

## **Native American Representation in Films**

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the history of indigenous portrayals in popular culture and how it influenced future film makers to create the Native stereotype in film. The purpose of this research paper is to discuss the representation of Native Americans in film and how it affects people's perception of Native Americans. It looks at the negative associations with Native Americans that viewers tend to think of when viewing cinema, and it discusses the help and harm it has done to the Native American community. I used evidence from classic and contemporary films, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, older genre literature, and interviews from Native American actors to discuss the history and impact that stereotyping has had on the indigenous community. Multiple academic journals were cited, and my use of interviews by Native American actors and film makers shows the complexity of the situation working within the Hollywood system.

The popular culture that we grow up with informs, at least in some part, our beliefs and ideas. When a person is exposed to a culture only through the written word, the celluloid reel, the voice on the radio, or the talking heads in our news media, they typically have a skewed perspective on what that group of people are like. One of the least represented, and frequently misrepresented groups of people is that of the Native Americans. Through Disney cartoons, films, western novels, and even our sports teams' mascots, the Native American population is woefully misrepresented and typically reduced to a stereotype. In the forward to the book *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, Wilcomb E. Washburn writes: “[t]he image of the Indian in dramatic, violent, and exotic terms was incorporated in the reports of missionaries and soldiers, in philosophic treatises, in histories, and in the first American bestsellers” (Washburn 1-3).

The idea of this stereotype circulates in what film critics call the “Hollywood Indian,” or the reduction of Native Peoples into three basic tropes: the noble savage, the ignoble savage, and finally the disappearing Native American, or the last of his/her kind.<sup>1</sup>

The stereotypical “Indian” has had its roots in American history long before the howling Indians were portrayed on screen. Western shows like *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show* helped spread the stereotypical “Indian” to an audience. The famous wild west show opened on May 19, 1883 at Omaha, Nebraska. The show had a different number of acts to enthrall its audience. Shooting, medicine galleries, horses, and the Indian gallery were all on display at these shows. The show paid the actors well and they had more access to politicians to argue for their rights,

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<sup>1</sup> The biggest difference between the noble and ignoble savage, is of course, the aptitude to convert to Christianity, and joining “civil” society.

but they were still woefully misrepresented. The former curator of the Buffalo Bill museum, Paul Fees, had this to say about the roles of Native American actors in these shows:

...they were stereotyped as mounted, war-bonneted warriors, the last impediment to civilization. Thus, they had to re-fight a losing war nightly; and their hollow victory in the Little Big Horn enactments demonstrated over and over to their audiences the justification for American conquest (Fees).

The audience viewing these shows would be treated to the stereotype known as the ignoble savage, which, just as Paul Fees said, would give the audience the sort of justification for the previous and future mistreatment of the Native American population.

The negative stereotypes of Native Americans are not relegated to the past, however. The stereotypes and tropes still perpetuate. In the 1953 Disney film *Peter Pan*, there is a scene in which the lost boys and Wendy go with the titular Peter Pan to return to the chief of the Indians, aptly named Big Chief, his daughter Tiger Lillie. Within the scene the boys sit and smoke a tobacco pipe with the Native Americans, with features that are very racially stereotypical, and the boys ask Big Chief “What makes the red man red?” and “When did he first say ugh?”. The Native Americans in the film then holler around the campfire and proceed to sing in traditional Disney fashion. The film is from a different time in American history, and Disney is not well known to be the most culturally sensitive when it comes to their properties, but the pervasive use of stereotypes in films designed for children can still be indicative of a problem that persists in

media. Even in the modern day, Disney is still very insensitive when it comes to Native American people in film.<sup>2</sup>

In what many film historians like to call the Disney renaissance, or the 1990's to early 2000's, Walt Disney Animation Studios produced a film called *Pocahontas*. The film tried to rectify some of Disney's previous mistakes by having the titular character of Pocahontas as a likeable and competent heroine. The biggest problem with the films' portrayal of Indigenous peoples is that it still portrays them as one-dimensional. The Native Americans are in touch with the natural world, and they can commune with animals, trees, and the wind. The stereotypes present here are trying to portray the Native Americans in a positive light, but they are still harmful, because they misrepresent an already marginalized and misunderstood group.<sup>3</sup>

One of the biggest issues with the previous examples in this essay has been the fact that many of these film makers have been non-native people telling stories about Native Americans. When telling a story about Native Americans, the writer, or director, can skew the perception of the audience to a misrepresentation of the Native American culture. In relegating the creation of the stories we see in media to non-native filmmakers, the studio can cling to a stereotype that favors Euro-centric Christian cultures over the indigenous culture. While discussing the role of Native Americans in film the writer Katie Ryder said, "Native American characters in Hollywood have of course been played in "white face" from the beginning. Indian identity was performed as white Americans imagined it, most interestingly by real Native Americans and ethnic impostors" (Ryder).

