

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

THE PERPETUATION OF NATIVE STEREOTYPES IN FILM

By

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## ABSTRACT

Stereotypical representations of Native people in film continue to be a lucrative formula for filmmakers. From the early days of motion pictures Native people have been portrayed negatively in common roles such as the stoic warrior or the Indian maiden. Contemporary films continue to perpetuate many of these common stereotypes meaning that generations of non-Native people have seen similar stereotypes in film and are apt to believe that these are not in fact stereotypes but accurate representations of Native people or Native history.

In the last few decades there have been an increasing number of Native filmmakers and writers who have attempted to address some of these stereotypes either by taking a humorous approach to debunking them or by featuring Native people in storylines that reflect a truer representation of Native people.

This paper examines a number of contemporary films that may have one or more common stereotypes including the stoic warrior or the Indian princess. In addition, there are films where “going Native” forms the basis for the storyline whereby a non-Native central character finds himself surrounded by Native people and attempts to assimilate to Native culture. On the reverse end there are a number of films whereby a Native person “goes home” finding themselves on a reservation knowing little about Native culture and is then adopted by the community.

Movies produced by Native filmmakers tend to focus on common day experiences of Native people and on the heterogeneity of Native culture rather than seeing all Native people as being part of one homogenous culture. As more Native people take part in the film industry their work continues to contradict many of the common stereotypes of Native people in mainstream film.

Stereotypical images of Native people in film continue to be reinforced up until present day. These stereotypes have two things in common - they are often negative and inaccurate (Moore & Fisher, 2004). There are several popular images of Native people in film. From middle of the nineteenth century the image of Native Americans flourished in dime store novels and Wild West shows as that of a hostile savage, a killer of men, women and children who in his savagery took scalps as his trophies (Gerster, 2013). With the rise of the motion picture industry Natives were frequently outfitted in regalia of buckskin and feathers living the plains culture of the horse, tipi and bow and arrow. Commonly the Hollywood Indian would be seen as “treacherous, vicious, cruel, lazy, stupid, dirty, speaking in ughs and grunts, and often quite drunk” (Keshena, 1980).

Gerster (2013) argues that roles for Native people in film can be thought of in terms of either helpful or hostile to the European protagonist and their manifest destiny plots. Those that are helpful are commonly thought of as a sidekick assisting the white hero. This noble savage will help the main character achieve his goals rather than achieving his own wants and desires. The hostile savage, on the other hand, is out to thwart the main protagonist and his dreams. In westerns he most often will resort to killing as his main tactic.

The most common role for Native women is that of the Indian princess or maiden who befriends the white man with the plot climaxing in her having to choose between the non-Native man whom she falls in love with or her tribe. While beautiful the Indian Princess is lesser than a white woman and more often than not the main character will ultimately choose the white maiden rather than her (Marubbio, 2006).

## **EARLY PORTRAYALS OF NATIVE PEOPLE IN PRINT AND FILM**

Before the invention of motion pictures there were many portrayals of Native Americans in arts and literature. For the mass market and especially those interested in the western frontier dime store novels fed the appetite of readers. The stories in these novels had little historical accuracy as Kirkpatrick (1999) describes how many of the plots in dime store novels centered on Indians encountering white people and slaughtering them. The white hero then kills the Indians and the community is safe from the dangerous, savage enemies. Seen as primitive, silent with the exception of a few “ughs” or war cries the Native characters in these novels were simply a vehicle for the hero to demonstrate his killing skills. In some instances, the hero would have a Native “sidekick” who had been somewhat civilized and therefore less threatening to the whites but is still not in the same class as the whites. Kirkpatrick (1999) describes the formula for the dime store novels as one that requires “that the ‘savage’ presence must give way to the dominant white presence, but not before offering a challenge to the heroes, the point men of ‘civilization’”(p. 11). In this scenario the Native person has come up against the white man and has surrendered his autonomy and culture rather than face death.

