race politics via the clumsy genre choice of the Western, betraying a larger epistemological inability within the GDR to reconcile the non-white populace on the frontier of Moscow's influence as equal, active participants in international socialism. The enslavement of African and the theft of Native American lands are collapsed into a single crime of American imperialism. In this respect, it might have been advantageous for Petzold to adhere to the historical material for the film's screenplay more closely. Finally, *Osceola's* aesthetic allusions to National Socialism link the film to the East German anti-fascist film tradition, but its use of 1830's Florida as an intertext so confounds the symbolism of German history with the history of American slavery so as to render both irrelevant. The historical and anti-racist framework of the film is undermined by a number of factors: the film's cardboard script, its awkward vocal dubbing and the *mise-en-scène* of its Bulgarian and Cuban locations. In Gerd Gemünden's words, *Osceola* is not so much a Marxist-Leninist object lesson in antebellum slave relations, but rather "attests to what it meant to be East German in the 1960s and 1970s" (Gemünden 402).

### DEFA *Indianerfilme* and the Performance of Race

From their inception in 1966, the DEFA *Indianerfilme* were designed to refract classic American and contemporaneous West German westerns, presenting an unabashed critique of colonialism and racism in the old American West through a materialist view of history deemed "anthropologically correct" (Habel 3).<sup>7</sup> The

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interrogates the East German anti-racist/exoticist discourse.

<sup>7</sup> This correctness primarily stems from the DEFA *Indianerfilm's* seminal piece,

”classic” Hollywood westerns of D.W. Griffith, John Ford and Howard Hawks famously stereotyped Native American peoples as savages—uneducated, uncivilized and whose domination at the hands of Euro-Americans was the usurper’s natural right.<sup>8</sup> In deliberate contrast, the DEFA westerns depict the Native Americans as clever, well-groomed, skilled, non-violent—unless of course they are forced to defend themselves—and willing to act as martyrs for a revolutionary (i.e. anti-white-expansionist) cause.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Fuchs argues that such a portrayal not only provides a further iteration of the “noble savage” myth, but also alludes to a GDR foreign policy goal: to connect 19th Century expansionism against the “red people” on the American continent with the *gelbe Brüder/Schwestern* fighting in Vietnam (Fuchs 164). Sites of postcolonial resistance against capitalist powers, such as Algeria, Cuba and Vietnam are thematized in these films. Moreover, Native American protagonists such as Ulzana in *Apachen* (1973) or Hard Rock in *Blutsbrüder* (1975) frequently employ guerilla and terrorist tactics against their scheming American enemies.

An autonomous Native American history still struggles to achieve representation amidst the competing meta-narratives in these films. Above all, the DEFA westerns dogmatically framed the historical oppression at the hands of Euro-American settlers as a bloodthirsty race war between Native Americans and white plantation owners. Using Harald Reinl’s *Winnetou* as a narrative model, only those white men who symbolically become “part of the tribe” are afforded any sympathy, and interracial relationships often end with the death of the woman involved. Also inherent in the DEFA Western was its discursive emphasis on anti-fascism; in this sense, white Americans function as 19<sup>th</sup> Century foils for National Socialists. Many of the films depict a systematic and insidious collusion between land-hungry planters, simple-minded military officers and greedy cowboys interested only in profit—

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*The Sons of Great Bear (Die söhne der großen Bärin, 1966)*, on which renowned anthropologist Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich was a consultant before she disavowed herself of the project. None of the following *Indianerfilme* were particularly “well-informed” in this sense, but their scientific accuracy was nevertheless mythologized. The use of anthropological science to justify racist and racializing practices corresponds with, as Pascal Grosse argues, the “epistemological pressure placed on whiteness” during any attempt to reconcile presumed white cultural and biological supremacy with empirical and experiential realities (Grosse 181). Habel’s anthropological recourse is part of a long-standing justification ploy.

8 Two of the most egregious examples of this were Griffith’s *The Battle for Elderbusch Gulch* (1915) and Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956).

9 In fact, it is fairly well documented that both archetypes of the noble and bloodthirsty savage generally have the same author and point of origin: the works of American author James Fenimore Cooper (Kilpatrick 2). Cooper’s literary negotiations between so-called “manly realism” and the romanticist notion of an adventurous-but-doomed Native American captivated and inspired millions of readers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most notably German author Karl May.

similar in many ways to the figures found in DEFA capitalist-conspiratorial thrillers such as *Die Affäre Blum* (1948) and *Rat der Götter* (1950). The Native American protagonist emerges as a Marxist-Leninist hero who flattens the difference between all historical, colonial, and post-colonial struggles into a narrative of universal multicultural solidarity.

