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Group 2 Film Analyses

Native America: A Series of Films Made by White Men

When a film that is widely thought of as one about Native Americans is produced without Native voices, that film becomes one about Europeans: their thoughts, beliefs, perspectives, interpretations. Native voices are needed in these types of films for an accurate telling of the story; otherwise, stereotypes emerge and become deeply engrained into the minds of the audience.

The Searchers is a 1956 Revisionist-Western film directed by John Ford, produced by C.V. Whitney studios, and based off of the novel written in 1954 by Alan Le May. This international hit is set during the Texas-Indian wars and stars the legendary John Wayne as a middle-aged veteran of the Civil War named Ethan. In this film Native Americans are not central characters, and are framed solely as antagonists. The dialogue between characters, the wardrobe of the Native actors, and the transition to darker musical themes whenever Native Americans appear on screen all help to perpetuate negative Native American stereotypes. Although director John Ford meant to help straighten out the distorted portrayals of Natives that Westerns typically make use of, *The Searchers* is still a pretty racist narrative.

One scene in particular that actually made us cringe upon watching involved one of the members of Ethan's search party mocking the Comanche by dancing around and humming something meant to resemble a Native song; however, the most profound instance of racism in this film comes when Ethan finds Debbie living with the Comanches as a wife to Scar. Upon finding Debbie, Ethan tries to get Debbie to return home with him and Martin, but she refuses to leave and asks them to go without her. Ethan becomes so enraged that he points a gun at her and tries to kill her, saying that he'd rather see her dead than living as an Indian. Scar, the Comanche

who led the raid on Ethan's brothers home, largely represents the negative imagery associated with the Hollywood Indian. He is bare-chested and wears war paint, feathers and lots of jewelry (Dagle, 124).

According to Ford, the main theme of this film is to examine the issues of racism and genocide towards Native Americans. Many interpret that Ford was trying to make a film that was an example of racism that could make genocide justifiable. In many of the scenes in *The Searchers*, Ford tries to show that Ethan's racist hatred for Indians stems from the raid that killed members of his family; however, the violence perpetrated against Natives, in addition to the stereotypical tropes and imagery used by the filmmakers makes it difficult to see how this film is attempting to lean away from negative portrayals of Native Americans in Hollywood films.

Little Big Man is a Revisionist-Western based on a comic novel written in 1964 by Thomas Berger. This box office smash hit directed by Arthur Penn and produced by Stuart Millar, is an extravagant movie that seeks to capture the essence of American heritage in funny and bitter ways. Native Americans do not really play central roles in this film either, as the narrative revolves around the life of a white man named Jack Crabb (played by Dustin Hoffman). In the story of *Little Big Man*, Crabb lives amongst both Native Americans and whites during different parts of his life. The narrative and Native imagery used in the film combine to reinforce many common stereotypes associated with Natives in cinema. For example, there are many instances throughout the film when Natives are referred to as savages, are seen as inferior to white people, and act in overdramatic ways that don't accurately reflect authentic Native culture. One aspect of this film I found interesting was that it is a captivity narrative that involves a male being raised by Natives. In many films with captivity narratives, women are more commonly the characters who are kidnapped.

The key issues and themes that recur throughout this film tend to be about the exploration of morality. In a way Crabb's character is representative of America as a nation, showing the pitfalls and triumphs of the country as it exists in a relatively eventful period in history. His relationship with Natives shows the filmmakers trying to portray Native Americans in a more positive light, but it is impossible to portray them fairly in a satirical context. Although there are many examples of stereotypes and negative Native American imagery in *Little Big Man*, it does have some positive aspects. Author James Welch wrote that *Little Big Man* did well to humanize Natives in the sense that they are depicted as individuals living in a society with its own special structures, morals and values (Welch par. 5). This effort to humanize the Natives and at least try to give the audience a different look at Native American society was one of the more enjoyable aspects of *Little Big Man*.

