



ON THE TRAIL OF
THE HOLLYWOOD INDIAN

REEL INJUN

Kemosabe? Loincloths, fringed pants, and feather headdresses? Heap big stereotypes. *Reel Injun* is an entertaining trip through the evolution of North American Native people (“The Indians”) as portrayed in famous Hollywood movies, from the silent era to today. Jim Jarmusch, Clint Eastwood, Graham Greene, John Trudell and others provide insights into the often demeaning and occasionally hilariously absurd stereotypes perpetuated on the big screen through Hollywood’s history.



FROM THE FILMMAKER

People of Earth!

(kidding . . .)

Welcome to this special screening of *Reel Injun*. (It's okay; you can say the word Injun out loud; chances are Natives won't be too offended.)

As with most films, *Reel Injun* was made primarily to entertain. But there are other reasons too. The film was made to inform you, the viewer, that Indians have contributed to American cinema from its birth to today. *Reel Injun* was also made for the Native youth of North America, to remind them of their people's past as well as the recent contributions of Natives to the art of film.

Shooting *Reel Injun* taught me (and the entire crew) a lot about the history of American cinema – and about world cinema as well. We learned that Native Americans were very much involved in film, from the very first flickering images of Edison's kinetoscope to the Silent Era, where three of the most successful producers, directors, writers, and stars of the movies were Native American: Edwin Carewe, James Young Deer, and Mona Dark Feather. Finally, we made *Reel Injun* to

inspire young Natives to tell their own stories.

It is our hope that audiences will come away from these screenings with a new understanding and appreciation of Native Americans. We also hope that audiences will go back to the old movies featured and watch them again, this time with fresh, critical eyes. Movie lovers should also make efforts to watch the indigenous films that have appeared in recent years from New Zealand, Finland, South America, Australia, and Canada, as well as the ones from the United States.

American audiences should see *Reel Injun*, not only because it's entertaining, informative, and funny, but because the story of Native Americans and cinema is a forgotten and sadly neglected part of film history.

- Neil Diamond



*Photo credit: Rezolution Pictures /
National Film Board of Canada*

THE FILM

The American Indian has long been a popular subject of Hollywood movies. From the early days of the film industry, Indian characters have filled movie screens with ceremonies, dances, and scenes of bravery and terror. In *Reel Injun*, Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond explores his “Hollywood roots,” describing the changes that have occurred in American Indian portrayals over time. With commentary from film historians, actors, and filmmakers, and a rich assortment of illustrative film clips, Diamond shows the onscreen evolution of Native people: from stereotyped, one-dimensional figures to fully human individuals.

The silent film era produced the “Noble Injun,” a romanticized, brave, and stoic figure with a close connection to the land. The “Savage Injun” came along during the Depression years, attacking and marauding indiscriminately. For the next three decades, Westerns – epitomized by the films of John Ford – cemented the image of the Indian as fearsome aggressor. In Ford’s films and other Westerns of that era, “The Cowboy” became a new kind of hero who could kill and tame the wild Native tribes threatening western settlers. In the 1960s the “Savage” gave way to the “Groovy Injun,” a free-spirited, headband-wearing, sensitive character who was largely a creation of hippie culture.

At a time when African Americans were fighting for their civil rights, Native Americans also began to fight back against injustices they had long been suffering. The takeover of Wounded Knee by members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and Marlon Brando’s subsequent refusal of his Academy Award in 1973 out of sympathy for the AIM action, brought attention to Hollywood’s portrayal of

American Indians. Onscreen, Indians started to become more fleshed-out characters, more complete people, but the films were still being produced by non-Indians.

After fading from the screen for a decade, the Western had a resurgence in the 1990s. Films such as *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last of the Mohicans* were box office hits, and now it was both “cool” and lucrative to be an Indian. The success of these new Westerns made it possible for an independent Native cinema to develop, with films that portrayed contemporary Natives. The 1998 movie *Smoke Signals* became the turning point for Native American filmmakers, who began producing films showing Indians as real people, as they are today.

This new age of Native cinema is not just a Hollywood phenomenon. Filmmakers in Australia, South America, and throughout North America have engaged their artistic skills in producing authentic aboriginal films with fully-developed characters facing all the vicissitudes of life.

Their work has revolutionized the image of Native people; it has opened the window on their cultures and let the world know that Native people have something to say, that they are not necessarily noble, treacherous, or stoic, but just human.



