A MOVEMENT FOR AUTHENTICITY

AMERICAN INDIAN REPRESENTATIONS IN FILM

RAYA WILLIAMSON

1990 TO PRESENT
INTRODUCTION

• Lasting stereotypes and the ‘Hollywood Indian’

Stagecoach (1939)  The Searchers (1956)
INTRODUCTION

• Modern-day productions
• Impacts on society
• Authenticity and use of ‘American Indian’

I argue the era, despite its faults carried from the earlier Western films, caters to a consumer-driven period for authenticity. In addition, I believe consumers’ concerns for truthfulness in filmmaking will lead to the development of more authentic and progressive films in the future.
FILMS

• Dances with Wolves (1990)
• The Last of the Mohicans (1992)
• Pocahontas (1995)
• Smoke Signals (1998)
• Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001)
• Flags of Our Fathers (2006)
• The Twilight Saga: New Moon (2009)
• The Revenant (2015)
DANCES WITH WOLVES (1990)

**DANCES WITH WOLVES (1990)**

- Box office and award hit
- Reinvigorated the Western
  + Righted the “imperialistic wrongdoings of the entire [Western] genre” (Aleiss, 2005, p. 141)
  + Strides for authenticity
    - “Not a Native movie” (*Reel Injun*, 2009)
    - Relics of the past
- “Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs had the highest number of senators wanting to serve on it” (Cobb, 2003, p. 212)
- Dakota Access Pipeline

**FUN FACT:**

The Sioux made Kevin Costner an honorary member for their depictions in the film.
THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS (1992)

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- Another remake of Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans; A Narrative of 1757*
  - Strides for authenticity
    - ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Indians (Edgerton, n.d.)
    - Limited focus on American Indian characters
  - Release coincided with Christopher Columbus celebrations

- Ample work for Native people:
  - 1985: 87 lead and supporting
  - 1993: 436 lead and supporting

  - Formation of Native American Stunt Association (Aleiss, 2005, p. 148)

**FUN FACT:**
Day-Lewis took his flintlock everywhere while studying for the film – even Christmas dinner.
POCAHONTAS
(1995)

POCAHONTAS (1995)

- First attempt at real-life movie
- Financial and award hit
- Made attempts for authenticity
  - “Multicultural pastiche” (Edgerton & Jackson, 1996, para. 31)
- Bevy of promos and tie-ins
- To create welcome for Disney’s America

- Admissions to Jamestown Settlement rose 60%, eventually reaching 38% more than the average for the previous five summers (Edgerton & Jackson, 1996, para. 52)
- Spread misinformation

**FUN FACT:**

*Pocahontas* was Disney’s first movie about a real-life person.
SMOKE SIGNALS (1998)

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- Road trip movie
- Breakout film for Native cinema
  + “Forged a path for American Indians as citizens of the 21st century” (Aleiss, 2005, p. 146-7)
  + “First feature film written, directed, acted, and co-produced by Native Americans” (Cobb, 2003, p. 206)
- Overculture audience

- Used widely in education
  - Often “forced to stand alone” (Shorter & Lewis, 2012, p. xi)
- Inspired new wave of Native filmmakers
- Insight into Native community

**FUN FACT:**
The film was adapted from a short story in Sherman Alexie’s novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993).
ATANARJUAT: THE FAST RUNNER (2001)

ATANARJUAT: THE FAST RUNNER (2001)

- Visual interpretation of Inuit legend
- Preserves Inuit culture
- Truly authentic depiction
- “Devoid of stereotype and cosmic in its vision…could suggest the rebirth of cinema” (Atanarjuat Press Kit, n.d., p. 2)
- Not widely known by American audience

- Release coincided with “whole aboriginal cinematic movement” (Reel Injun, 2009)
- Lasting impact in result of preservation

**FUN FACT:**
Director Zacharias Kunuk spoke Inuktitut while accepting the film’s award at the Cannes Film Festival, marking the first time his native language was broadcast internationally.
FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS (2006)

- Flag raising in WWII and war bond drive
  + Oscar consideration for Beach
  + “Human face to the stereotype of the drunken Indian” (Reel Injun, 2009)
- Strides for authenticity
  - Negative representation

- Served as example for more diversity in Oscars
  - Only two Native actors have received nominations

FUN FACT:
THE TWILIGHT SAGA: NEW MOON (2009)

THE TWILIGHT SAGA: NEW MOON (2009)

- Second movie in saga about vampires and a wolf pack
- Incredibly popular – financial and award hit
- Bevy of promos and tie-ins
  + Modern depiction of Native people
  - Romantic Savage portrayal
  - Playing Native issues
  - Ignores harsh realities
- Surge in visits
- Congress passed Quileute Tribe Tsunami and Flood Protection Act (Nelson, 2012, p. 3)

FUN FACT:
THE REVENANT (2015)

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• Raw portrayal of life in 1820s
• Financial and award hit
  + Strides for authenticity
  - Natives minimally developed
  - Little Native voice
  - White Savior trope

• Success used as a platform for social and environmental reform
  – Compared to Sacheen Littlefeather speech

FUN FACT:
The normally reclusive DiCaprio appeared on programs such as The Ellen DeGeneres Show, the Today Show, and Entertainment Tonight to talk about the grueling filming conditions.
CONCLUSION

![Graph showing the growth of Authentic Films over time.](image-url)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Producers/Dir.</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Studio/Producer(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destination Forks: The Real World of Twilight</td>
<td>Baur, Y. &amp; Brown, J.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Peninsula Heritage Productions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Making of ‘Pocahontas’: A Legend Comes to Life</td>
<td>Boothe, D. &amp; Boothe, D.</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>The Wrightwood Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dances with Wolves</td>
<td>Costner, K. &amp; Wilson, J.</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Tig Productions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Twilight Saga: New Moon</td>
<td>Godfrey, W. &amp; Rosenfelt, K.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Summit Entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Last of the Mohicans</td>
<td>Mann, M. &amp; Lowry, H.</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Morgan Creek Productions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pocahontas</td>
<td>Pentecost, J.</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Walt Disney Pictures</td>
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REFERENCES

ONLINE VIDEOS


REFERENCES
DATABASE MATERIALS

(2015, April 26). From a Sod House to the Cannes Film Festival; In this Excerpt from Me Artsy, an Aboriginal Anthology, Director Zacharias Kunuk Describes His Early Life and the Spark that Led to His Award-Winning Film, Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner. The Toronto Star.


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