Soldier Blue is a two-hour 1970 American Revisionist Western film about the Sand Creek massacre in 1864, and is based off of the novel *Arrow in the Sun*, by Theodore V. Olsen. The film was directed by Ralph Nelson, and produced by Gabriel Katzka and Harold Leob. Candice Bergen stars as Cresta, a young woman who is joined together with U.S. private Honus Gent, played by Peter Strauss. The film was not a very popular success in the states when it was initially released, but was a massive hit abroad.

In *Soldier Blue*, Natives mainly play antagonistic roles as warriors, but by the end of the film they are framed as lost and disappearing victims. This first encounter with Native Americans shows them as brazen, bloodthirsty savages, and reinforces the common stereotype of Natives as "noble savages". Like many Hollywood Indians are commonly portrayed, the Cheyenne are wearing stereotypical Indian dress, shown bare-chested with war paint. Later in the film Cresta is "rescued" by U.S. troops, and she returns to Fort Robinson to find out that the

army is planning an attack on the Cheyenne village nearby. Having lived with the Cheyenne for two years before she was taken to Fort Robinson, Cresta sympathizes with the Cheyenne and decides to warn them of the impending attack. Unfortunately the warning came too late, and the Cheyenne village is destroyed. The violence shown towards Natives in this scene is pretty staggering, and it shows why the U.S. poster boasted that it was "The Most Savage Film in History" (PB Hurst). The main themes in this film revolve around anti-violence and anti-nationalism. Some say that this film serves as a "...Pacifistic moral statement and condemnation of [the 1968 My Lai massacre]" (Sosa par. 2). *Soldier Blue* sought to acknowledge the anti-war movement happening in the U.S. when it was released, and reflects societal values of its era. The other theme that appears in the narrative is human universalism, with the American flag serving as a motif for anti-nationalism. This is most obvious in the massacre scene, when a Cheyenne chief is waving a U.S. flag as a sign of peace and surrender. Even though the Chief is clearly trying to submit to the will and force of the U.S. army, the troops are ordered to attack regardless.

Emerald Forest is a two-hour film directed by European filmmaker, John Boorman, 1985. It was nominated for multiple awards-Best Makeup Artist, Best Cinematography and Best Score-by the British Academy of Film and Television. The screenplay was written by Rospo Pallenberg, and is based on real life accounts of the kidnapping of a Peruvian boy by one of Brazil's native tribes, the Mayoruna (Greenwood). However, the screenplay deviates dramatically from the story on which it was based because the film designed for the expectations of a white European audience. This choice reflects the classic captivity narrative, which is deeply imbedded into the American psyche in which the savage, brown Indians kidnap an innocent, white female or child. A white audience might have difficulty relating to a kidnapping

story in which a brown Indian took a brown Peruvian boy captive; the narrative would draw little sympathy from its white viewers without a white victim with which they can identify.

Although the film is based on the Mayoruna tribe of Brazil, most of the actors who portray natives in the film are neither members of the Mayoruna tribe, nor any other tribe native to Brazil (IMDB). Although it would have been more authentic to use a true native language, this type of research was not put toward the film and the language of “The Invisible People” is one fabricated by Pallenberg based on the same structural syntax and phonetics of the English language (Films on Native).

“The Invisible People” are shown to live a very romantic life in the forest, speaking with animals, jumping into freshwater springs, and having a strong connection to a spiritual realm. The film reinforces the romantic, magical stereotype of native cultures. Often, “The Invisible People” communicate with elements of nature for information regarding an uncertain future: when the toucan calls, danger is near; when the frogs chirp, a big rain will fall; when dreams turn to flesh, trouble is soon to follow. The tribe also partakes in ceremonies; their dancing is a wild contortion of their bodies accompanied by howls and grunts similar to monkeys. Although it is possible that native tribes communicate with elements of nature and partake in rituals, the method by which “The Invisible People” do so is a fictional trivialization of the sacred meaning that real native tribes ascribe to such events.