In the DEFA case, the symbolically over-determined noble savage actually has a single face and name, regardless of which Native American tribe he may belong to in a given film: Gojko Mitić. Mitić presents us with a “body too many”—a term coined by film scholar Bill Nichols to describe the unavoidable physiognomic mediation of history by actors performing historical reenactment—due to the numerous roles as Native American figures he played. The faces of all tribes—be they Iroquois, Apache or Seminole—were collapsed into Mitić’s strong jaw, exaggerated red make-up, a long black-haired wig and muscular torso, each of which appears prominently in virtually every one of these films. As Vera Dika notes, “his image is a picture of a picture, one that refers to the history of the North American Indian in film, yet to no one image in particular” (Dika 1). A native of what at that time was Yugoslavia, Mitić was a sports instructor and occasional stuntman whose rise to fame came when he was cast for the role of Tokei-Ihto in Josef Mach’s *Die Söhne der großen Bärin* (1965). Several factors allowed Mitić’s sudden and prolonged success as an actor both in the GDR and abroad. First, his Serbian heritage gave him a slightly darker complexion than that of the “unmistakably German” face that, according to Sabine Hake, characterized the top DEFA actors; his Serbian accent, however, ensured his voice would always be dubbed by a native German speaker (Hake 130). In addition, his square jaw, piercing gaze and chiseled physique made him a suitable aesthetic counterpart to American protagonist figures such as Charlton Heston or even Superman—essentially a combination of physical strength and sex appeal. Most importantly, Mitić could perform his own stunts and was adept at handling horses, factors which gave his performances an air of authenticity. Performance-wise, he functioned as a Will Rogers of sorts: racially non-white by presumed western European standards, but exceptional in terms of his showmanship and eagerness to please audiences. The noble savage fighting the international struggle against white capitalism had to simultaneously look good while outwitting the capitalists at their own game.

Katrin Sieg’s concept of “ethnic drag” provides us with a useful point of departure to for discussing the racial dynamics which underlie the depiction of Native Americans in the East German *Indianerfilm*. Rather than seeing the “red man” as a historical and cultural construct, such performances reinforce the stereotypes because “ethnic drag excludes the material bodies of cultural Others and appropriates or ventriloquizes their voices” (Sieg 86). Mitić himself becomes an extradiegetic presence on each successive *Indianerfilm* as the handsome actor famous who plays Indian characters in GDR-sponsored productions, thereby reducing Na-

tive Americans to a merely fictional role. Mitić's clothing, "red-face" make-up and black-haired wig help reify a racially motivated fictional construct—the noble savage—which is then placed within narratives that alternately reenact historical conflicts and then lapse into an ahistorical spectacle. German racism toward Eastern Europeans contiguous with pre-1945 prejudices, however, legitimates Mitić within his consistent role of the "Indian brave." Mitić himself is tokenized—because of his presumed racial Otherness, he serves as an acceptable substitute for any number of racial Others.<sup>10</sup> If such a performance is deemed "historically accurate" within a given society, then the locum replaces the historically marginalized people in the collective imagination of the main stream culture. Furthermore, the fringe group used as stand-ins are pushed further to the margins of mainstream society, as they would not necessarily want to align themselves with these representations.<sup>11</sup> As Sieg puts it, "xenophilia alternates with xenophobia" in the visual relationship that is established (Sieg 77). Creative and dramatic license transforms into anthropological fact before the European cultural consumer, no differently from the Wilhelmine *Völkerschauen* of Maghrebs in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>12</sup> Just as specific groups of Native Americans are then rendered as a performance, the non-white people of the global South can be generalized about and their oppression re-imagined as figments of a socialist narrative.

As for such storytelling, the principal creators of the DEFA *Indianerfilm*—the *Arbeitsgruppe Roter Kreis*, including Günter Karl, Hans-Joachim Wallstein, Richard Groschopp, Gottfried Kolditz and Konrad Petzold—follow a well-established pattern of DEFA genre productions, from fairytales to science-fiction films and musicals.<sup>13</sup> Such fare was explicitly created to compete with television and

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10 In this sense, Mitić resembles many American actors of sub-dominant ethnicities and races who ended up making a career playing stereotypes, particularly Anthony Quinn.

11 It should be noted to the contrary that contemporary Native American organizations have openly embraced Mitić as a cultural figure. The Tulalip tribe even performed a traditional welcoming ceremony for him when he came to Seattle for the U.S. *Indianerfilm* premiere in October 1996. This reception requires further examination, as do other cultural interchanges between Native Americans and the GDR. H. Glenn Penny's recent article "Red Power: Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich and Indian Activist Networks in East and West Germany" has charted new territory in this respect.

12 As described by Sierra Bruckner, *Völkerschauen* were commercial ethnographic exhibitions that were part of German popular culture by the 1880's. Natives of colonized countries would be paid small sums to perform their race before on-lookers, so as to "educate" Europeans about the habits of non-Europeans (Bruckner 128).

13 Konrad Petzold and Gottfried Kolditz built their careers off of directing a variety of similarly-themed genre pictures, with the latter having filmed not only westerns, children's films, comedies, musicals and science-fiction but also the only existing



broadcast cultural material from the West.<sup>14</sup> Exemplified by films such as *Geliebte Weiße Maus* (1963), *Der goldene Gans* (1964) and *Im Staub der Sterne* (1976), the formula appropriated tropes from generic cinema produced in Hollywood while reconfiguring their ideological framework. Although scholars have drawn attention to both the larger budgets and the peculiarly combative socialist character of the DEFA *Indianerfilme* in contrast to the studio's other genre productions, they have overlooked the uniquely transnational character of these productions, as well as the complicated racial dynamics they establish and reinforce in their narratives. The *Indianerfilme* were exceptional for three reasons: many were co-productions with sympathetic countries such as Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Cuba, Mongolia or Hungary; secondly, these films often featured non-Germans as historicized extras; and, lastly, they were screened throughout the Eastern Bloc. For example, *Apachen* was the most popular DEFA film ever produced if we include its reception in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania and Czechoslovakia; over ten million tickets were sold throughout the Eastern Bloc while the film was on tour. Thus the GDR's enthusiastic reinterpretation of the western that "overlooks the deeply ingrained racism and sexism of this genre" was itself made for export among a diverse European populace, some of whom had performed the necessary ethnic drag during the shooting (Gemünden 401). Indeed, Günter Karl, chief dramaturge of the *Roten Kreis* and screenwriter for *Osceola*, harbored few illusions about the compromises made in the adaptation of historical and racial realities into westerns for export to the East:

