A Critical Analysis of the Misrepresentation of Native Americans in Film

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**Abstract**

The study is a critical analysis of the commodification of Native Americans in film, going from early film to the present day. The research is split into three sections. The first is devoted to how Native Americans are often depicted as relics of the past and the effect that has had. The second is on the many stereotypes attributes to Native American depictions on film, including the “noble” and “evil savages.” Lastly, the analysis focuses on symbolic annihilation theory and the absence of representation in actors, characters, and behind-the-scenes positions. All of these sections combine to give an encompassing view of the depiction of Native Americans in film.

*Keywords:* Native Americans, representation, media portrayals, film, critical analysis

**The Misrepresentation of Native Americans in Film**

This study is a critical analysis looking at a multitude of films and literature of film criticism. The subject of the analysis is the misrepresentation of Native Americans in popular media with an emphasis on films from their inception to the modern day. This is an important subject because, as you will learn in the study, Native Americans are some of the most marginalized groups in the modern media landscape and have been for decades. The adopted research strategy is primarily that of a review of literature. Through extensive research on the topic, three distinct and overarching themes pertaining to the depiction of Native Americans arose: Native people are often portrayed as relics of the past. The tropes of “noble” and “evil savages” persist. And, Native people often experience symbolic annihilation and are altogether absent in the media.

**Review of Literature**

**Relics of the Past**

For my historical analysis of these depictions, the first theme that was found when looking at Native American representation was the fact that Native people are very often depicted as relics of the past. When most people think of Native Americans, they think of headdresses and teepees, beads and buckskin. That is not a statement of groundless opinion; for proof of this misconception look no further than a basic Google search. If you do an image search for the key terms “Native American” and “American Indian,” Google shows an overwhelming majority of historical depictions. Peter Leavitt (2015) and colleagues did a content analysis of the first 100 images of both terms and found that 95.5% of the Google-produced images are historical representations and not contemporary depictions. These depictions are very problematic because it seems to cement the Native American race in the past and make them not a welcomed part of the present day. On the subject films, interesting enough, representation of Native people was present from the very beginning of film. Thomas Edison focused on depicting Native Americans in the first motion pictures made with his kinetoscope (1894). Typically speaking, they were the oft-depicted Romanized headdress-wearing figures of Western iconography. However, they were they very much there. Some film historians like Ulrike Wiethaus (2016) have made claims that the depiction of Native Americans helped create filmmaking itself. It was the desire of white filmmakers to record the “dying race” that formed documentaries. When film narratives were introduced, this existing subject lead to the creation of the Western genre (pp. 189-204). This is an interesting, alternative perspective to the traditional timeline of film history. But, truth is, much later, western films were a Hollywood mainstay for many decades. However, as new genres emerged like science fiction and fantasy, Native Americans were not featured in these programming. This absence seemed to say there was no future for Native Americans, they belong to history. To this day, most Native American depictions are set in the past. *Dances with Wolves* (1990)*, Pocahontas* (1995)*, The Revenant* (2015)*, Wonder Woman* (2017)*, Hostiles* (2017)*, The Lone Ranger* (2013)*,* and *The Ridiculous Six* (2015) are some prime examples of this. These movies range from horribly offensive stereotypes to great depictions of Native life, but all of the carry this idea that Native people are figures stuck in the past.

**Noble & Evil Savages**

The second theme is one that has often been referenced in many works and research throughout history. That is depicting Native American characters as “noble” or “evil savages.” The trope of Indian evil savages was depicted in many Western movies, which as discussed earlier is often the other form of mass media Native Americans are depicted in. This started with D.W. Griffith’s *The Battle of Elderbusch Gulch* released in 1913. This continued in many westerns. However, this trope of native savages is not only in the films of the far past. *Raider of the Lost Ark* (1981)*, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006)all contain native people being portrayed as evil, angry, and, in the latter’s case, cannibalistic. The other trope is the noble savage. This figure is one that goes against his violent people to live an honorable life often showing a sympathy for the white man that the others lack (Luther, et al, 2017, pp. 31-35). This trope, in many ways, replaced that of the evil savage but is just as problematic since these characters are shown as special exemptions to the norm. Native American characters are primarily shown on either side of broad dichotomy and rarely as a wholly new character unrestrained from these fixed stereotypes.