While “The Invisible People” reinforce the romantic, noble Indian stereotype, another tribe in the film, “The Fierce People,” depicts the untamed, savage Indian. Although the two tribes are supposed to be different, the difference is marked solely by “The Fierce People’s” body paint. They are also depicted as bloodthirsty cannibals, and closely resemble tribes native

to Africa rather than those native to Brazil (African People). This further reinforces the western vision of native life by classifying a diverse range of cultures into a single category.

Perhaps the film is so far removed from the truth of native life due to the lack of contribution from native people toward the production of the film. The finance, production, screenplay, cinematography of the film was generated by Europeans (IMDB). This manages to reinforce old stereotypes and perpetuate mainstream ignorance of indigenous people, not only of South America, but all over the world.

The New World is a film, which is far more accurate than *Emerald Forest*; however, it is not completely free of the stereotypical inaccuracies of Native America. Written and directed by Terrence Malick, it depicts the famously westernized version of the story of “Pocahontas”. For the production of the film, Malick claims to have put in copious amounts of research to stay true to the historical accuracy of the film. However, according to film’s website, “the director interpreted the relationships for dramatic effect to serve the film's symbolism” (IMDB).

Although he was well aware that Pocahontas was eleven years old at the time of her encounter with John Smith (United States), Malick made the decision to portray her as the beautiful Indian princess who has a love affair with John Smith. These interpretations have led to yet another romanticized depiction of Native Americans. Malick’s “interpretation of relationships” is more of a compliance to the classic romantic story of Pocahontas, than it is an artistic interpretation.

In many ways the film has achieved historical accuracy. The tribe of the Powhatan region indeed dressed themselves in animal skins, shells, and paints; the men often had half their heads shaved while keeping the other long, as is shown in the film. Their shelter was also accurately portrayed as longhouses and wigwams (Native American Houses), which were common to coastal tribes in the Virginia region. The film also uses the name “Matoaka” instead of

“Pocahontas”, which many do not know is merely a nickname popularized by the Disney version of the story (United States). Although Malick has stayed true to the physical and cultural aspects of the tribe, he has fictionalized the actual Pocahontas story for the purpose of entertaining his audience, who expect to see the Disney version of the story. Had Malick made a true historically accurate account of the situation, it is likely the production would have suffered since the Pocahontas–John Smith love affair is deeply imbued in the America subconscious.

In the popularization of the European version of events, the Indigenous version of events are often overlooked and ignored, due mainly in part to the fact that the native tradition is oral. According to the oral tradition of the remaining descendants of the tribe, much of what written history tells us of the events is false.

Matoaka (Pocahontas) was born to the Mattopi tribe, and grew up among the Werowocomoco. Both were two of thirty other tribes belonging to the Powhatan village. Matoaka’s father, Wahunsenaca, was chief of Werowocomoco, not of all thirty tribes belonging to Powhatan as the classic Pocahontas narrative suggests (United States). Perhaps the most surprising inaccuracy of the film, according to the Mattopi oral tradition, is the events regarding John Smith’s captivity. It is said that what John Smith wrote in his journal (seventeen years after the fact) regarding his near death at the hands of the Indians, was in fact his own misinterpretation of events due to his lack of understanding the Mattopi culture. The Matoppi oral tradition describes the supposed capture and near murder of Smith as a ritual to recognize him as a chief of his own people, symbolizing the acceptance of the white man living among the Indians.

The film also falsely depicts the relationship between John Rolfe and Matoaka as one of mutual acceptance. Matoaka was actually forced into a marriage with Rolfe after being

kidnapped by white settlers of Jamestown in order to gain leverage in dealing with the Natives. During her captivity, John Rolfe raped her and, after becoming impregnated with his child, was forced to marry him and adopt his culture as her own (United States). The film's disregard for this part of history shows the ways in which film often covers up the areas of history in which white people acted dishonorably.

