

The Exiles

By Catherine Russell

“The Exiles” (Kent Mackenzie) is a fiction film about Indians living in the city, and it virtually disappeared for 50 years. Its “rediscovery” occurred in a compilation film about Los Angeles by Thom Andersen, who recognized the cultural value of a film that makes uncanny parallels between latent colonialism and urban renewal in postwar America. “In Los Angeles Plays Itself” (2003), Andersen includes “The Exiles” among a dozen films set in the Bunker Hill neighborhood in downtown L.A., which was razed shortly after the film was shot. “The Exiles” is an anomalous cross between film noir and ethnography that had only a limited film-festival run and some university screenings before it was restored and re-released in 2008.¹

Mackenzie’s film was shot on 35mm, and one of its most striking features is the cinematography. The crew and the equipment were all borrowed from the industry, and they managed to translate their subjects—the Native Americans and their Bunker Hill location—into the expressive vocabulary of the Hollywood idiom. The characters’ lives revolve around juke-boxes, fast cars, Brylcreem and girls in sweaters and New Look skirts. The film’s real accomplishment is to depict the lives of Native Americans as part of the popular culture of the 1950s. They are exiles from the reservation, and while their life in the city is certainly seen to be difficult, they are nevertheless depicted as being “of” their time, rather than “outside of time” on the reservations with their parents. By way of comparison, McKenzie includes a prologue of Edward E. Curtis’s romantic portraits of Indians in traditional garb.

Mackenzie wanted to make a “truthful” film about Indians displaced from the reservation.² He came to know the men and women living in Bunker Hill by meeting them in the bars along Main Street and Broadway. On the Milestone DVD audio track for “The Exiles”, Sherman Alexie enthusiastically reports that this is the first time an Indian is seen wearing chinos in a movie, getting gas in a movie, and so on.³ Whether this is true or not, his testimony confirms the central role of this film in American cultural history. However, critics of the time did not take kindly to the depiction of carousing Indians, and the film was deemed “too negative” at the prestigious Flaherty Seminar in 1961.⁴



Kent Mackenzie’s group of “exiles” walk down an alley in the Bunker Hill area of Los Angeles. Courtesy Milestone Films.

It is evident today that “The Exiles” is an innovative depiction of Indians as citizens of the city and the movies. Mackenzie and his cinematographers, Erik Daarstad, Robert Kaufman and John Morrill, were all trained at USC to shoot and edit according to the Hollywood model. Against all odds, they managed to light the scenes and shoot them with truck-loads of equipment and elaborate set-ups. Even if they were aiming to recreate a “natural” feel, the result is that of stylized lighting with shadows and depth, and because it is mainly at night, the source-lights of neon signs, shop windows, and car lights give the film its distinctive noir feel. Many of the daylight shots have a softness to them, perhaps because they were shot in the early morning hours. The whole film is bathed in the glow of the city, giving the film a transcendent quality.

Mackenzie also edited his footage according to conventions of continuity editing, so despite the challenges of working with non-professionals on location, the film has a remarkable fluidity. The rhythm of the film is partially accomplished through the use of pauses and transitions that include emblematic shots of the city, passers-by, and extras. Dissolves are used for these interruptions and for many of the transitions, while action scenes are cut with quick close and medium shots. The voice-overs of the three main characters are used over some of the transitions, and in places where the on-screen dialogue is silenced. The dialogue functions on the same level as the juke-box music and the lighting: to create atmosphere.

The non-professional Indian actors, who re-enact stories and scenes from their own lives, contributed a great deal to the script, and their monologues are carefully shaped to create characters with minimal means. Homer is a tough guy who spends the evening in bars, playing poker and picking fights. His pregnant wife, Yvonne, longs to raise her child in the city and improve her standard of living. She gazes into shop windows and talks about how she has stopped praying and going to church because her prayers have never been answered. Tommy, on the other hand, is a party boy with the graceful moves of a slick rocker of the period. He picks up a girl in bar and takes her up to Hill X where the community gathers for Indian drumming and dancing at the end of the film.

The gathering on Hill X gives the film a sense of dramatic closure, ending with a small group straggling home the next morning. The partying is a celebration of Indigenous roots and also an opportunity to drink all night. In the aftermath of colonization, cultural rituals are combined with violence and misogyny that the film does not shy away from. In fact, "The Exiles" is remarkably acute about gender roles and inequities in this displaced community.

In one of the film's most remarkable scenes, Tommy, Cliff, and two girls, Clydean and Mary, pull into a gas station in Cliff's Oldsmobile convertible following a dynamic scene of them laughing, drinking and driving through the 3rd Street tunnel. When Mary goes to the bathroom, the others drive off without her. The whole scene is bathed in a brilliant white light in which the white gas station attendant watches the kids' antics with a curious passivity. As the Indians smoke, drink, and carry on, the attendant's gaze is caught in reverse-shot cutting as a kind of stand-in for the film's audience. The characters' behaviour is not necessarily condoned by the filmmakers, but observed with a certain detachment. The film is not critical of the gender inequities but places them center-stage and casually incorporates them into its depiction of everyday life.

McKenzie wanted to use the rock and roll that the Indians were actually listening to, but because he could not afford the rights, he contracted one band, "The Revels," to record all the music for the film, including the radio commercials. The music itself conveys the dynamic sense of social change associated with the youth culture of the late 1950s. The Indians were the James Deans, Marlon Brandos and Shirley MacLaines of their generation, but nobody knew about them. The "truth" of the Indian experience is apprehended in "The Exiles" through the transformation of their everyday life into the language of affect and melodrama, even if the drama is downplayed and distended. In their profound inauthenticity, the "exiled" Indians perform their own impending displacement by corporate capitalism. "The Exiles" depicts a culture of alcoholism, poverty, and sexual politics; but it also inscribes its characters into the larger firmament of popular culture. The Indian characters are no longer outside looking in, but a full part of the generational energy that surged through American culture in the 1950s.

¹ The film was restored by the UCLA Film Archive in and distributed theatrically before the DVD release by Milestone.

² Kent Robert Mackenzie, "A Description and Examination of the Production of *The Exiles*: A Film of the Actual Lives of a Group of Young American Indians," MA Thesis, University of Southern California, 1964.

³ Sherman Alexie and Sean Axmaker, Second Interview: Audio Bonus Feature in *The Exiles* (Milestone DVD release, 2008).

⁴ MacKenzie, 156.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Catherine Russell is Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. She is the author of four books, including Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video (Duke, 1999); The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity (Duke, 2008); Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure and New Wave Cinemas (Minnesota, 1995). She has also published numerous articles and is currently working on a book on Walter Benjamin and archival film practices.