There have been thousands of Native characters in motion pictures since the creation of the industry. Many of the first films were westerns with Native peoples portrayed in full plains culture regalia riding on horseback. Many of the Native roles were based on dime novels and Wild West shows but as the film industry has progressed the portrayal of Native people has not changed much. The majority of films portraying Native people focus on the second half of the twentieth century and do not represent Native people in contemporary life (Buscome, 2006). Overwhelmingly of the western genre these films take place between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century. By focusing on such a limited period of history Buscome (2006)

explains that the “effect of this concentration upon such a small segment of history is to freeze the Indians in time” (p. 25).

More often than not the roles of Indians in film were played by non-native actors who were given bronzed skins, braids and buckskin regalia. Friar & Friar (1972) describe this as the creation of an “Instant Indian Kit” consisting of a “wig, war bonnet or headband (beaded or otherwise), vest or shirt, breechclout, leggings or fringed pants, and moccasins. To top off the costume, include Hong Kong beadwork, plastic bear, or eagle claws with plastic beads and other geegaws. Add a few streaks of paint and Viola!...you’re an Indian, too” (p. 223). These “native symbols” have come to be seen as collective symbols for all Native people which become a “national mythology of the historical original (Kirkpatrick, 1999, p. 5).

Native people were often brought in to be extras in the background scenes while non-Native actors took on the major roles of Native characters (Prodan, 2012). For Native peoples themselves they would assume a role in film that was often divergent from their own Native culture. Raheja (2010) introduced the concept of “redfacing” in which Native people on and off screen perform acts that “draw upon Indigenous performance contexts and spiritual traditions but are staged under conditions controlled, more often than not, by white filmmakers using new technologies and often in conflict with Indigenous self-representations” (p. 21). In the early part of the twentieth century by performing “Indian” Native people were compensated with economic security, mobility and were able to escape from the living conditions on reservations (Singer, 2001).

Rollins (1993) notes that Hollywood is not full of “Indian haters” but rather that filmmakers develop films that the audiences want to see and that will produce maximum box office profits. O’Connor (1993) describes three production factors that influence the portrayal of

Native people in film: dramatic considerations, commercial considerations and political considerations. Dramatic considerations include development of the plot and the visual imagery of the film. Commercial considerations include what Keshena (1980) describes when the public wants to see Indians as savages then filmmakers will create such characters. When the political climate changed and more minority groups began to protest their treatment in society films Native people in films were then portrayed not so much as savages but as noble characters. Herzberg (2008) notes that in the post-Vietnam war era most westerns had Native roles characterized as the noble savage in that they were peaceful people unless provoked (p. 4).

While audiences influence the types of films that are produced Wood (2008) describes film goers as passive participants given that they are apt to go to movies with subjects that interest them but they do not have the ability to question what they see on the screen as they are seeing the film. Believing the images of Native people on film have has meant that some film goers believe they know Indians and therefore know about Native culture and history (Hilger, 1986). Wood (2008) cautions against believing that the portrayals of Native people are true and that “those who know a culture mostly through the power of films should then vigorously resist believing that they understand like those who live that culture” (p. 80).

### **IDENTIFYING STEREOTYPES OF NATIVE AMERICANS IN FILM**

Vickers (1998) defines stereotypes in which identity is defined from the “outside” whereas archetypes are identified from “inside”. The creation of a single Native identity has in turn has led to “the formulation of stereotypes that replace historical Indian identities with an easily manipulated sameness” (p. 3).

The concept of Other is a one-sided representation of Native peoples that has been pervasive for centuries. Owens (2001) explains how the “Indian” Other developed over centuries

has led not to Native people being able to look in the “mirror” and see themselves but rather they see what the image of the “Indian” constructed by non-Natives. For any kind of recognition or control the Indian needs to “step into that mask and *be* the Indian constructed by white America” (p. 17). The Native person still is not a true representation of himself since the construction of a Native person is defined by what the Euro-American wants him to be.

Because these two groups are uniquely different from one another Budd (2002) writes that “any voice used to tell of the meeting would inevitably come from only one side of the cultural divide” (p. 163). The side commonly told from is that of non-Native people.