Photo credit: Resolution Pictures /
National Film Board of Canada

INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN REEL INJUN

Actors

Adam Beach (Saulteaux)
Wes Studi (Cherokee)
Graham Greene (Oneida)

Filmmakers

Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapahoe)
Jim Jarmusch
Clint Eastwood
Zacharias Kunuk (Inuk)

Film historians

David Kiehn
Melinda Micco (Seminole)
Andre Dudemaine (Innu)
Angeles Aleiss, PhD – UCLA

Activists

Russell Means (Lakota)
John Trudell (Lakota) – poet

Other

Jesse Wente (Ojibway) – film critic
Charlie Hill (Oneida/Cree) – comedian
Richard Lamotte – costume designer
Sacheen Cruz Littlefeather (Apache/Yacqui) – educator
Robbie Robertson (Mohawk) – recording artist

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Origins of the Mythical West

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “wild west” shows were an extremely popular form of entertainment. They traveled throughout the United States and Europe, presenting a romanticized version of the Old West, filled with action and adventure. The first and best known of these was Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. It, along with its many imitators, was largely responsible for creating the myth of the American west, represented by cowboys roping cattle, showdowns and shootouts on dusty streets, rodeo events, displays of trick shooting, and other semi-fictionalized scenes of life on the legendary frontier.

Native Americans were a central feature of “wild west” shows. Most were from northern Plains tribes such as Pawnee and Lakota; they wore feather headdresses and were characterized as living in tipis, and skilled in horseback riding and hunting bison. Known as “show Indians,” the Native performers took part in reenactments of Indian attacks on settlers’ cabins, stagecoaches, and pony express riders. They also reenacted the Battle of Little Big Horn and the death of General George Custer. William Cody (Buffalo Bill’s real name) actually hired the Sioux leader Sitting Bull, who at the time was reputed to have killed Custer, to perform in his show. The Sioux were known as a warrior tribe and, helped to establish the popular image of all Indians as warriors.

Easterners and Europeans made up the vast majority of the audiences for these “wild west” shows; they had no first-hand knowledge of the reality of life in the West and were not familiar with the differences between Native American tribes. They were intrigued by images of frontier life, and shows such as Buffalo Bill’s fed their imaginations. What they saw in these shows became their reality; these concepts of Western life and Native Americans became stereotypes that persisted into film, radio, and television westerns.

Sources: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Show_Indians; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_West_Shows

Stereotypes in Popular Culture

Stereotypes are a kind of shorthand – a quick way to describe a whole group of people by emphasizing just a few characteristics. While not all stereotypes are negative, they nevertheless can provide an inaccurate or unrealistic picture of an individual member of a group. Some of our stereotypes may come from personal encounters – for instance with people of another ethnic group – resulting in a belief that all people of that group share certain characteristics. Sometimes stereotypes are learned from family members or friends.

The media plays a large role in reinforcing existing stereotypes or imparting new ones. In books, plays, TV, movies, and other media, stereotypes can serve an important function. Used for theatrical effect, they allow an audience to instantly identify a character. Advertising and situation comedies rely on stereotypes to get information across quickly and efficiently. The down side of such portrayals is that those stereotypes can morph into caricature, and if used frequently and consistently, the images tend to stick.

The image of the American Indian has suffered from some common stereotyping methods, including romanticized, historically inaccurate, and simplistic characterizations. For most of film history, Hollywood has relied on these methods to portray Native Americans as fearsome attackers of white settlers, strong and brave warriors, or primitive people living in tipis, wearing feathers, speaking staccato-like broken English. For the most part, they lived in a long-ago time of noble savages and Indian princesses. While some worthy efforts during the last decade have provided a more authentic picture of Native Americans, they are still largely absent from mainstream media. For instance, if you check your local listings, you’ll probably look in vain for American Indian stories or characters in current television programs.

Commercial use of Native American Images

In the commercial sphere, a number of companies and products use trademarks and logos that feature Native Americans images. Among them are:

- Land o’ Lakes butter
- Calumet baking powder
- Crazy Horse beer
- Mutual of Omaha
- Pontiac (the car formerly featured an Indian head as a hood ornament)



Many sports teams continue to use Indian names and/or have a “Native American” mascot. Among the professional teams who follow this practice are the:

- Atlanta Braves
- Cleveland Indians
- Kansas City Chiefs
- Washington Redskins
- Chicago Blackhawks

Many people find these names and other commercial uses of Indian imagery disrespectful and demeaning. They argue that using tribal names trivializes American Indians, perpetuates stereotypes, and sends a message that such representations are acceptable. Opinion is divided among Native Americans. Those who support the use of Indian names and imagery by athletic teams say this is a way of paying homage to Native American people. In recent years, many schools and colleges dropped their Indian names and mascots, but professional teams have remained unchanged.