Wir waren uns von Anfang an klar darüber, daß wir uns sehr genau abgrenzen mußten gegenüber des gleichen Genres der kapitalistischen Produktion. Dabei waren wir genötigt, einen Teil der Wirkungsfaktoren dieses Genres zu nutzen, Faktoren, die eines gewissen Reizes und manchmal auch einer gewissen Romantik und manchmal - soweit es die indische Seite betrifft - nicht entbehren.<sup>15</sup>

Karl's carefully chosen words about the „gewissen Romantik“ *vis-à-vis* Native Americans considers romanticizing such people as part of the genre. Marxist-Leninist multiculturalism requires the singling out and differentiation of those who constitute its multicultural aspect. In accord with Dale Hudson's argument that "multicultural whiteness is [...] not a form of racial passing, but *national passing*" (Hudson

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DEFA "horror" film, *Das Ding im Schloss* (1979).

14 The competition, as it turns out, were Austrian director Harald Reinl's *Winnetou* films based on Karl May's popular literature, the success of which secured the production of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns. The overnight popularity of these films prompted the DEFA, under Hans Mahlich, to immediately begin its own western cycle.

15 From the *Berliner Zeitung*, 1971. Quoted from Habel 12.

132), Marxist-Leninist multiculturalism must necessarily delineate the cooperating nations and races involved before incorporating them into the homogenizing socialist matrix.

On the surface, it seems completely unproblematic to situate *Osceola* within the overarching ideals regarding performance in the DEFA *Indianerfilm*. The film features Mitić, revolves around the conventional plot of Euro-Americans conspiring to take away Native American land which then leads to the inevitable uprising and subsequent defeat of the tribe. Landscapes foreign to most East Germans grace the screen in full majestic color accompanied by a lazy trumpet melody and Sergio Leone's harmonica.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the film employs an archetype which became a beloved convention of the *Roter Kreis*: the white mediator.<sup>17</sup> First appearing as Old Shatterhand in the tales of Karl May, this figure strives for a community in which whites and reds can live in harmony, but eventually sides with the Native Americans against the unrelenting assault by white-coded capitalism. In *Osceola*, this character is the sawmill owner Richard Moore.<sup>18</sup> If Mitić's character is to signify the revolutionary strength of international socialism, then the figure of the white mediator provides an ideal persona as a point of identification for East German viewers—a member of the hegemonic race who comprehends that the dual forces of race and culture function to push minority groups to the fringes of society. "Strategies of ethnicization and devaluation are combined with strategies of affiliation," as Peggy Piesche describes it. "The 'others' thus appear as a difference that can be readily consumed, such that the heroes' inner life appears as a hybrid" (Piesche 54). Suppressed guilt from the Holocaust combined with the continuous efforts to make multiculturalism readily consumable in Germany have set the psychological stage for what Sieg calls "Wiedergutmachungsphantasien"—fantasies of atonement which tend to confuse "racial tropes as symbols for *cultural* rapprochement" (Sieg 110). This notion is best exemplified in DEFA films by the "fence sitter," a figure who eventually sides with anti-imperialist movement attributed to the Native Americans. In this respect, *Osceola* is no exception.

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16 The irony is that only about four minutes worth of footage shot in Cuba even appears in the film, consisting primarily of palm trees dotting the Cuban countryside as characters ride their horses across it. There are also shots of Afro-Cuban sugar plantation workers chopping sugar (which likely would be imported later by the GDR).

17 If one is to consider that *Dances with Wolves* (1990) has made \$184 million to date—one of the highest grossing westerns of all time—one could say that this figure has only magnified in global presence over the decades.

18 Dean Reed's character Harmonica in *Blutsbrüder* is another excellent example of this archetype. Reed's extra-diegetical presence as an American musician symbolically unites the USA and the GDR in a harmonious brotherhood.



## Historical Fact and Marxist Fiction

*Osceola* is essentially a Marxist-Leninist reading of the (semi-fictionalized) events leading up to the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), one that posits capitalism as the impetus behind American racism. Both antebellum slave culture and the carefully circumscribed narrative of the Trail of Tears are depicted as proto-fascist events by virtue of their oppression of the racially- and politically-united black Seminoles. As Uta Poiger has argued regarding German westerns, GDR filmmakers dismantled the racial and political complexity that the Seminoles and the real Osceola present as historical figures in order to “place violence (and genocide) firmly in the American context” (161). Director Konrad Petzold and his crew seem to hold assumptions about the Seminoles’ lack of history that Hegel or May would share. This, I would argue, reflects the general ignorance concerning Native American history outside of the field of anthropology (or *Völkerkunde*) in the GDR (Van der Haydn 132). Given the historically questionable relationship between anthropology and the tribal cultures anthropologists took as their objects, a charitable critique of *Osceola*’s historical accuracy would be that GDR historians such as film consultant Dr. Lothar Dräger idealized Seminole culture via a hybrid of *Völkerkunde* and Marxist-Leninism. In continuity with May’s depiction of the “noble savage,” however, GDR racial historicism creates a fantasy that “indicts the imperialist project and even mourns its violent outcome, yet legitimates it as the doomed struggle of primitive, natural peoples against the inevitable encroachments of a more advanced civilization” (Sieg 78).

