

STEREOTYPICAL IMAGES OF NATIVE AMERICANS IN LITERATURE AND FILM

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Abstract

Despite the tendencies to support the equality in all the areas of society such as race, gender or religion, there is still some unspoken prevalence of stereotypes, often related to the minorities. When it comes to Native Americans, a look back at the history offers one of the best examples of the stereotypical depiction of the cultural minority in both, the printed and electronic media. Books, newspaper, internet, or television stand for the most powerful mediators of information in the world about the world, and due to that they wield great power over the masses. Via those media, it seems easy to form the opinions of people, as the information offered to them is presented often as the truth. However, there is a tendency to present the point of view of those who keep the power to control. This paper critically focuses on the process of portraying Native Americans in the American literature as well as American film in the works labelled as the classics of the literary and film production, however, they offer constructs of images known as “American Indians” created by the Western society since the first encounter of those cultural societies.

Key Words: Native Americans, American Indians, stereotypes, film,

Abstrakt

Napriek tendenciám podporujúcim rovnoprávnosť vo všetkých oblastiach spoločnosti, ako sú rasa, pohlavie či náboženstvo, stále existuje akási zamlčaná prevaha stereotypov, najmä vo vzťahu ku menšinám. V prípade pôvodných obyvateľov Ameriky, pohľad do histórie ponúka jeden z najlepších príkladov zobrazovania stereotypov vo vzťahu ku etnickej a kultúrnej minorite vo forme tlačeného ako aj elektrornického formátu média. Knihy, noviny, internet či televízia zastupujú najsilnejších mediátorov informácií o svete, a vďaka tomu majú kapacitu ovplyvňovať masy. Názory jednotlivcov je možné preto ľahko formovať, vzhľadom na to, že informácie, ktoré su im ponúknuté, sú často prezentované ako fakty. Ich relevantnosť však môže byť spochybnená, lebo reprezentujú uhol pohľadu tých, ktorí majú tieto médiá pod konrolou. Tento článok sa kriticky zameriava na zobrazovanie pôvodných obyvateľov Ameriky v „klasickej“ americkej literatúre ako aj americkom filme, aj napriek tomu, že tieto diela ponúkajú konštrukt pojmu „americký indiáni“, kreovaný od prvého stretu so západnou kultúrou.

Kľúčové slová: pôvodní obyvatelia Ameriky, Americkí indiáni, stereotypy, film

Introduction

Since the first days of their existence, the literature and film have become those types of media power of which lied in their effect on the masses. Characters, places, or events could be presented through the creative composition and images of reality which obviously differed from

everything the audience had ever known before. Therefore, such newly introduced images of the other reality merged into the consciousness of the masses and became the tempting process, during which anybody “can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection.” (Lipsitz in Marc, 1998, p. 61) On the other hand, it is important to ask what kind of images they presented. The point of view of the dominant society depicting the indigenous communities then could be questionable and not objective. Moreover, the images presented in the literary works and films can lead to the misinterpretation and acceptance of the given picture. Contemporary literature as well as the film industry, despite their official attempts to keep the policy of equality in many areas, cannot completely avoid the fact that even though the growth of multicultural society is on its rise, the Euro-American tradition and its influence are still strong. The mainstream literature and film industry follow the demands of the audience often at the cost of the minorities and their cultural specifics. The given film characters seem only destined for only certain types of roles as the sidekicks supporting the main white heroes.

Native Americans belong to those cultural minorities whose image has become misinterpreted and transformed into stereotypes already in the early literary works of the American writers appearing on the American continent from the fifteenth century. Later, with the onset of the film industry, many of those literary works became the sources for the film adaptations, especially during the twentieth century, which just led to another exploitation of the given image of Native Americans.

Similarly, as did the other minorities, many of the Native American political activist and writers turned to the same media to get rid of the stereotypical misconceptions of the past with an aim to break such a negative trend that has caused wiping out the real image in the dominant society as such but also in cultural society of Native Americans. The aim of this paper is to critically focus on the stereotypical images of Native Americans in the chosen literary works and film with the aim to deal with the distorted feeling of the image of Native Americans caused through those media.

