Native Americans in Film, Television and Entertainment

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Native American History

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Native Americans have been perceived as primitives since the incursion of non-native peoples to the Americas. Stereotypes were created early in oral tradition among explorers and settlers and have been carried on up to the present day through writing, radio, television, and film. Bridled with this prejudice, Indians have suffered throughout their life times. The invading peoples permeated the idea of Indians as savage. The Europeans had superior technologies and viewed the New world as an asset for cultivation, and its’ inhabitants at best, required assimilation or elimination. In literature and the entertainment world, the Native American’s journey has been from noble savage stereotype roles, to that of the “new hero”, to more diverse roles such as Magua in James Fenimore Coopers’ 1826 novel *The Last of the Mohicans* and Scar in *The Searchers* (1956). Native Americans have challenged old stereotypes in the entertainment industry and the arts through their progression into what used to be ethnic restricted roles.

University of Columbia historian Brian Dippie pointed out that there were traditionally two types of Indians; noble and ignoble savages. The phrase “noble savage” incidentally, which would later assert itself into modern vernacular, first appeared in John Dryden’s 1672 play, *The Conquest of Granada*. Indian men were either the good brave or the “fiendish” warrior. Indian women took on the role of the drudge or obedient squaw. Indians, whether considered good or evil, were still seen as wild and uncivilized. And although the Indian might be admired for his rough or natural existence, he was still inferior to that which was civilized. However, Indians were in many ways romanticized as well. The late 1700’s into the 1800’s saw a growing view of Native Americans as natural beings living in harmony with nature. Some, like artist George Catlin, regarded

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the Native American culture would not survive, and that their way of life would soon fade away. Known for his painting series, *The Vanishing American*, Catlin based his work on the belief that the Indian way of life was doomed. ² Like his contemporaries, Catlin sought to record every aspect of Native life. Like so many others, he felt white civilization confronting savagery would result in the loss of Indian noble virtues, leaving behind only savage vices. These perceived shortcomings coupled with white vices, would certainly seal the Native Americans’ demise. Adding to the stigma already entrenching a true Indian identity was the upcoming theory of polygenesis. This theory proposed the idea of race-based variances in racial capacity and gave credence to differences in the conflict of civilization and savagery, and the theory of evolution gave strength to the Vanishing Indian as the loser in the struggle of the fittest.

Besides art, early exhibitions, such as the Wild West shows were very popular and perpetuated the image of the “savage” aspect of Indians. These two to three hour shows portrayed frontier life, horsemanship, marksmanship, Indian villages, dances, attacks on pioneers, and reenactments of famous battles. These were quite popular at the time with the most famous of these extravaganzas being Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.³ Indians were the focus of these shows. They are what drew the crowds. Their popularity grew substantially with visual and print media of the day. Show programs, photos, posters, advertisements, popular dime store novels, and newspaper articles with Native commentaries, gave voice to the performers of these shows. As these shows were

reviewed, so were Indian affairs and culture. Native Americans were still depicted as “savage”, and were represented on the bottom social order. The Wild West shows reinforced and justified past and present European actions.

As the entertainment industry moved forward, the image of the Indian remained stagnant, with little advancement towards a real worldview of the Native American.

Radio became a major news link and entertainment pastime for the world, and grew into a new medium for music, drama, comedy, and commentary. Some popular stories were made into series, or serials as they were called. Usually an episode would end with an unsolved cliffhanger, ensuring that the audience would tune in the next time that story aired. One of these serials with a Native American in the storyline was The Lone Ranger. Debuting on January 30, 1933, in Detroit, Michigan, on radio station WXYZ, the masked man hit the airways. Originally written as a single, “lone” character, it was decided he needed a partner, and on February 25, 1933, Tonto was introduced. Tonto, played by non-Native, Irish-born John Todd, spoke in very short phrases of rudimentary broken English, and depicted in a very stereotypical fashion. In October 1939, the Saturday Evening Post reported 20 million people tuned in every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The Lone Ranger was depicted as a wholesome, and clean crime fighter. An upright man who did not smoke, drink, swear, or kill. The writers kept Tonto adhering to the same code of conduct. And although the show aired for 21 years, it did little to uplift the image.

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4 Linda Scarangella McNenly, “Foe, friend, or Critic: Performers with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and Discourses of Conquest and Friendship in Newspaper Reports”, American Indian Quarterly. 2014. pg 145.

of the Native American. *The Lone Ranger* writers would later reincarnate the show for television and film.

American Indians worked in the film industry both in front and behind the camera, and in films’ earliest incarnations. Records show Native Americans appeared in silent films approximately between 1894-1929. Although research into the silent era has been scholarly, accurate recollections of Native American contributions were lacking. Kathleen M. German states approximately 200 silent stock films exist in the Library of Congress that should be gleaned. Out of the 86 films German used for this study, two films stand out as substantial. *The Vanishing American* (1925), and *The Iron Horse*. The latter being noteworthy due to scale. 1,300 bison, dozens of Indian extras, and a longhorn herd. Other films were relating to the westward expansion.