In contrast to the red-painted Bulgarians found in the film living happily in their homestead during the opening credits, the Seminoles themselves were not a timeless, “natural” entity, but a late-emergent, 19th Century polyglot tribe. Historians have posited two theories for their origin, both of which reflect early 19th Century European debates about the racial origins of mankind. The monogenesis theory conceives the Seminoles as a splinter group of the Creek Federation (Muskogee) who established claims on arable land in Florida at the beginning of the 19th Century and then partially absorbed communities of escaped slaves. The polygenesis theory, however, views the Seminoles as a congregate of Native Americans (principally migrating Muskogees, Yamasees and Apalachees) and escaped African slaves who fled the British in South Carolina and the Spanish in the Caribbean beginning in the 1680’s (Twyman 11). The polygenesis theory usefully complicates the racial portrayal of the Seminoles in *Osceola* in that black- and red-skinned Seminoles were not divided into those racial categories—skin color would have secondary importance to one’s proven skills and merits to the tribe. As Bruce Edward argued, the continuity of the macro-level rebellion of the Seminoles against white planters is evidence of the Seminole population’s roots stemming from an amalgam of recently exploited peoples. Since the Spanish, the British and the U.S. depended heavily

on African slavery at the turn of the 19th Century, the demographic explosion of enslaved Africans in Georgia and Florida inevitably led to the creation of more black Seminoles. But it was the desire of Spain's King Philip V to stave off British expansionism in the U.S. colonies prior to the 19th Century that caused him to grant amnesty to slaves fleeing to Spanish Florida, allowing these rebellious communities to flourish on the fringes of British territory until the U.S. conquered it during the War of 1812.<sup>19</sup> The Seminoles were distinct amongst the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles), as they were the only tribe without a full written constitution containing their own codes of slave ownership for subsistence agrarian interests (Bolt 151). Nevertheless some Seminoles owned a limited number of slaves themselves, and would occasionally return escaped slaves to their owners, depending on the local political climate. The Second Seminole War was therefore a breakdown of a political negotiation, not necessarily a racially motivated inevitability. This is to say that not only were the Seminoles a racially diverse and politically autonomous tribe, but their political and racial policy was formed in opposition to many of the existing Native American tribes that had not yet been subdued by the colonists or the U.S. military. African slaves were considered both individuals and slave labor to be bartered with, complicating the otherwise simplistic reading of the Seminoles as noble savages being inevitably conquered by both modernity and counter-capitalist slave liberators (Covington 63).

*Osceola* does have it correct that sugar plantation slavery was the key issue that sparked the Second Seminole War, but this practice benefitted the Seminoles in two crucial ways: it prompted an increase in their numbers and functioned as a source of spiritual strength. Northern Florida was a rapidly expanding sugar plantation region with American sugar croppers intent on breaking Spanish and Portuguese dominance of the market. A large number of newly imported slaves from Africa very quickly outnumbered the whites four to three. More contentious slaves in northern Florida meant a greater number of them found their way to the Seminoles with their presumed assurances of freedom and land. The escaped slaves of the 1820's and 1830's, however, differed from their predecessors by virtue of their close proximity to fellow slaves, a factor that enabled them to mobilize against their former masters to free other slaves (Twyman 15). In terms of a Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history, they constituted an effective proletariat rebelling against their exploitation by capitalist plantation owners. The Second Seminole War was instigated by a dominant class—who possessed a strong sense of racialized class-consciousness—consolidating their forces (as the National Socialists presumably did

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19 Philip's actions helped create the first free black town in America, Fort Mose, in Florida in 1738. This town would later be destroyed in the 1760's, forcing the free blacks to flee to Spanish Cuba. The amount of cultural and demographic links between African, Native American and Spanish cultures in Cuba are visible to this day.

in 1933) in a push to exterminate their class enemies, the non-white proletariat.<sup>20</sup> These newly escaped slaves, however, were not immediately accepted as brethren Seminoles. False agreements such as the Treaty of Payne's Landing and the insistence of plantation owners on the return of all escaped slaves dating back to Spanish rule motivated slave communities to become close allies with the Seminoles.<sup>21</sup> Chief Osceola famously recruited recently escaped slaves into his tribal ranks even *after* it was seen as detrimental to Seminole foreign policy interests to do so (Covington 76). The DEFA film, however, depicts the chief as cautious about allowing more former African slaves into the tribe on account of stirring up trouble with the whites. This cautiousness strongly contrasts with the basis on which Osceola proves historically interesting.