Kirkpatrick (1999) reveals that stereotypes of Native Americans in film can be characterized according to three categories: mental, sexual and spiritual. Mental stereotypes of Native Americans include characterizations such as “stupid”, “dumb”, “primitive”, and “innocent”. Based on this description Native people are seen as less intelligent as the Others and are in need of help to show them a better way. In terms of sexuality Kirkpatrick describes how Indian males are often portrayed as lusting after white women while the Native females are seen as objects of sexual desire as seen in the “Indian Princess” stereotype. Spiritual stereotypes include Native peoples’ connection to nature and therefore the assumption that they must have a spiritual connection to the earth.

Buscome (2006) identifies two types of Indians, one who cooperates with white people and is willing to assimilate while the other type of Indian fights against them and is deemed to be “savage”. These translate into the two most common stereotypes of Indians in film – the Noble Indian and the Savage Warrior. The image of the vanishing Indian is one who is so intertwined with the past that he cannot move forward in the modern world is a common one in film (Hearne,

2012). In order for Native people to survive they will need the help of a colonizing force to bring them into modernity.

### **THE NOBLE SAVAGE**

Vickers (1998) describes the Noble Savage as a “red man replete with ceremonial (usually Plains Indian) headdress, breechcloth or buckskin leggings, certainly a breastplate of bone or a jacket with delicate beadwork, moccasins (again adorned in delicate bead or quill work), and carrying a sacred pipe, tomahawk, bow and arrow, or spear, parfleche or other conventional regalia” (p. 41). The Noble Savage is described as a character locked in the past and therefore this image becomes associated with this time period and the Noble Savage never catches up to the present period (Vickers, 1998; Mihesuach, 1996). In touch with nature the Noble Savage is seen as earthy and in touch with the earth (Robes Kipp, 2001).

Johnny Depp’s portrayal of Tonto in the Lone Ranger (2013) demonstrates that even in the newest retelling of an old story the Native character is portrayed as the sidekick to the non-Native hero. Kicking Bird in *Dances with Wolves* (1990) also personifies the noble savage as a medicine man and friend to the main character.

### **THE STOIC WARRIOR**

Not only is the stoic warrior the most prolific stereotype of Natives in film but Feier (2011) writes it is probably the most damaging in that Natives continue to be viewed as willing to go to war against the whites. In the Hollywood version of history only the Natives are responsible for bloodshed and the white hero is merely responding in defense (Prodan, 2012). With so many films featuring Native people wanting to fight and war this has led to many more opportunities for mainstream culture to be exposed to this negative stereotype and “the cliché of the stoic warrior has entrenched itself in the dominant discourse” (ibid, p. 357).



The stoic warrior is characterized as a “silent, unsmiling and grim” figure lacking emotion (Feier, 2011, p. 12). In the film *Geronimo* (2003) this historical figure is seen as ruthless and willing to kill non-Natives to remain outside of the reservation system. *Powwow Highway* (1989) features both stereotypes of the Stoic Indian and the Noble Warrior with the lead characters each assuming one of the stereotypical roles. This leads to conflict and misunderstanding on some fronts since Buddy (the Stoic Warrior) is seen as militant, hot-headed and a fighter whereas Philbert (the Noble Warrior) shares a deeper connection to the nature and spirituality.

### **THE INDIAN PRINCESS AND OTHER FEMALE NATIVE STEREOTYPES**

There have been fewer roles for Native women in film than for Native men (Raheja, 2010) and are often ignored by (Miheasuash, 1996). Frequently the speaking roles were played by non-Native women who were cast for their sex appeal which would draw in audiences.

Images of Native women in film present both stereotypes of ethnicity and gender. Like their male counterparts there are stereotypical roles of Native women in film but to a greater extent than Native males their gender and sexuality lends itself to additional stereotyping.