More information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_mascot_controversy; and <http://www.aistm.org/1indexpage.htm>

Learning to “Read” the Media

The media – film, television, video, print in various forms – tells stories that provide a picture of “reality.” But what reality? And whose reality? Stories in the media include dramas and comedies, as well as advertising and the news. All of these stories are constructed messages about reality – a writer creates a story; a producer or director selects actors and the technical elements to enhance a story; an advertiser studies audiences’ feelings, desires, and perceptions to inform the story in an ad; and an editor chooses the top stories of the day to fill the newspaper or broadcast. The stories thus created are representations of reality that can influence viewers’ (or readers’) attitudes and beliefs about the real world. Whose stories are told and in what manner? Do they include stereotypes about gender, race, class, sexuality, or disability? Whose point of view is presented? What stories are left out, and why? An examination of media content can shed light on this constructed reality. Questioning the choices made by the stories’ creators, looking at multiple sources for information that might confirm or refute a story’s accuracy, and understanding the manipulations of “that man behind the curtain” are all aspects of media literacy, an increasingly necessary skill for navigating today’s media culture.

A Picture of Native Americans in the U.S. Today

Population* – 2.5 million identified as only Native American or Alaskan Native; another 1.6 million claim a mix of Native American with other ancestry. Over 40% live in the West, with most living in three states: California, Oklahoma, and Arizona.

Number of tribes – 562 federally recognized tribes; the largest by population*: Cherokee, Navajo, Choctaw, Sioux, Chippewa, Apache, Blackfeet, Iroquois, and Pueblo.

*Source: 2000 Census Bureau figures (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-15.pdf>)

Tribal Sovereignty

Tribal sovereignty refers to the inherent authority of indigenous tribes to govern themselves within the borders of the United States. The federal government recognizes tribal nations as “domestic dependent nations” and has established a number of laws attempting to clarify the relationship between the United States federal and state governments and the tribal nations. The Constitution – and later federal laws – grant more sovereignty to tribal nations than is granted to states or other local jurisdictions. This sovereignty allows for certain activities on reservations, such as the operation of gambling casinos and the tax-free sale of cigarettes.

Sovereign Status of Indian Tribes Has Led to Certain Misconceptions

There are many of these, such as:

- Native Americans are rich from gambling revenues. While 40 percent of tribes operate casinos, which have been a source of income for these tribes, nearly 25 percent of Native Americans live below the U.S. poverty level. Tribes that own casinos use proceeds to fund tribal schools, medical clinics, roads, elder care, child care, college scholarships, and/or distribute proceeds among tribe members through per capita payments.
- Native Americans do not pay U.S. taxes. American Indians, even those who receive a per capita payment from proceeds of tribally owned casinos, pay U.S. income tax to the IRS.
- All Native Americans live on reservations. Only one-third of the American Indian population live on reservations; the majority live in urban areas throughout the country.

Conditions On the Reservation

American Indian communities are rife with conditions that, in some cases, approximate those of third world countries. Housing is often substandard, sometimes lacking indoor plumbing, electricity and phone service. Health problems are much greater than those in the general population, with high rates of diabetes, tuberculosis, and alcoholism. Unemployment rates are very high, exceeding 50 percent on some reservations. Economic opportunity is minimal or lacking altogether.

More information: http://www.nrcprograms.org/site/PageServer?pagename=naa_livingconditions; <http://www.sierraserviceproject.org/Native%20American%20Information.htm>; and <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/na/>



Photo credit: Rezolution Pictures / National Film Board of Canada

Wounded Knee

As shown in *Reel Injun*, Wounded Knee is sacred ground to most Native Americans. The small hamlet of Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, was the scene of two struggles by Native Americans, almost a century apart. **The Wounded Knee Massacre** occurred near Wounded Knee Creek on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation on December 29, 1890. In the years leading up to that event, the Sioux experienced a continuing erosion of their way of life. Coercion by the U.S. government to sign away more of their lands, the decimation of buffalo herds and other animal species, and the failure to receive full rations as agreed upon by treaty led to unrest on the reservation.

During this period, a “messiah craze” also took hold on the reservation, which was a belief that the white man would disappear from Indian lands, the former abundance would return, and ghosts of the ancestors would return to live in peace. Performance of the “ghost dance” would bring all this about. In a misguided attempt to quell the “messiah craze,” which began to alarm some whites, Chief Sitting Bull was killed and his followers fled to find shelter on the reservation. They were intercepted by the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment, which rounded up the Indians in order to disarm them. A scuffle broke out and shots were fired. The soldiers indiscriminately opened fire and killed between 150 and 300 (estimates varied) Lakota Sioux men, women, and children, as well as some of their own troops.