Or perhaps what actually secured Osceola's place in posterity were the lithographs and paintings made of him by George Catlin and Robert J. Curtis. These paintings solidified Osceola's status as a noble savage in Western visual culture far before film was invented. In these images, he appears tall and proud with a slight anguish to his eyes suggestive of his defeat by "civilization." Later generations transformed the scenes depicted in such works into a fetish of sorts via cigar brand names, postcards and even county names in Iowa, Florida and Michigan. Interestingly enough, Osceola's lithograph also appears in GDR *Amerikanist* Horst Ihde's Marxist-teleological monograph of African American history, *Von der Plantage zum schwarzen Ghetto*, with the simple caption: "Osceola - Häuptling der Seminolen, die flüchtende Sklaven in ihren Stamm aufnahmen."<sup>22</sup> Situated among other images about African American freedom/captivity dating from 1745 to 1914, the lithograph in the book does little to contextualize the leader, comparing him instead in his regal features to sketches of Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass—other racialized anti-imperialists. Ihde's ahistorical characterization resembles that of *Osceola*, which begs the question of who the historical figure actually was.

Osceola was born in 1804 in Alabama, reportedly of mixed racial ancestry: his mother was Ann McQueen who was part Muscogee and his father was either Creek or the English trader William Powell. His mother was part of the Creek exodus to the Seminole territory in Florida near St. Augustine. Osceola's racially

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20 This, of course, brings up the question of problematic GDR anti-fascist connections drawn between Nazi anti-Semitism and anti-communism.

21 Andrew Jackson's egregious Native American policy, established in an 1834 open letter, to send the "native" Seminoles west to Creek land in Arkansas and keep the black Seminoles as slaves, helped solidify this alliance (O'Brien).

22 Ihde also claims the Marxist-Leninist narrative of *Osceola* to be true: „In Florida entkamen viele Unfreie zu den Seminolen, die sich weigerten, die ehemaligen Sklaven wieder auszuliefern. Die Bundesregierung nutzte dies, um den Freiheitssinn des tapferen Indianervolkes in zwei Kriegen zu brechen. Die Seminolen und ihre schwarzen Freunde trotzten jedoch der Übermacht und fügten den regulären Truppen schwere Niederlagen zu [...]“ (Ihde 34).

mixed ancestry made him a controversial figure in his time; this very same attribute rendered him an ideal persona for a GDR seeking a “race-blind,” mixed-race revolutionary who could be positioned as a key figure in the historical resistance to capitalism. In the film, Osceola is unmistakably coded as red, keeping ideological and racial categories firmly in line. Historically, Osceola’s pre-war duty was to maintain the poorly marked boundary between Seminole territory and the plantation properties by wrangling Seminoles who strayed into white territories and bringing them back to camp—it is here where history and cinema diverge. Osceola violates this very responsibility by rescuing Zilla and Gladys from a runaway horse-cart on Raynes’ plantation. Other than the exploitation of his image, Osceola’s historically famous moments include: his initially harsh rejection of the Treaty of Payne’s Landing,<sup>23</sup> his effective tactical deployment of a contingent comprised predominantly of freed black Seminoles during the war, and the assassinations of both chieftain Charley Emathla (for accepting a bribe) and Thompson (for violating the Treaty of Payne’s Landing that Osceola had later signed).

Other than his murder of Emathla and his enlistment of Robin as his black Seminole sidekick, Osceola’s major actions in the film are nowhere to be found in the historical narrative: he saves a fictional wife Che-Cho-Ter, befriends a white northern industrialist émigré who married Emathla’s daughter, and destroys an American military steamer traveling down the Suwanee River. In addition to enacting such action-movie clichés, Osceola is also blessed with metahistorical insight resembling that of a Marxist prophet. “Die Umsiedlung über vielen tausend Meilen ist der Tod,” he says to Chief Micanopy as they discuss the deal offered by the whites; one may read as the subtext of this reference to the Trail of Tears as the *Umsiedlung* of European Jews to concentration camps. The last shot of the film consists of Osceola staring at the burning remains of Richard Moore’s burning sawmill. He states flatly, “Das ist der Krieg. Er wird uns folgen, wohin wir auch gehen.” Immediately the scene cuts to a black screen with white text that states the date of the war’s beginning and the number of casualties suffered during its course. History, however, informs us that Chief Osceola was not invested with such clairvoyance. After a few successful encounters against American forces, Osceola was captured on October 25, 1837 while attempting to negotiate under a white flag and remained a prisoner until he died of malaria in January of 1838. General Thomas Sidney Jesup, the man who captured Osceola, was reprimanded years later for violating the sanctity of the white flag, an act that made the Seminoles resistant to negotiations and, as a consequence, prolonged the Second Seminole War (Covington 93).