1 Literary beginnings of the Native American Stereotypes

Long time before the film, there appeared an influential medium serving for sharing the ideas, knowledge, and images about the known and unknown world - the books. For example, the records of the early journeys from the discoveries of New World appeared as the subjective point of view of the explorers on what they saw there during their explorations of the new worlds. Later, the early colonial literature became the source reflecting the first contacts of Europeans with the American continent. Therefore, they were the early opinion-forming and image-making sources for masses which had been eagerly waiting for any information in Europe. It would be unfair to blame those explorers for being fully responsible for creation of the stereotypical images of Native Americans, but at least, as Kerstin Knopf (2008) notes, “[T]he genesis of the stereotypical Indian begins with the colonization of the Americas.” (p.9) The journals and diaries of explorers originate

in the fifteenth century, they serve as a valuable source of information about the new continent and its people inhabiting it. Although, they still refer to the roots of the stereotypical representation of Native Americans. The encounter of so much different civilisations led to the quick conclusion that the indigenous people were no more than just wild, savage, fearful creatures whose manners had nothing to do with the manners familiar to the European explorers. Even one of the most famous stories depicting the early encounter of the Europeans with the indigenous people of America has become an idealized version of the reality, for Captain John Smith even though saved by Pocahontas had contributed to not a very positive depiction of Native Americans in his records.

Following centuries of the European expansion with the aim to colonize and control the new continent the general attitude just confirmed the continuing trend of underestimating the indigenous populations and acceptance of their stereotypical images having set up before. The onset of the nineteenth century introduced the conditions for new literary movement, which slightly changed the attitude toward depicting the Native Americans. The writers labelled as the American Romantics came with a different view on the individuals, society, and nature, especially while dealing with the so-called frontiers.

In case of

Washington Irving, the interest of the European society obviously influenced his interest to depict Native Americans. At the beginning, as Littlefield (1979) presents, Irving's view of American Indians was in their favour, and in contrast to the earlier literary works, also quite realistic, however, with declining interest and more benevolent attitude of the cosmopolitan society towards the wild frontier influenced also the area related to depicting American Indians. In comparison to other writers of the western narratives of the nineteenth century, his book *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), *Astoria* (1836) and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* (1837) depict "a strong sense of the beauty and dignity of Indians." (in Black and Wiedman, 1979) They participated in creating the image of the idealized "American Indian", but not the real Native American. Even the characters depicting Native Americans in the works such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Pathfinder* (1840), *The Deerslayer* (1841) and others from James Fenimore Cooper's literary production just enhanced the image of the idealised "Indian."

However, the idealised does not necessarily mean a positive connotation, and due to the readers' preferences, the authors used to depict the main white characters which were in contact with two types of "American Indians." Why the term "American Indians" and not Native Americans? The answer is quite simple, for "American Indians" stand for the constructed image of the idealised indigenous people inhabiting the American continent, especially its northern part. Even more, the poetic designations such as a noble savage and a bloodthirsty savage, refer again only to the construct of the Western culture to which Kilpatrick refers simply to "a good or bad Indian." (p.2) In Cooper's stories similarly to those written by Irving it was possible to distinguish those two types, as both authors quite precisely used similar imagery. It is obvious that both above mentioned authors tried to catch the essence of the frontier including the that-time notion of American Indians. Their research and personal experience had the influence also on their imagination, as the critical papers such as *White on Red* (1976) by Nancy B. Black and Bette S.

Wiedman or “The True Beginning of Native American Novels by James Fenimore Cooper and Helen Hunt Jackson“written by Taisuke Suzuki (2003) present.

The early excitement and interest about the unknown frontier transformed later into the topic of Wild West which included also the already known Indians. The new topic became popular and part of the American literature designed primarily for the youth who tried to the everyday reality of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Stories about Buffalo Bill or the Wild West were so exciting that even the writers in Europe started to imitate the topic in their own stories depicting the American West, the “cowboys” and Indians. Karl May, for example, had inspired by such stories before he started to write about Winnetou and Old Shatterhand in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. One might complain that there was nothing wrong to fantasize and write about the symbols of the “American dream,” also represented by the Wild West, but someone else might argue that it was just a pure fiction that was far from reality. It is obvious that May drew his inspiration from the Germanic culture and applied it also to his main characters, such as Old Shatterhand, but that was nothing new for Cooper did the same in his stories presenting Nathaniel Bumppo. Therefore, that point plays a significant role in creating and supporting the stereotypes which takes part in accepting the previously established images without confronting them with the reality.

Karl May’s imagination is undoubtedly extraordinary, as he depicts the Wild West, where the white men often discover the frontiers during the missions and meanwhile they have to save men and women in need from the hands of bandits or bloodthirsty Indians. All that processed with the help of their sidekicks, represented by the Indians often leaders of one of those friendly tribes mutually connected through the tie of blood-brotherhood with the white main character.