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<sup>2</sup> See the inclusion of the character of Tonto in the 2013 *Lone Ranger*.

<sup>3</sup> The colonizers are also presented in a more positive light as well.

In this critique of the “Hollywood Indian” Katie Ryder describes the fact that Native American actors must play to the American imagination of what an Indian is supposed to be. A better example of type casting is an interview conducted by the CNN correspondent W. Kamau Bell, in which he interviews the famous Native American actor Adam Beach. Beach is asked about his role in Hollywood to which he responds, “...they don’t want to see us now it’s like that’s the mentality out there and we have to change it you know. They like us in the 1800’s” (Beach ).

The “Hollywood Indian” not only informed Native American actors on how they should act for a predominantly white American audience, but it also informed the studios on how Native Americans should be framed in future films. Peter Yacavone writes:

To some extent, such reductive tropes are often not a question of directorial choice but a rote treatment of the subject matter according the ideological and commercial constraints imposed by the studio. Because the ‘Indian attack’ in *The Covered Wagon* contributed to its success, the system demanded endless reproduction of the same (Slotkin 472).

Unsurprisingly, money kept the stereotype going strong (Slotkin 34).

The perpetuation of the negative stereotype was, in part, a result of the money that Hollywood studios could make off the trope. In other words, the stereotype is harmful, but it sells tickets.

The problem with the stereotyping of Native Americans does not end with just the misrepresentation in media; it continues into the public’s imagination. Many people who grow up in America could go their entire lives without ever meeting or interacting with an Indigenous person. This lack of communication between groups of people can lead to a misunderstanding. We have seen this play out in recent memory on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2019. At the Lincoln Memorial, there were three groups of people who were there protesting, and marching, for

different reasons. A video was recorded during the event, which featured two groups of protesters, and it went viral. The video depicted a group of boys from Covington Catholic High School, who were there for a Pro-life rally, and a group of Black Israelites counter-protesting. At the same time, a Native American man by the name of Nathan Phillips was part of The Indigenous People's March; he walked in between the group of students and the Israelites beating a drum and chanting. According to Nathan Phillips: "the Black Hebrew Israelites were "saying some harsh things" and that one member spit in the direction of the Catholic students...So I put myself in between that, between a rock and hard place" and "I was there and I was witnessing all of this ... As this kept on going on and escalating, it just got to a point where you do something or you walk away, you know? You see something that is wrong, and you're faced with that choice of right or wrong" (Brookbank).

The author, Deborah Miranda, of the impeccable book, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* said on the incident:

Here is what I also see: that the children in these videos have absolutely *no true representations of Native Americans in their heads to prepare them in any way for this moment*. They possess no point of reference for what an Indian person is, other than howling stereotypes from Westerns, Indian sports mascots, bloody video games, and outdated novels or textbooks. They probably have never met an Indigenous person, let alone spoken to one, or heard Indigenous music or prayers sung (Miranda).

As evidenced by the above quote we can see the real-life ramifications of a fundamental misunderstanding of cultures. Media is a lens through which many people view the world. Hollywood is an important cultural disseminator, and the stereotypes it perpetuates have real life consequences. The Covington Catholic students, as most Americans, don't have the type of

cultural exposure to Native Americans to give them the framework to understand the entirety of the situation. The boys were influenced by the way in which Hollywood “codes” Native Americans.

In film criticism there is a term called coding. Coding is usually described as the symbolic meaning behind an image being presented on screen. The author Manon de Reeper writes: “You could say meaning has two “levels”. On its most basic level, there is the **sign**: the denotation, which is the *literal meaning*. But when a sign occurs in a group, or in a particular context, it becomes a **code**, and it can suggest or connote extra meaning” (Reeper). Modern day films typically steer clear of the upfront “Hollywood Indian” stereotype for obvious reasons (Disney again did not understand the cultural insensitivity it perpetuated and decided to release the 2013 version of *The Lone Ranger*.) The idea of the savage barbarian is now just coded as a Native American instead of it outright being a group of Native peoples.

In his essay *Indians of the Apocalypse: Native Appropriation and Representation in 1980s Dystopic Films and Comic Books*, author Paul Lester Robinson writes:

Contrasting representations of Native characters between these two genre forms reveals how works like the *Mad Max* films, in their heavy borrowing of established John Ford-era western film conventions, reinforce negative associations of Aboriginal/Native/Indian iconography with the Other and with a threat to white, industrialized civilization. (Robinson 68-69).