The disregard for the voice of the Mattopi in the telling of this story reflects Malick's true purpose in making the film: to entertain the expectations of his audience. It softens the atrocities of the white settlers of the time, and portrays them with a more honorable disposition; simultaneously, it becomes a story about white European culture, instead of one about Native Americans.

Similarly, *Dances With Wolves*, is a film made in 1990, which depicts the story of a white man, rather than Native Americans; however, it is widely misinterpreted in mainstream culture as a film about Native Americans. It was directed by Kevin Costner and written by Michael Blake, both men of white European ancestry. Many of the actors who portray Native Americans in the film are Native Americans; however, none belong to the tribe portrayed in the film, the Lakota. Members of the Lakota tribe or any members of six other tribes belonging to the Sioux nation had no involvement in the production, aside from Floyd 'Red Crow' Westerman, a Sioux, who played Ten Bears (IMDB). This signifies that the Sioux nations had very little voice in the making of a movie regarding the history of their people. Although the film portrays the Lakota in a seemingly respectful way, such respect is undermined by the absence of true Lakota influence in the film's production.

The Lakota culture is, for the most part, accurately portrayed in the film. The Lakota is a plains tribe, which is from where the typical Indian stereotypes derive. In the film, they are

dressed in animal skins decorated in beads, and moccasins, which is an accurate portrayal (Lakota Society). Although the wearing of feathers in their hair, and teepee houses may appear to be stereotypes, this is actually accurate to the Lakota tribe as well (Introduction to Lakota). However, because there is only one true Sioux voice in the film, the significance of these cultural elements are not explained to the audience; thus, the audience only glimpses the surface of their culture, but cannot understand its true meaning. For example, there are twelve poles that make up the teepee. The tenth teepee pole is directed toward the Morning Star, and the door is always positioned to the east as a symbol of how new life is created every day (Lakota Society). This is an important part of their culture, which is not explained in the film, and keeps the audience in a western state of mind, instead of emerging them into a Lakota state of mind.

Despite the overall accurate depiction of the Lakota, the historical accuracy suffers in some respect. Ten Bears is the name of the Lakota chief, but according to history he was actually a Southern Plains Yapparika Comanche chief. The medicine man, Kicking Bird, was actually a chief in another Southern Plains tribe, the Kiowa (Hosmer). The Lakota language spoken in the film was not completely accurate either. In the language, there is a feminine dialect spoken by women as well as a masculine dialect spoken by men. However, in the film, the feminine dialect was sometimes spoken among men (Haviland). Because this film is oriented toward a white, English-speaking, American audience, the importance of accuracy in the language, and specific historical figures, was not given proper attention.

The narrative portrays the Indians as a people who need to be saved by the white man. The main character, Dunbar, assimilates himself into the culture, learning the language, understanding their beliefs and way of life. This is a reversal of the stereotypical narrative in which the Indians are forced assimilated into white culture. As such, the film propagates the

notion of respect for all cultures. However, Costner, while attempting to show the beauty of the Lakota culture, has positioned himself as the point of focus in the film. The narrative revolves greatly around the presence of Dunbar, even when he is not physically present in the scenes, and in this way, the film becomes about the white man rather than the Lakota. Although on the surface it seems that the Indians are portrayed respectfully, the underlying narrative is disrespectful to the sovereignty of the nation. Subliminally, it presents Dunbar as the white man who saves the Lakota, and without his presence, they would not have survived. This narrative symbolizes the relationship between the US government and sovereign native nations, in which the US government asserts itself as the overseer of native affairs fueling the idea that without them, the Indians could not sustain themselves.

In conclusion, we came across common issues, themes, and representations of Native Americans in all of the films that we analyzed. For one, Native Americans do not play central characters in the film's narratives. Even in *The New World* in which Pocahontas plays a key role, the story revolves around the narrative of John Smith's diary. Because Native Americans had almost no voice in the production of these films, they tend to reinforce commonly used stereotypes and imagery associated with Native Americans in film.

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