The line between stereotypes of the noble savage and the bloodthirsty savage is thin according to the observations from the books. It lies in the type of relationship with the white main character. From the stories written by Irving, Cooper and even May, the “noble savage” impersonates often is a proud, honest, and brave man. A warrior who has taught the white hero everything about the wilderness, still, he is nothing more than his sidekick, who often must sacrifice his own life to save the life of the white character. On the other hand, the characters depicted as the “bad Indians” became the reference for their strong lust to fight and kill. Even more, they as malicious savages torture, kidnap and do other terrible acts mostly against innocent white men and women. Authenticity was one of the aims the authors tried to follow, but under the terms of their period, a lot of information about Native Americans lost somewhere between the reality and writing the texts. Despite that they substituted the missing parts with a term “Indian” or “savage,” which slowly transformed into a negative connotation affecting the way of life of the generations on both sides of the society for decades.

2 Native Americans playing American Indians

The onset of cinematography enabled to visualize the images which were only in books and left to the readers' imagination. To catch the widest audience, the filmmakers drew for the inspiration to the themes presented in the books fascinating the readers for generations, including those about discovering and colonizing America, the encounters between the white men and the indigenous people. As in the literature of the past, also in the film industry, Native Americans represented the minority which had only few options how to represent themselves in their own way. Still, they were in demand in the film industry especially in Hollywood, as they were inevitable elements of the genre of western during 1950s-60s. (Schatz, 2007) Even though with the growing popularity of that genre in Europe, there were many of the European actors playing the American Indians, such as in the famous Winnetou series based on Karl May's popular novels, or films in which starred European actor Gojko Mitić.

As in the literature, even in the films, Native Americans represented characters often displaying stereotypical counterparts who were assaulting the white settlers due to their lust for blood and scalps. Or, they stood for such characters labelled as the noble savages, whose performances were mostly based on the ideas of scriptwriters who had little or no knowledge about the original behaviour and way of life characteristic for Native American tribes and their members. Many of them would protest, for the film productions used to hire Native Americans as the consultants responsible for the authenticity, despite that the presented versions were still inadequate.

The growth of the audience and its demands on the film production have naturally turned into the boom in making the films more attractive for people. Naturally, the literary works popular before became the source of inspiration, and the filmmakers gave them the fresh look. Films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) or *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), earned great popularity among the American as well as European audience meaning also their commercial success. Those films more than that they introduced an opportunity for the actors of Native American origin to play, however, after a closer look, the Hollywood production again restricted their options to perform. The following part introduces a closer look at the popular and commercially successful films which included the Native American characters.

The first film, *Dances with Wolves* (1990), can be defined as "a landmark film because it treated American Indians as fully realized human beings," (Kilpatrick 1999, p.124) or according to these papers, at least it seems to do that. Costner's direction gave the Canadian and American actors of the indigenous origin enough space for acting, some stereotype stayed. It is quite easy to distinguish the "noble savages" and the "blood-thirsty savages" in the film. The community of Lakota tribe accepts the main character, who later introduces his view on the Lakota's referring to them as "intelligent, happy, friendly, loving people who can and will fight if necessary," (Kilpatrick,124), which influences directly the audience. Kicking Bird, Whereas Ten Bears and Wind in His Hair played by actors Graham Greene, Floyd Red Crow Westerman and Rodney A. Grant obviously represent the proud, honest warriors who earn Dunbar's admiration and respect as

they teach him the Lakotas' way of life, and their characters closely approach to the image of the "noble savage." Costner as the director presents the Lakota people not as flat characters, but his view occurs in the clash with the stereotypical depiction of Native Americans out of many reasons. For example, only one of the Native American actors really comes from one of the Lakota ethnic group. The others relate to the Six Nations, the Cree tribe from Canada or the Omaha tribe in Nebraska, and those are only the actors representing the characters closest to John Dunbar, who was played by Kevin Costner himself. Therefore, even this film has become an example of the unfortunate process leading to creation and support of the stereotypical images of Native Americans. Again, the large and diverse culture becomes reduced into the notion that every Native American or the member of Six Nations can play an "American Indian." *Dances with the Wolves* (1990) offers quite positive and imaginative picture about Native Americans. It gives much more space for a depiction of their way of life which was quite vivid in the film. Still, the film as such reflects obvious traces of the generalized stereotypes which are still not Native Americans.