The public at this time seemed ripe to record authentic American Indian life. Two of such films bent to this effort were *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *The Silent Enemy* (1930). The Western genre began to dominate other genres, and by the end of the silent era, Indian portrayal went from sympathetic to more hostile. A portrayal the Western perpetuated. In the production process, Indians worked as stuntmen, actors and behind the camera. In 1912 Santa Ynez boasted 18,000 acres that housed production workers and livestock. It was a huge concentration of Native Americans in Hollywood.

The War Paint Club for Indian actors in 1926 later became the Indian Actor’s Association in 1936, later became associated with the SAG, the Screen Actors Guild. Irregular work, discrimination, lower wages fueled the fight for equal opportunities

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7 Kathleen M. German, “*American Indians in Silent Film, 1894-1929*”, pg 20.
throughout the industry. Indians working as technical advisors and featured artists, worked from inside the system in an effort to tip the scales in favor of the Native American. Early on, Thomas Edison created several films regarding Indians and their activities, but there is some speculation as to the authenticity of some of the dances. Pre-dating life-sized movie images, the public could view Indians engaged in these and other activities in street arcades through Edison “peepholes”. These upright coin operated wood box devices had a brass viewing port that allowed a spectator a 20 second to 1 minute private viewing. To many urban citizens, this widened their exposure to Indians, although still a limited stereotype.

Again, the two most common Indian depictions in film remained that of the “noble savage” and that of the “murderous heathen”. The Indian with bloodlust became more prevalent as the Western developed and the silent film era came to a close. Many stories could portray Indians as companions to the white hero, wives, sidekicks, or scouts. Hollywood was still showing the Indian as both dangerous, uncivilized, and aggressive, or wise, passive, and non-threatening.  

As technology advanced, the entertainment industry evolved as well. Talkies, films that featured sound. Cameras that were once restricted to stationary shooting, advanced to motorized cameras with more versatility in the positions they could shoot. Longer shooting capacities with more durable film stock. All these advancements and more, allowed filmmakers to manipulate a story, and direct a stories’ theme with greater control and agility. Cinema and the arts in general experienced a renascence in how they

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could communicate to the masses. Many films perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes not
just for the entertainment of their target audience, but also for the manipulation of public
opinion through propaganda. Although stereotypes can be used to a positive end, they
have historically been the opposite. Negative stereotypes in literature, radio, and film
have been used for rationalizing a dominant groups’ actions against another. Regarding
the Native American, history is replete with examples of dehumanizing Indians to justify
actions taken against them. For centuries Indians have been described negatively. As late
as 1939, Apaches and Mohawks were depicted as barbaric in films such as John Ford’s
Stagecoach and Drums Along the Mohawk.9 Westerns continued to personify the Indian
as the unbridled savage, ready to attack any and all that crossed their paths.

The negative depiction of Indians became an issue for the U.S. government as
well as Hollywood. Exportation of movies with negative content before and after World
War II had concerned film executives as to how the American film industry would be
perceived and in turn hurt their overseas market. On the government side, agents were
sent to Hollywood to discourage films from being produced with certain content that they
felt would show the U.S. in an unsavory light in the international arena.

U.S. television used American Indians for political reasons as well as
entertainment. During the 1950s and 1960s were used as stand-in for other minorities
when writers wanted to tackle issues of segregation and racism.10 Some examples would
be Chief Bromden in Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, in his
commentary on the U.S. counterculture. Director Arthur Penn substituted Indians for

9 Michael Ray FitzGerald, “Native Americans On Network TV: Stereotypes,
10 Michael Ray FitzGerald, “Native Americans On Network TV”. Intro pg xxxi.
Vietnamese in *Little Big Man*, after the 1968 My Lai massacre. Other films made the
effort to make statements using Indians, like Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves*, and
James Cameron’s 2009 *Avatar*. Indians were being used to promote U.S. foreign policy
regardless of the good intentions a film’s motives.\(^{11}\) Communications scholar and
journalist Michael Ray FitzGerald observed that even positive stereotypes had
repercussions. For example, although the 1971 Advertising Council’s *Keep America
Beautiful* campaign public service announcement is sympathetic, it “locks him into the
past, making him symbol of a forgotten era and a forgotten people”.\(^{12}\)

Besides viewer gratification, the major networks of the time, ABC, CBS and NBC
were geared toward market volume rather than special interests or a niche. FitzGerald
surmises further that in order to understand ethnic representations on U.S. television and
film by Native Americans, the Cold War must be considered for several reasons:

- Defense contractors and broadcast development.
- The emergence of network television during the Cold War and the
  completion of the transcontinental cable in 1951.
- The civil rights movement and the effect on minority representations, by
  which were linked to the U.S. international image.
- Postwar international and diplomatic relations with new nations.
- The large output of westerns during Eisenhower administration.\(^ {13}\)

Even though there were both negative and pro-Indian films during wartime, the
number of anti-Indian films increased. While films such as Paul Sloan’s *Geronimo* and