**Symbolic Annihilation**

The third theme is the overall absence of Native Americans in the mass media. According to Dr. Stacy Smith (2017) and colleagues in their study of 900 popular films released from 2007-2016, less than one percent of the characters in the films were American Indian / Alaska Native (p. 7). This means virtually zero. Similarly, Dr. Darnell Hunt (2017) and colleagues of the Ralph J. Bunche Center at UCLA’s *2017 Hollywood Diversity Report* found that during the 2014-15 television season Native Americans made up 0.3 percent of the roles in scripted cable television shows (p. 26). Furthermore, there have been only two Native actors nominated for an Academy Award. The first nominee was Chief Dan George for his role in *Little Big Man* (1970) and the second was Graham Greene in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). There has been only one Native person to win an Academy Award and that was Buffy Sainte Marie for Best Original Song for “Up Where We Belong” from the film *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982). No Native American filmmaker has ever been nominated for any award. This heavily ties into George Gerber’s symbolic annihilation theory which states that “Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation.” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 182) This has a great effect on the members of the general audience, both on those who are absent and those who are not. It causes both groups to believe the absent group is a departure from the norm and does not belong.

**Discussion**

**Personal Background**

In addition to being a student in Communications and avid consumer of mass media, this subject is very important to me, because the most influential person in my life was my grandmother. She was a full-blood Cherokee woman who was my greatest mentor in life. She showed me a love for life, for fun, and most importantly a love for film. A gift that I will forever be grateful for. She showed me this gateway to other worlds and to beautiful reflections of our own world. That’s what movies are to me. Growing up, I saw tons of examples of characters that looked like me, however, I realized, none of them had a Cherokee grandmother that lived with them. None of the films depicted the culture I grew up in. And, I knew it had to worse for my grandmother and for many Native Americans living today.

**Results**

If you want to see how people view Native Americans, there is no need to look further than a simple Google image search. Go ahead and search “Native American” or “American Indian” in the search bar and look at the images. You will see primarily historical depictions.

Let me be clear, I’m not saying Google is 100 percent to blame for this. Google is a search engine that tries to compile a list of pages and images that they believe users want. And, through complex algorithms that I couldn’t possibly comprehend – let alone explain, these are the images that most web users find representative of their search. And, this is because our media and our society continue to say that these are the “correct” images of Native Americans.

In film and television, when new science fiction programming came along, Native Americans were not welcomed like they were in westerns. No, Hollywood said very clearly that Indians are of the past and have no place in the future. I am a big fan of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Even as a kid, I loved how diverse the cast was. It was especially important in the era it existed in. The show had a black woman as the Communications officer during the civil rights era, a Russian navigator during the Cold War, and an Asian man literally flying the ship in a post-World War 2 era. But, as a kid, it did make me wonder why there wasn’t a Native American character who was a part of the *Enterprise* crew, especially, knowing now, that there was probably 80 Native American actors on the same lot shooting a western. This brings me to why representation is important: Young black girls saw Uhura, a Communications officer on the bridge of the *Enterprise*, and they believed in a future where they were welcomed and equal. Native Americans don’t have that. They barely have any representation in any form of visual media and when they do it is in the distant past and as a savage stereotype. Native people are human beings that live in the modern-day with problems like you and me, but you wouldn’t get that from our media.

**Limitations**

There were some limitations in my research that is important to note. I am not the one who conducted the primary research on the subject. For the most part, since this is primarily a literature review, I compiled information from several different sources. Furthermore, this cannot be generalized to the general population.

**Conclusion**

The most shocking thing I found with conducting the review of literature is the fact that there is very little research on this topic when compared to other social groups. I came across many reports and studies that said that they were collecting statistics and figures for diversity in Hollywood and its films because it has started to become very buzzworthy in recent years. However, Native Americans were often omitted in the research and the findings, which is very problematic. Because if the researcher’s point is to depict the lack of diversity in the media, it would be important to include what other researchers have found to be one of the most underrepresented. Lastly, I wanted to address the most common response I receive when discussing this topic, which is that Native Americans are not often represented because they make up such a small portion of the American population. The most recent U.S. Census showed that nearly 2 percent of people are Native American or Native American and another race. This means that 2 in every 100 Americans, or 1 in every 50, are Native. This should mean that one in every 50 leading roles should be Native American, one in every 50 sitcoms should revolve around a Native family, one in every 50 film directors, actors, actresses, and writers in Hollywood should be Native American. And, considering our long history, I don’t think that’s asking for much.

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**Appendix**

List of films and television shows referenced in study (in order of release date):

* Thomas Edison’s *Buffalo Dance* (1894)
* *The Battle of Elderbusch Gulch* (1913)
* *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969)
* *Little Big Man* (1970)
* *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)
* *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982)
* *Dances with Wolves* (1990)
* *Pocahontas* (1995)
* *The Lone Ranger* (2013)
* *The Revenant* (2015)
* *The Ridiculous Six* (2015)
* *Wonder Woman* (2017)
* *Hostiles* (2017)