The two most common stereotypes the Indian Princess and the Squaw represent the polar opposite of one another but have one thing in common – both share a common theme of sexual desire by white men. In terms of their physical features the Indian Princess is often seen as having features more like white women while the Squaw is seen as more crude, fatter and “Indian” looking (Green, 2001). The Indian Princess is beautiful, virtuous and possesses some sort of nobility while the Squaw is viewed as the female counterpart of the Savage Indian with the negative attributes of “treachery and licentiousness” (Feier, 2011, p. 6). The Indian Princess is the female stereotype of the Noble Warrior whereas the Squaw is the female equivalent of the

Stoic Warrior. Through his liaison with a Native woman a white man is able to experience “the purity and allure of “noble savages” (Budd, 2002, p. 177) but with the added dimension of sexual attraction.

Pocahontas (1995) is Disney’s story of a famous historical Native American female figure. Unfortunately there are many flaws to the portrayal of Pocahontas including her physical appearance. Mihesehuah (1996) characterizes Pocahontas as a heroine who “absurdly sings with forest animals, is clothed provocatively (contrary to the modest dress typical of women in her tribe) and in true Disney fashion, is blessed with a Barbie doll figure” (p. 10). It is this Barbie doll figure and attractive looks that Ono and Buescher (2001) argue led to an extensive array of products, include 50 dolls, based on the Pocahontas character. The film features the song “Savages” which Turner Strong (2003) argues has some of the most vicious stereotypes of Native people by describing them as “filthy little heathens” and “only good when dead” (p.198).

A later film, *The New World* (2005), focuses on the relationship of Pocahontas with John Smith and to a lesser extent her husband. Like the Disney version this Pocahontas is still scantily dressed spends a lot of the time frolicking in nature. It is here that John Smith first sees her and becomes entranced by her. Pocahontas is later pursued by John Wolfe as he is entranced by her beauty but also her fragility suffering from a broken heart after hearing John Smith has died.

Viewing Native women as objects of sexual desire can also lead to portrayals of sexual violence against Native women. In *Dance Me Outside* (1994) Little Margaret, is a young attractive girl who asks a non-Native man to “dance me outside” of the dance hall and is then found raped and murdered. The young women of the community react to her murder by mounting a political campaign against her murderer. Marrubio (2006) argues that the physical

look and sexual promiscuity of Little Margaret harkens the formula of Indian maiden who has a disastrous interaction with a non-Indian man which eventually results in her death. In *Naturally Native* (1998) the youngest sister is date raped by a non-Indian man who describes his adoration of her as an Indian princess. While she does not die as a result of her assault as in the prescribed formula for the Indian princess she no less suffers sexual violence at the hand of non-Indian man (Marrubio, 2006).

Contrary to the stereotypical view of Native women there are some films that have strong Native female lead characters including *Frozen River* (2008), *Older Than America* (2008) and *Naturally Native* (1998) which features has three Native sisters as the main characters. In all these films the non-Native characters are featured in the background in a reversal of the usual formula of Native to non-Native people in film.

### **“COMING HOME”**

*Coming Home* represents the image of a Native person who has resisted their own native heritage only to find themselves on a reservation, encountering real life Indian people in present day. The characters encounter some sort of spiritual awakening through an elder and become more attuned to their own self as Native. Becoming more Native does not guarantee that they become members of the tribe and stay on the reservation. In fact, in both movies described below, the characters return to their non-Native lives at the end of the film.

In *Thunderheart* (1992) Ray Levoi is an FBI agent sent to the Pine Ridge Reservation because of his half-blooded Indian heritage which the FBI hopes will build good relations with Native people on the reservation. Levoi encounters Walter Crow Horse, a tribal police man who is skeptical of Levoi's credentials as an FBI agent but also as an Indian. Pack (2001) compares this relationship to that of the Lone Ranger and Tonto with Crow Horse playing Tonto to Levoi's

Lone Ranger. Levoi eventually becomes befriended by a tribal elder who provides him with traditional teachings and this relationship along with that of Crow Horse helps with his credibility on the reservation. What ultimately makes this a coming home story is Levoi's spiritual awakening and his realization that he is a descendant of Thunderheart which he sees through a series of spiritual visions.