Ironically, Osceola’s true biography may have been a far better Marxist object lesson for a GDR film audience than the melodramatic Richard Moore/William S. Raynes/Che-Cho-Ter situation concocted by the *Roter Kreis* for *Osceola*. The chief’s biography depicts a defiant, mixed-race Seminole with a daring and

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23 See the opening quote of this article.

competent band of black Seminoles who stand up against unfair treaty conditions and continuous threats from white plantation communities, even going so far as killing his own tribesman for being a traitor. Osceola might have been viewed as being betrayed by the military-capitalist conspiracy and could have made some very telling speeches while in captivity about the future of a United States that was in the habit of breaking its agreements. What that would have probably involved, however, would have been more black actors in major parts and more footage shot in Cuba, since he utilized the swampland of Florida to his tactical advantage and black Seminoles constituted much of his historical fighting force. Told along these lines, the story would have been a martyr tragedy as in other DEFA films—the classic *Marriage in the Shadows* (*Ehe im Schatten*, 1947) or even Konrad Wolf's *Goya* (*Goya: Der arge Weg zum Erkenntnis*, 1971) released just after *Osceola*. This would have dignified the history of the Seminoles, depicting them as capable fighters and shrewd politicians whose only flaw was having faith that the neighboring Euro-American plantation owners—as well as representatives of the U.S. government—would honor their pacts. Instead, the generic conventions of the western and the racial and overtly Marxist-Leninist logic of the screenplay combine to produce an ahistorical and anachronistic representation of the Second Seminole War.

### **The Dynamics of Race in *Osceola***

Three factors underlie the racial dynamics of the film: a GDR perspective concerning the foundational currents of racism, the racially dictated performance inherent to the western, and the Marxist-Leninist allegorical designs that preclude a strictly materialist take on Seminole history. These dynamics emerge from the film's pointed division and articulation of black, white and red people according to the understanding of U.S. relations in the 1830's maintained with the GDR of the 1970's. In addition, because the GDR principally viewed itself as transcending biological-racial boundaries—as opposed to cultural-racial—in relation to Third World countries, racial clichés appear throughout DEFA westerns, betraying a sense of the one-dimensionality such stereotypes offer to a historical situation already serving as a bizarre referent to both Vietnam and Nazi Germany.

Although Goldberg asserts that “racial historicism evades racism by definitional deflection” (51), the film's narrative only functions if racial interests remain at its center—a fitting portrayal of the United States in the 1830's. The setting of *Osceola* is the banks of the Suwanee River on the eve of the Second Seminole War; this, in light of the fact the actual historical events preceding the war took place on the eastern side of Florida toward St. Augustine. Indeed, it is implied that the events in the film directly caused the war, giving the film a dogmatic quality that intensifies the glaring presence of historical discrepancies. Plantation farmer Raynes rules over his sugar plantation with an iron fist along with his sadistic daughter Gladys and his

overseer Joe Hammer. Robin and Joshua, two young slaves, are unjustly whipped by Hammer, and decide to flee to the Seminoles. The two successfully escape but find themselves mercilessly pursued by Hammer, his dogs and Florida's crocodiles. Hammer, however, trespasses on the property of sawmill owner Richard Moore, who has a Seminole wife Rhea, daughter of Chief Emathla. Moore drives Hammer away, his disgust for slavery and its corresponding violence absolute. Rather than use slavery, he employs black workers for wages on his plantation—thereby advancing the clock on the eventual proletarian control of the means of production. Meanwhile, Osceola saves Robin while Joshua dies, and Robin is reluctantly allowed to join the Seminoles, albeit segregated to Black Panther's tribe. The government, represented by Governor John Eaton and General Thompson, wants the Seminoles to move peacefully to Arkansas (pronounced 'arKANSas' rather than 'ARKansaw'), but Raynes would like to go first through the Seminoles "mit einem sehr feinen Sieb" in order to recover former slaves as his rightful property. In addition, it comes out later that Che-Cho-Ter, Osceola's wife, is the daughter of one of Raynes' former slaves and, therefore, at risk of being separated from her husband as the plantation owner searches for former slaves. As the situation escalates, a race-motivated saloon brawl breaks out over Moore's bringing his Seminole wife to see a visiting Irish performer named Peggy. Osceola murders Emathla after he is bribed to resettle his followers. Hammer and his men murder the rest of the Seminoles and then kidnap Che-Cho-Ter as Raynes' property.<sup>24</sup> In the final sequence, Osceola, with the (albeit superficial) assistance of Robin, rescues his wife, kills Hammer and destroys the steamboat *Puma*, which was sent by the governor as the threat of war had become increasingly evident. The explosion of the *Puma* somehow also destroys Moore's sawmill, forcing Osceola, Moore and his wife, Moore's free black workers, the freed slaves from Raynes' plantation and the remaining Seminoles to flee across the Suwanee River into the swamps. This racial conflict bears many similarities to the anti-fascist narrative spun in the GDR. Raynes, who represents agricultural interests, pushes for war as a means of both increasing his profits and securing additional non-white slave labor. The protection of the plantation owner's interests is, of course, a responsibility of the U.S. military and emphasizes the relationship between military violence in the service of capitalist interests. The Seminoles, on the other hand, simply want to remain *friedliche Ackerbauer*, but are prepared to band together with other victimized groups against the encroachment of capitalist imperialism onto their lands.