With the commercial success and popularity of *Dances with Wolves* (1990), the theme dealing with the American frontier of 18th century returned on the screen again under the Hollywood production in *The Last of Mohicans* (1992) under Michael Mann's direction. The film adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's book touches the topic presented in the book, still, it is far from its written original. Regardless those differences between the original and its film adaptation, the depiction of Native Americans as in the film mentioned before, offers the characters which have more space to develop during the story. However, there are many critics who consider the film *The Last of the Mohicans* still presenting the stereotypical image of the indigenous people known as the "noble" or "bloodthirsty" Indians. The film as such is closer to the screenplay of the version from 1936, a period when Native Americans got the roles in which they had to play stereotypical characters and let the white actors star. At those times it was impossible for the non-white people in the film to play roles other than those representing the stereotypes, therefore, the black people often played musicians or servants, while Native Americans played the good, bad or even the drunk Indians as the counterparts to the white heroes or heroines. As mentioned above, the Mohicans even though offer some alternation of family to Hawkeye, they represent here more his supporters rather than the equals to him during the film. (Kilpatrick 2008)

Also, this film offers a very similar situation, but Mann's version offers a young, handsome white actor, Daniel Day-Lewis, who stars in the film and is obviously attracted to one of the female characters. While in the original version of the book, the same character is a mature older man who has no love interest with other female characters. Most of the Man's version of the story is spinning around the betrayal and kidnapping the Munro's family. The white actress Madeline Stowe playing Cora in the film is also in a deep contrast with Cooper's Cora who is originally depicted as mulatto. A situation like that refers to the adjusting the image and is obviously in conflict with the contemporary demands of the multicultural audience. One of the reasons might be in what Edgerton who says that "[I]n the process, American Indian images continue to be used in this newest version,

intentionally or unintentionally, to present the viewpoint of the historically privileged rather than the oppressed.” Therefore, the American Indians depicted in the film are close to more idealized and artificial images, referring to the attempt to recall the dreamy periods of the frontiers or the Wild West.

The film depicts Chingachgook and Uncas again as the “noble savages”. Even though these characters are obviously stereotypes, it is possible to admit that the film shows some progress in their depiction on the screen. Courageous huntsmen, helping the English army to fight against the French who accept Nathaniel Bumppo and teach him as if he were one of them. Chingachgook stands for an experienced, self-possessed warrior who guides his two sons to live in the spirit of the Mohican tradition. He seems reserved as he does not speak much, but his acts speak instead, what refers to him as the “noble savage.” On the other hand, Uncas is more hot-tempered in comparison to his father and step-brother. He is faithful to his family and loyal to those who are in command. He is ready to sacrifice his life to save someone else, as he proves while fighting Magua to save Alice Munroe. Similarly, as in the case of the previously mentioned character, even this one possesses the characteristics of the “noble savage,” for even his actions are to serve as a support to white men. It does not matter whether it is Nathaniel Bumppo, the English officers or white women in need, what has become a subject of criticism.

The film offers also another stereotypical image, the image of bloodthirsty American Indians, represented by Magua, the Hurons and the Mohawks. Being malicious, treacherous, vindictive, or merciless that all refers to Mann’s portrayal of the “bloodthirsty savage” fighting on the side of the French. Magua personifies one of them, as he as well as his men are depicted as half-naked savages, decorated with war painting or the blood of their enemies. Despite the negative attitude towards this character, from the Native American point of view, Magua has broken the view on the stereotype as he has become the only “complex, fully developed American Indian character. [...] the film will ‘allow more people than just Indians to identify with Magua. [...] They’ll see that he has reasons, that it makes him feel better to act ruthless’” (in Rinne, 2001 p.8) Magua can be understood in a different way, for he is obviously not mad but still driven by his desire for revenge. The way he acts is only a reaction to the events caused by the English and their savagery responsible for the misery of Magua and his relatives, his captivity by the Mohawk tribe. A Native American as the negative character is presented as a developing one, moreover, he reflects an image of a character “intellectually superior to his non-Indian counterpart.” (in Rinne, 2001, p.8)

3 Native Americans in Films

Native Americans did not have many options how to represent themselves in reality as well as in the film industry. In the latter, even though they were quite in demand, as they were inevitable elements of the genre of western by 1950s-60s, still, the rich cultural variety of Native Americans deliberately and drastically compressed into generalized stereotypical characters. That caused that the image of savages inevitably influenced their notion within the whole American society, and it

has taken a long time to the image of Native Americans made by non-Native Americans started to change. The period between the 1950s -1970s represented for the Native American population harsh times in many aspects. Interventions of the Federal Government including the “Termination policy” and process of relocation to cities led to the mobilization of the Native American activists who joined together with other minorities and participated in Civil Right Movement in the 1960s. Therefore, the film industry reacted with lack of interest to make films not only with the topics but also with the actors of Native American origin. Films such as *Windtalker* (1980) signified the slow return to the topics related to Native Americans, however, it caused a wave of criticism from the Native American camp, for the actors in the roles of Native Americans were not Native Americans at all, similarly to it was in the early days of film, the characters of Indians were played by masked white actors under the constructed image of the earlier times.