The Wounded Knee incident revolved around a dispute with Oglala tribal chairman Richard Wilson. On February 27, 1973, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) seized the town of Wounded Knee and occupied it for 71 days. During the months leading up to the seizure, dissatisfaction had been growing over Wilson’s administration of tribal lands and his control of employment and other opportunities on the reservation. Sides were drawn between “traditionals,” who were trying to maintain Indian culture and sovereignty, and those who supported Wilson’s actions.

The Department of Justice sent fifty U.S. Marshalls to the Pine Ridge Reservation: they set up roadblocks, cordoned off the area, and set up arms around tribal headquarters. Although AIM claimed that their organization came to the town for a peaceful, open meeting about the intolerable conditions on the reservation, their side was also armed. On March 13, assistant attorney general Harlington Wood, Jr. entered Wounded Knee without a military escort to begin negotiations aimed at a peaceful settlement of the conflict. The government and AIM reached an agreement to disarm, and the siege ended on May 8.

Sacheen Littlefeather, who appears in *Reel Injun*, had been an activist working with AIM. When Marlon Brando, an AIM supporter, asked for someone to represent him at the Academy Awards, AIM recommended her. At the award ceremony, Sacheen Littlefeather spoke on behalf of Marlon Brando, who protested Hollywood’s portrayal of American Indians and refused the Oscar for his performance in *The Godfather*.

Today, the Pine Ridge Reservation is one of the poorest places in the United States and ranks lower than most other parts of the country in

virtually all measures of human wellbeing. Long-standing discriminatory practices have maintained unequal land use patterns on Pine Ridge, where only twenty people control nearly 46 percent of the land base. Currently, nearly 60 percent of the Pine Ridge Reservation is being leased out by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), often to non-tribal members, with the tribal landowners receiving only a small fraction of the current market rates for use of their land. Such practices have a devastating economic impact for tribal members, keeping them in a state of abject poverty.

TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO REEL INJUN

A screening of *Reel Injun* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics, and to inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Media literacy
- Native American culture
- American history
- Film criticism
- Film history
- Storytelling
- Popular culture
- Rights of indigenous people
- Effects of misrepresentation
- Media created by Native artists



Photo credit: Resolution Picture National Film Board of Canada

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Before seeing *Reel Injun*, what was your image or idea of the American Indian? How did you develop that image?
2. What is the connotation of the word "Injun" in the title of the film? Why do you think Hollywood has portrayed Native Americans inaccurately, both historically and culturally?
3. How important is historical accuracy in films, television programs, and other media? Should filmmakers stick to the historical facts? What responsibility do they have to let audiences know if they have embellished the historical record?
4. What stereotypes have you seen in the media (i.e., films, TV programs, video games)? How are different ethnic or cultural groups portrayed? What about women? Gays and lesbians? Immigrants?
5. Some groups are hardly visible at all in the media. One example is the elderly. Which is worse, being included as a stereotype or not being included at all? Explain your answer.
6. As a society, do we still have an image of what American Indians should be like? If so, what is that image? What about other groups, such as gays, blacks, women, the elderly? How is our society clinging to images of these or other groups based on stereotypes?
7. Native Americans do not seem to have a presence on prime time television. Why do you think they are absent from the small screen?
8. Why have Native Americans been so marginalized by our society?
9. Do you think audiences are interested in seeing films and TV programs that show Native Americans and other minority groups as "normal" people, or do audiences prefer stereotyped versions of these groups? Why?
10. How can we counteract attitudes and beliefs that reduce groups of people to stereotypes?



Photo credit: Resolution Pictures / National Film Board of Canada

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1 – Work with your local library or school to organize a media literacy workshop for the community. Decide ahead of time on a focus topic, such as recognizing stereotypes or understanding advertising techniques. Two organizations that are a source of speakers and workshop leaders are the Media Literacy Clearinghouse (<http://www.frankwbaker.com/>) and the National Association for Media Literacy Education (www.name.net).

2 – Get your family or a group of friends involved in a survey of television characters. This can be based on one week's worth of programs. Have each person note the kinds of characters that appear in programs they regularly watch, and label them according to age, sex, profession, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Come together to share your findings. Create a chart to provide a more dramatic picture of who's on TV. Is there a typical character? What types of characters appear most often? Does the population of television programs reflect the general population?

3 – Help your community learn more about issues affecting Native Americans. The American Indian Movement (AIM) maintains a Speakers' Bureau, whose members can address specific topics. Find more information at <http://www.aimovement.org/iitc/index.html>.