What makes this melodrama fascinating is the carefully constructed racial hierarchy that dominates the film, which presents itself as "anti-racist." The condi-

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24 The cross-racial kidnapping of women, an obvious projection of the threat that miscegenation apparently posed, was also the principle topic of the only other motion picture made about Chief Osceola, namely the 1957 film, *Naked in the Sun*. Further comparative studies between that film and *Osceola* would be most interesting in terms of a Cold War formulation of the Seminoles' last stand.



tion of “blackness” in the film is coded via a specific figure—the child-like laborer stuck in a state of bewilderment unless converted to a socialist cause. Although the filmmakers avoided using “sambo,” “zip coon” or any other hyper-masculine configurations of black men,<sup>25</sup> there are notable differences depicted between the ingenuity of the free blacks Robin (played by William Aniche) and Benjamin (Aubrey Pankey) and the Cuban sugarcane workers who figure in shots depicting the slaves *en masse*. Such a typology conforms to the observation Jean Penieres made in a July 1821 letter about the free blacks living in Florida: “These Negroes appeared to me far more intelligent than those who are in absolute slavery” (Twyman 109). As free Africans with very dark skin and socialist sensibilities, Robin and Benjamin are given the main speaking roles and are dubbed by Germans voice actors. The “slaves” on the other hand are only represented in the film as either working or running around in panic, conforming to the typological role of the simple-minded, easily frightened Africans. A poignant example of this is in the scene following the burning of the Raynes plantation, where several Cubans of all shades run toward the camera—a cinematic gesture communicating a sense of collective anxiety. A moment later after Osceola regroups with other Seminoles, he glances over at the gathering crowd of slaves who shout: “Wir sind Sklaven von Raynes Farm, und wir wollen zu den Seminolen. Helft uns!” (This statement may be read as a plea for help from Third World nations—those indigenous communities in the cross hairs of capitalist imperialism.) A cannonball explodes as they attempt to cross the river and, once again, panic ensues—expressed primarily by way of the voice dubbing. Since Osceola knows exactly what to do in this situation, he rides gallantly before them on horseback and shouts, “Folgt mir, schnell!” Afterwards, a soundtrack consisting of German-language dubbing communicates a sense of panic and confusion among the slaves. The racism of the German voice-over, however, is effectively undermined by the performance of the Cuban actors who calmly make their way to the boats, prompting a quick cut back to Osceola and Moore.<sup>26</sup> “Sie waren nicht aufzuhalten!” Osceola tells him, describing the former slaves as if they were an uncontrollable mass. The safety of this inept collective of slaves must now be guaranteed by those few competent Seminoles who retain the only real agency in this picture.

As for tokenism, Robin and Benjamin are the final pieces in establishing the subtle inferiority of all the black characters in the movie. Robin is useful because he is clever enough to join the Seminole cause, but his agency is always sublimated to the will of Osceola. Even his bitter attempt on Hammer’s life in righteous vengeance is literally cut short by Osceola. Osceola holds the monopoly on justified

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25 The contemporaneous Hollywood film *Shaft* (1971) contains an abundance of this model.

26 In the saloon scene, the soundtrack also covers up the black musicians, who are holding anachronistic musical instruments. What is heard on the soundtrack does not match the visual image. No black character can possess autonomy in the film.

violence in the film and uses this with free license. Similarly, Benjamin cleverly hides from Raynes when he has Hammer secure Moore in his house, but his only other action in the story is to hand Moore his rifle so he can ride off dramatically with triumphant music. Benjamin is an enlightened proletarian, but a poor revolutionary on account of his social location. When taken together with the tangible separateness of Black Panther and his tribe from the historically racially diverse Seminoles proper, it is suggested that black revolutionaries are ideally situated when they express solidarity with, and are separated from, the anti-racist whites and the all-knowing Seminoles. In geo-political terms, the GDR may have moved to conduct politics on the world stage, but their moral and historical superiority as socialist, white Europeans is still a given.

Whiteness in the film, however, is categorized into three different sub-categories: hard racists, soft racists and anti-racists. In all cases, racism is just as much of a performance as the performance of race is in this film, perhaps as an object lesson of what racism "looks like." Raynes, Gladys and Hammer are hard racists, as well as foils for Nazis. Raynes freely uses racist language and consistently chooses the most insidious, violent solution to acquire more power and property at the cost of shattered Seminole families and lives—in short, a one-dimensional capitalist villain. He also corresponds to GDR historian Horst Ihde's characterization of the slave-owner:

Die Pflanzeroilgarchie als parasitäre Klasse verachtete jede wie auch immer geartete Tätigkeit in der materiellen Produktion, und in keinem Teil Nordamerikas hatte sich der Gegensatz zwischen körperlicher und geistiger Arbeit stärker und schärfer herausgebildet als in den Südstaaten. (Ihde 32)

Meanwhile, Gladys' impeccable blonde hair, tight gloves and riding crop underscore her debased, sado-masochistic personality. Her final act of the film is to release the dogs against the slaves.<sup>27</sup> Hammer's unquestioning obedience and calculated use of violence unquestionably code him as an SS officer. The left-wing vengeance implied in the film's subtitle is largely leveled against him, as he is Osceola's principle antagonist.