Unlike the two previously mentioned films, *Smoke Signals* (1998) can be regarded as “the first feature film conceived, written, directed and co-produced by American Indians, the film subverts mainstream viewers’ generic expectations through the use of classical film narrative techniques and humor.” (Kilpatrick 2009, p.29) The film has a character of a road movie and is far from the previously analysed films. This film combines the Anglo-Western and Hollywood cinematographic tradition and the Native American point of view. Based on the Sherman Alexie’s novel of the same title, the film focuses on the journey of Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph to Phoenix in Arizona to arrange an issue of cremated remains of Victor’s father, an alcoholic who had left him and his mother couple of years ago.

As the previous films displayed “noble” and “bloodthirsty” American Indians, *Smoke Signals* (1998) deals with the concept of American Indians interpreted as poor alcoholics with the culture disappearing within every other drink, from the Native American point of view. The characters are what makes this film different from any other film dealing with the theme related to Native Americans. Their complexity is interpreted especially through the depiction of their negative experience expressing contemporary Native Americans and their everyday reality. The film questions preconceptions about Native Americans hidden behind so often used reference of “American Indians.” Different perspectives through which the stereotype of “noble” warrior is questioned and put in contrast with the stereotype of a drunk Indian, another deeply rooted concept present in both the indigenous and Western society. “Just what kind of Indians are you exactly?” is a question the Chief of the local police asks Victor and Thomas, after Victor’s confession about this attitude to alcohol. The question directly undermines the notion of the American Indians, the image created and nurtured for centuries within the American as well as the European society. The scene as such represents one of the crucial moments as it questions the views of both the Americans and Native Americans on the same issue. Victor is the character who used to live under the influence of his tribe but wanted to escape it. He is not fully in agreement with the fact that as a Native American due to preconception of the dominant society he should be condemned to live a life as a poor drunk. His actions, therefore, reflect his stand even in the most miserable moments. Thomas, on the other hand, growing up without parents, focuses his attention and care towards his community and its traditional stories, in order to give his life some sense. Even though his self-

image is influenced by the stereotypical view of Native Americans seen as “American Indians” by the dominant culture, he can distinguish his position within his community. Gilroy presents that “he [Thomas] seeks to preserve and create a meaningful existence through his stories as a way to deal with the hardships of reservation life in general and his tragic past in particular.” (Gilroy 2001, p.34) In comparison to Victor, for whom the traditional stories have been familiar, yet, his personal experience alienates him from their traditional meaning. For Thomas it is his family, culture, and the stories which are somehow interconnected and make sense to his own life as well as to life of the others around him.

The film under the influence of the Native American production uses the procedures to with aim to achieve that the main characters must have become victims of stereotyping to foreground and break the notion of previous false impressions not only in the Native American but also Anglo-Western audiences. Instead of “Indians “stuck back in time, the film presents the characters whose life is dynamic, actual, and is far away not only from the preconceptions rooted inside the minds of non-Native audience but also Native Americans themselves creating the false ideas how the Indians should look like and act.

With the films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) or the *Last of the Mohicans* (1998), the indigenous actors not only got the chance to play again, they could present characters of Native Americans that were not perfect, but at least they were more than just one-dimensional, "noble" or "bloodthirsty" savages. Finally, They could introduce more realistic image about Native Americans presented as human beings, who could act according to own will and to some extend to own cultural traditions. Even though some critical voices still recognize the traces of stereotypical depiction, those films and their popularity have opened the space for the Native American filmmakers such Chris Eyre, whose concept of American Indian stereotype got a completely new notion. The American Indian stereotypes previously set up by the dominant culture in film and literature are in his films confronted with the stereotypical images created by Native Americans themselves showing that they are far different than those created by the Anglo-European society. The non-Native and Native audience is, therefore, exposed to completely a new image suggesting how to credibly see and understand Native Americans not only regarding to their past but especially to the contemporary America.

Conclusion

This paper critically focused on the process portraying Native Americans in the early literary works and in the chosen American films of non-Native and Native production. The paper questioned the notion of the cultural construct “American Indians,” as well as the notion of the “noble” and “bloodthirsty” savages that represented the stereotypes created by the Anglo-Western tradition. As this paper presents, the position of Native Americans has changed, however, not only in the film or literature, they still meet with some level of creating the stereotypes. Especially, Native Americans themselves use these constructs about “American Indians” through their direct

confrontation whether in literature or film. Such confrontation then introduces completely a new point of view not only for the Native but also non-Native audience.

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