\(^ {11}\) Michael Ray FitzGerald, *Native Americans On Network TV*, Intro, xxxi.
Vidor’s *Northwest Passage* depicted Native Americans in a negative light, television seemed to take a different tact. The aggressive Indian emerged as the victim who needed the white man for salvation. Racial stereotypes had changed from violent hatred to paternalism. A new, more benign, and passive Indian began to materialize. For example, originally born in radio, *The Lone Ranger* aired on the ABC television network in 1949 and ran until 1957. Here again the faithful sidekick Tonto attended to the needs of the masked man he referred to as “kemosabe”, (faithful friend). *The Lone Ranger* set the prototype for many long and short-lived television productions that followed. The formula always had a dominant white lawman with a cunning but peaceful Indian counterpart. The white lawman personified justice and order, while the Indian supported the crime fighters’ efforts with almost mystical tracking prowess and quiet wisdom. The pairing of white and Indian were likened to the half-breed, which became the next incarnation with characters like John Wayne’s’ *Hondo*, and Chuck Norris as Cordell Walker of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. In the latter, Walker had both the urban, civilized sensibilities of the white man, while still able to connect with his Cheyenne side when needed.\(^\text{14}\) Still, the stereotype of the “lesser” Indian persisted.

The promotion of Native Americans and their status in a storyline were more evident with shows like *Law of the Plainsman* on NBC. The first series on network television to feature an Indian as the lawman and enforcer of white law and order. White men had donned Indian attributes and become “Indianized”. Indians had now taken on the mantle of supporting the laws and ways of the dominant group. They were being introduced as “civilized” men. Indians, who used their Native “attributes” almost without

\(^\text{14}\) Michael Ray FitzGerald, *"Native Americans On Network TV: Stereotypes, Myths, and the Good Indian"*. pg 9, 37.
thought, like a submerged sixth sense. Examples of such characters were Mingo, the educated sidekick from NBC’s 1964 *Daniel Boone*, and the James Bond-like detective in *Hawk*, portrayed by actor Burt Reynolds in 1966. *Hawk* served to address and connect with the youth movement of the 60s. He could be hip and gain needed information on the “street” more readily than his conservative counterparts. Throughout the history of television, attempts to address social issues like racism and civil rights, almost all have been related to African Americans. Other films have dealt with other ethnic groups, such as Jewish immigration to the U.S., and the Japanese internment of the 1940s. The few works that have been produced are usually inaccurate and shallow, made for purposes other than Indian affairs or concerns. Indians still had their spiritual mystique and perceived connection to nature. These traits were depicted in literature; television and film to the point Native Americans became prized by military forces for their “tracking” attributes.

Even with the ground breaking casting of such shows as *Star Trek*, the original 1966 series, had a diverse ethnicity as their crew, but oddly enough, no Native American. Not until the 1995 *Star Trek: Voyager*, did a Native American grace the bridge of the starship Enterprise. The space officer Chakotay, portrayed by Robert Beltran, of Mexican-Native American Ancestry. Although his Indian heritage is affirmed from time to time, the aliens they encountered gave more cultural background.

Despite the westerns, Tonto, and the animated *Pocahontas* songs, Native Americans have continued to strive for expression of their cultural identity in many venues of the entertainment industry. One such venue not normally associated with Native Indians is standup comedy. Historically Indians have been the brunt of comedy in
film and television, not the instigators. The locations are usually reservation casinos, comedy clubs, festivals, and cable television. Dr. Amanda Lynch Morris of Kutztown University has stated that Native American comics must balance “declamation and play”, due to the “tense history they share with and against a potentially white-majority audience”.15 These shared histories invariably are the vehicle the Indian comic has used in his or her act. The stereotype is established and dismantled through mockery and mimicked assumptions of both native and non-native points of view. Comedy in general, has been regarded as a healthy experience. Morris surmises medium and the content used will allow all people a unique understanding and perspective on where we live and who with.

Onstage, at the microphone, in front or behind the camera, has been a dream for many. Fighting stereotypes over the years, Native Americans continue to work the entertainment industry in many facets. Few have had the opportunity to fill multiple roles like that of author and screenwriter Sherman Alexie. Growing up as a Spokane/ Coeur d’Alene Indian on Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Indian reservation, he faced many challenges. One of the challenges being born with an excess of cranial fluid known as “water on the brain”. He met these challenges and has been influential for other young artists. In 1998, his film Smoke Signals, that he co-produced and wrote, won him the Audience Award and Filmmakers Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival. “Smoke Signals is the first feature film, written, directed, and co-produced by Indians to ever receive a major distribution deal”.16 Native Americans have overcome tremendous obstacles while

in pursuit of their dream of being part of the entertainment industry. Native Americans have struggled with historical abuse and loss of cultural identity. The entertainment world and arts in general are a means of cultural discovery and knowing oneself. The Native American community has striven towards that discovery, reclaiming identity, and sharing a truer, richer history by continually challenging persisting stereotypes.