The soft racists consist of characters such as Zilla, Peggy and Captain Stock. Zilla's racism comes as a result of her feminine-coded naivety. Enconced in a pink-wallpapered *boudoir*, she looks both fearfully and longingly out her frilly curtains. Turning, she calls to Gladys, who is arranging her own long blonde hair vainly in the mirror in the next shot. Zilla looks down as if she has something repressed to unleash and, after exchanging a few words with Gladys, she sits down while the

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27 Her riding crop also figures into Ihde's portrayal of slave-holders as all-but-Nazis: "Die Peitsche war das Symbol des Sklavenaufsehers, und selbst Frauen und Kinder wurden Opfer der sadistischen Machtgelüste der weißen Herrenkaste [...]" (Ihde, 31).

camera tracks to re-align them in the center of the frame, and says, "Ich glaube, ich habe Angst." Gladys continues to stare straight ahead and, as if feeling out a kindred racial paradigm, asks, "Wovor? Vor Negern oder vor Indianern?" Zilla responds helplessly, "Ich weiß nicht." This superfluous scene effectively serves as a Brechtian social gestus of what non-violent racism looks like: a helpless woman indoors afraid of the multi-racial world outdoors. Peggy the singer, on the other hand, presents her soft racism through her condescension of Moore once she discovers his wife is a Seminole. These are all stock characters representing the pre- and post-revolutionary *bourgeois*, seen as a containable threat under Marxist-Leninism. Moore is the sole anti-racist in the film, but his principle anti-racist behavior is all-encompassing: what Sieg would call his "ethnographic romantic" marriage to Rhea, his fair treatment of his black workers and his statement in a room full of hard racists that "Indianer und Neger - die sind Menschen wie jeder von uns" (Sieg 76). His status as the white mediator figure presented East German viewers with a model of a racially tolerant individual from the dominant or main stream ethnic group—in this case, white Euro-American culture.

In conclusion, I would like to make a few final comments on the issue of redness in *Osceola*. A pan across the Seminole chieftains in the film reveals Black Panther and a sea of Bulgarians in red face make-up and wigs. Black Panther stands out because he is the token black chieftain. Because their ethnic drag is so prominent, the Native American characters of the film are otherwise the most readily identifiable examples of "racism" to a contemporary audience, donning redface rather than blackface. Yet the film's narrative spells them out as the unsignified race *instead* of whiteness, which is clearly articulated in contrast to blackness.

This is the film's strong point: the Seminoles as a specific historical group are rightly lauded for their acceptance of both whites and blacks into their ranks, as well as for their shrewd political maneuvering on the eve of the war. They are, however, also a violent revolutionary vanguard, the filmic embodiment of what both the USSR and the GDR sought to be: perfectly balanced between a harmonious agrarian lifestyle at peace (as depicted in the opening credits) and a fierce battle readiness in the case of racial and class struggle.

With Mitić's resolute and able body firmly blocking the mass slaughter of those individuals seeking refuge in the Seminole community, the bodies of the Cuban and Bulgarian actors serve as the sites of victimhood and class struggle that transcend racial boundaries. Mitić's impeccable physique and the voyeuristically displayed naked Seminole women attacked by Hammer also show an eroticism of the "natural" man and woman, something reinforced by the landscapes of Cuba and Florida in the mid-nineteenth century<sup>28</sup>—what Jennifer Ruth Hosek calls an

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28 One of the most technically jarring aspects of the film, however, is the dramatic shifting between the Cuban landscapes with their palm trees and the Bulgarian wilderness with its sparse foliage. The Foley employed for bird noises is the only force

enticing "socialist island paradise" (Hosek 40).<sup>29</sup> Hence, in their austere perfection the Seminoles embody a utopian communist community whose existence plays out in exotic tropical locales.

The film advances a universalist notion of a people hemmed in, attempting to resist a set of historical forces—in this case, the encroachment of capitalism represented by American plantation owners backed by the U.S. military—and open to any assistance from those who would give it, regardless of race or ethnicity. This portrayal of oppression corresponds to Gemünden's observation that after 1970, tales of Native American resistance put more emphasis on their suffering than on their successes (402). Increased suffering in the GDR due to a decline in the standard of living, coupled with a lack of real freedom, could have struck a chord with audiences in the Eastern Bloc. No longer could the oppression of the Seminoles be limited solely to the narrative of corrupt western capitalism, individuals would now find the intolerable acts of those southern plantation owners in their own backyards.

Nevertheless, the film has awkwardly imposed a traditional anti-fascist paradigm onto a narrative of militaristic solidarity against global capitalism and its accompanying racism. *Osceola* depicts a Marxist-like revolution waged by noble savages against an omnipotent, historically progressing American race-state which is structured within two distinct allegorical schemas: the history of racism in the U.S. and the global Third World struggle that took place in the 1970's. Racism is posited as a specifically American historical dilemma, not a German one. The GDR waged a cinematic proxy war against the United States, with Cuba and Vietnam becoming ally states as points of reference in the genre of the East German western. This gives further credence to Piesche's argument that "solidarity with the 'oppressed peoples of the world' [...] in most cases was no more than propagandistic sloganeering, because there was extremely little active exchange, something that would entail everyday encounters, travel, and the mediation of information" (Piesche 43). In East Germany it was unimaginable that a culture founded on the principles of social justice promoted by Marxism perceived the world through racial hierarchies; this is especially true of the strong anti-fascist tradition and gestures of global solidarity as seen in Joris Ivens' *Song of the Rivers* (1954) or the international social work of the *Brigaden der Freundschaft*. Such thinking simply could not exist in the GDR. Systemic patriarchal and racializing structures such as these—as well as their accompanying genre tropes—remain firmly in place on the left as well as the right side of present-day discourse, structures which still grow in a "post-racist" world inextricably bound by race.

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that maintains this barrier.

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