The statement that Robinson makes here is very important regarding the deeper connection to racist caricatures becoming tropes. Hollywood filmmakers never make their films in isolation. The directors, writers, producers, and actors have all grown up watching films, and those films

(particularly westerns) will have an impact on the way they tell stories as well. The racist caricature of Native American culture permeates in the contemporary films of today by way of misunderstanding on the part of the filmmakers. If George Miller, the director of *Mad Max*, grew up watching older westerns, then his idea of a barbarian/savage would follow logically from the characters on screen, which were typically racist Native American stereotypes. There are, of course, contemporary directors who don't fall into this category.

The representation of Native Americans in film have not been all one-dimensional stereotypes. As mentioned before the coding of the enemy as a Native American is still a problem in the Hollywood film industry, but the move to depicting actual Indigenous peoples as relatable, flawed, and unique individuals is more prevalent in the film industry today. As the actor, and writer, Jay Tavare writes:

It was in the 1970s that we really started seeing Indians portrayed more authentically and more prominently in film story lines...director Arthur Penn showed the Cheyenne people actually laughing and crying, like real human beings rather than the predictably stoic and unemotional Indians we'd seen in Hollywood features (Tavare).

One of the noteworthy things about this changing landscape of the stereotypical "Indian" is that the stereotype can be invoked by Indigenous peoples for comedic effect. In the film *Dance Me Outside*, the main protagonists, members of a First Nations tribe in Canada, must distract one of their sisters' husband (who is white). The characters take him on a "spirit quest" to gain his "animal name" and make jokes about his belief that they have this ritual. They use the stereotypical headdresses, chants, fire, and war paint at the expense of the white individual. This shift is notable, because the characters use a negative stereotype associated with them for a joke, and they use it to their advantage.



Films with Native American characters do not always have to be negative in their depiction. A film from recent years, called *Wind River*, is a good example of this. The main character is a fish and game warden who finds the dead body of a Native American girl who lived on the nearby Wind River reservation. The story brings to light many of the problems facing Native American women near pipeline building sites. It ends with white text that explains that although there are missing persons statistics compiled for every other demographic, but there are none that exist for Native American women. This is an example of a film that not only portrays Native Americans as real people instead of caricatures, but it also explores and exposes a real problem. The storyline is rife with other Hollywood tropes, such as the white savior and the white man who can “out-native” an Indigenous person, but it has a large Native American cast with flawed and relatable characters.

The shifting narrative in Hollywood is reflected in the fact that more emphasis is being placed on having Native American filmmakers write and direct stories about Indigenous peoples. According to Julia Boyd, “Another major development in Native cinema in the last twenty years has been the creation and evolution of the Sundance Institute’s Native American and Indigenous Program, commonly referred to as the Native Film Program” (Boyd). Sundance is a festival through which independent films can get funding, and they can be picked up by studios who will distribute the film either widely or in a limited run. The fact that the Sundance Institute is backing Native American filmmakers is a big step forward in better representation.

The Native American representation issue has been a long and arduous discussion. Much of the film-going audience does not even realize their lack of education when it comes to Native American culture, because their culture has been disseminated through popular culture. The American education system usually brushes aside the indigenous cultures and instead relegates

them to one-off lectures.<sup>4</sup> The lens through which the public has viewed Native Americans has been so skewed in the favor of the white, Eurocentric, Christian colonizer, that it is hard to distinguish the difference between genuine knowledge and fantasy. If the only encounter with the Native American culture was through the Cleveland Indians, the tropes that Hollywood perpetuates, and an inadequate school system, then there is little wonder as to why there are fundamental misunderstandings between groups of people. The cultural shift to more nuanced stories, and the questions of the ethics of caricature sports mascots are a step in the right direction. When filmmakers can successfully humanize people, and the stereotypical “Hollywood Indian” is finally gone, then the quality of the art should improve.

When discussing Native Americans in popular culture, one must be cognizant of one’s own biases. Many of the films discussed have helped Indigenous people with employment and recognition, but the audience must be wary of the societal impact that stereotypes, even positive ones, have on cultural understanding. The job of the storyteller, even if the story is completely fictional, is not only to tell a compelling narrative that will invoke an emotional response, but also to be wary of the power that they have over societal imagination. If you tell a story about a group of people and you humanize the characters, then the public will usually view them as relatable, but if you tell a story about a group of people as savages, then that is how the public will remember them, as savages.

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<sup>4</sup> This sentence is not a value judgement on the teachers of the classroom or the students. The public education system has a long list of problems, and one of them is the time to tell the stories of the Native American.

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