In *Sioux City* (1994) Dr. Jesse Rainfeather Goldman returns back to the Lakota Sioux reservation of his birth mother only to find her murdered. After meeting a few people on the reserve including his grandfather, a medicine man, Goldman finds the Lakota people to be "backward, stuck in the previous century" (Budd, 2002, p. 184). As in *Thunderheart*, the main character in this film is dressed in a suit upon arriving on the reserve and none of the other Indians resemble him in dress and manner. Similarly, Goldman also goes through his own spiritual awakening by participating in a vision quest.

### **"GOING NATIVE"**

While not a stereotype of a Native person the stereotype of Going Native is still an important one when considering stereotypes and the representation of Native people in film. The main storyline behind *Going Native* has the main non-Native male character encountering a group of Native people, becoming accepted by the group and learns their language and culture and becomes one of the tribe. This is not a new plot line as it has been written for films such as *A Man Called Horse* and *Little Big Man*. In the film *Dances with Wolves* (1990) John Dunbar encounters a group of Lakota, marries the non-Native woman who was captured by the tribe and acculturates to the Lakota way of life. Unlike the members of their adopted Native community, those characters like John Dunbar get to return to their own culture while the group of Lakota he had befriended must pack up camp and run away from the encroaching white people.

Those characters that Go Native are always represented in the past and usually within the romantic period of the western before the turn of the century. Filmmakers are unlikely to make a film about a non-Native character “going Native” in the present day since they would have to figure out how the character would have to adapt to the present conditions on reservations and how to make it appealing to audiences.

Budd (2002) argues that films like *Dances with Wolves* offer value in “their potential to help humanize, not romanticize, lives culturally different from that of the audience, to offer alternative views of both history and contemporary reality, to challenge the ethnocentric views that all peoples naturally hold and may slide back into all too easily” (p. 198).

## **NATIVE FILMS AND FILMMAKERS**

In the past four decades Native filmmakers have begun to make films that focus on modern day experiences of Native people. Native people have also begun to take control of the production and distribution of films with less reliance on grants and funds coming from outside of Native communities (Singer, 2001). Still the big budget Hollywood-style films are still out of the reach for many Native filmmakers due to racism and large production costs (Reed, 2001).

Film as a new medium for storytelling means that Native people have the ability to control how Native people are portrayed in their films and correct earlier misrepresentations (Wood, 2008). Rosenthal (2005) notes that “Native people have also begun to see film as a vehicle for complicating the ways that the public had come to think about American Indians, even if it was film that produced the erroneous images and perceptions in the first place” (p. 351). By looking at the diversity of Native Americans, Native filmmakers can focus on the heterogeneity of Native American tribes rather than the stereotypical homogeneity of Native peoples (Feier, 2011).

The most critical acclaimed and well-studied film by academics in both film studies and native studies is *Smoke Signals* (1998). Directed by Chris Eyre *Smoke Signals* “serves as the most effectual rebuttal of the stoic warrior image” (Feier, 2011, p. 17). Through dialogue, strong character development and even consideration of the physical appearance of the main characters *Smoke Signals* challenges stereotypical views of Native peoples and the “audience’s perception of the 19<sup>th</sup> century stoic Plains Indians warrior transforms into a more complex picture of contemporary Native Americans” (Feier, 2011, p. 19)

Since *Smoke Signals* there continue to be more Native filmmakers making films based in contemporary Native society. Native women are beginning to find their roles in the production of films such as *Naturally Native* (1998) and *Older Than America* (2008) which were both written and directed by Native American women. *Naturally Native* also employed a unique funding strategy with their entire budget funded by a Native nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The portrayal of Native people in stereotypical roles continues to be a successful and lucrative formula for filmmakers. In these films both Native men and women are frozen in the past either in cooperation or in conflict with the white hero where they are portrayed both negatively and inaccurately. Native filmmakers continue to film Native people in another light as contemporary peoples within the context of their own indigenous cultures and communities. As ambassadors of Native peoples part of the role of these characters is to replace the stereotypes of Native people by movie audiences.

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