4 – Educate yourself about Native American tribes in your state or locality. You can identify them and find out where they are located by going to the online directory of Indian tribes (<http://www.indians.org/Resource/FedTribes99/fedtribes99.html>). Invite a tribal leader or other member of the tribe to address your organization about the tribe's culture and issues important to their community.

5 – Organize a Native American film festival. Identify film experts who can help select films (see Resources). Other individuals, such as film historians, anthropologists, and experts in popular culture, can lead discussions after each film about the portrayal of Native Americans and the films' impact.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.communitycinema.org. For local information, check the web site of your PBS station.

RESOURCES

<http://www.reelinjunthemovie.com/site/> - Explore the website for the film contains clips of the film, a synopsis of the story, and brief biographies of some of the featured individuals.

<http://www.nativetelecom.org/> - Native American Public Telecommunications (NAPT) shares Native stories with the world through support of the creation, promotion and distribution of Native media. Visit their website to find resources for educators and tune into Airos Audio for all Native radio.

<http://www.bluecorncomics.com/> - Check out The Blue Corn Comics, a multicultural comic book featuring Native Americans. It includes cultural and educational information, news and blogs of interest to Native youth, and opportunities for Native artists and writers.

Factual Information

<http://www.indians.org/Resource/FedTribes99/fedtribes99.html> - Peruse this directory of federally recognized U.S. Indian tribes

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nagpra/documents/resmap.htm> - Examine this map, which shows the locations of Indian reservations in the continental U.S.

<http://www.native-languages.org/states.htm> - Explore this clickable map showing Indian tribes in each state, along with brief histories and meanings of Native American state names.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States - Read this article, which surveys the history of Native Americans and includes photos, maps, and population figures.

Film & News

<http://www.longhousemedia.org/> - The mission of Longhouse Media is to catalyze indigenous people and communities to use media as a tool for self-expression, cultural preservation, and social change. Learn more about Longhouse Media's acclaimed youth media program, Native Lens.

<http://ladyhawkesite.tripod.com/nativemovies.htm> - Check out this website, which contains a list of films about Native Americans made since 1970. It includes plot synopses and links to other information about Native Americans.

<http://www.aifisf.com/home.php> - Visit the internet home of the American Indian Film Institute (AIFI), a nonprofit media arts center that fosters understanding of the culture, traditions, and issues of contemporary Native Americans. It encourages filmmakers to bring Native voices, viewpoints, and stories that have been historically excluded to the broader media culture. Programs include the American Indian Film Festival and the Tribal Touring Program, an outreach and educational effort aimed at Native youth.



<http://www.reznetnews.org/> - Explore Reznet, a Native American news, information, and entertainment website that also trains and mentors American Indian college students around the country as they prepare for journalism careers.

<http://www.indiancountrytoday.com/> - Stay informed with this leading, online Native American news source contains a full range of news, including articles on Native issues before Congress.

Advocacy & Activism

www.ncai.org - Visit the website for the National Congress of American Indians, which advocates on behalf of more than 250 tribal governments and thousands of individual members. Its website contains the 24-page "An Introduction to Indian Nations in the United States," describing tribal government and a range of issues related to the federal-tribal relationship. The web site also lists numerous ways to become involved in protecting the rights of Native people.

www.aimovement.org - Explore the American Indian Movement, which works for the protection of the rights of Native Nations, including the fulfillment of treaties made with the United States, and the promotion of self-determination for Indian tribes.

www.nmai.si.edu - Take a virtual tour of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, which is dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of the Native cultures of the Western Hemisphere.

<http://www.villageearth.org/index.htm> - Examine Village Earth, a nonprofit organization that works to reconnect indigenous communities to the resources that promote human wellbeing through social and political empowerment, community, self-reliance, and self-

determination. In the U.S., Village Earth is helping Lakota families on the Pine Ridge Reservation reclaim and consolidate their legally allotted lands.

Media Literacy/Media criticism

<http://name.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/NAMLEKeyQuestions0708.pdf> - Use this list of key questions as a guide for analyzing and critiquing the media.

http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/aboriginal_people/aboriginal_portrayals.cfm - Check out "Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People," from Canada's Media Awareness Network, which provides a comprehensive overview of media stereotyping of Native Americans.

REEL INJUN: ON THE TRAIL OF THE HOLLYWOOD INDIAN WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS IN NOVEMBER 2010. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian is a co-production of Rezolution Pictures and National Film Board of Canada. The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.communitycinema.org.



Photo credit: Rezolution Pictures / National Film Board of Canada