

ON THE TRAIL OF  
THE HOLLYWOOD INDIAN

REEL  
INDIAN



## SYNOPSIS

Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond takes an entertaining and insightful look at the Hollywood Indian, exploring the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples through a century of cinema. With clips from hundreds of classic and recent films, *Reel Injun* traces the evolution of cinema's depiction of Native peoples from the silent-film era to today, only to find the future of Aboriginal cinema in the unlikelyst of places: Canada's North.

Rambling through the heartland of America, Diamond looks at how the myth of the "Injun" has influenced the world's representation—and misrepresentation—of Native peoples. The Cree filmmaker conducted candid interviews with Native and non-Native film celebrities as well as activists, film critics and historians.

*Reel Injun* is a documentary about cinema through the perspectives of the people who appeared in its very first flickering images and have survived to this day to tell their own stories with their own cameras. Diamond meets with Clint Eastwood (*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *A Fistful of Dollars*, *Unforgiven*) at his studios in Burbank, California. The famous actor discusses the evolution of the image of Native Americans in westerns and what cowboy-and-Indian myths mean to America. Legendary Native American activists John Trudell, Russell Means and Sacheen Littlefeather take hold of the talking stick to critique the history of Hollywood and its promotion of stereotypes and racism, and discuss how it played a significant role in the rise of the American Indian Movement (AIM).

Celebrities featured in **Reel Injun** include Robbie Robertson, the Mohawk musician and soundtrack composer (*Raging Bull*, *Casino*, *Gangs of New York*), Cherokee actor Wes Studi (*Last of the Mohicans*, *Geronimo*), filmmakers Jim Jarmusch (*Dead Man*) and Chris Eyre (*Smoke Signals*) and acclaimed Native actors Graham Greene (*Dances with Wolves*, *Thunderheart*) and Adam Beach (*Smoke Signals*, Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers*). Diamond also travels north to the remote Nunavut town of Igloolik (population: 1,500) to interview Zacharias Kunuk, director of the Caméra d'Or-winning *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*.

**Reel Injun's** humour and star power are balanced with insightful commentary from film critics and historians, including CBC film critic Jesse Wente, author and American Indian studies scholar Angela Aleiss, and Melinda Micco, associate professor of ethnic studies at Mills College, California.

In **Reel Injun**, Diamond takes the audience on a journey across America to some of cinema's most iconic landscapes, including Monument Valley, the setting for Hollywood's greatest westerns, and the Black Hills of South Dakota, home to Crazy Horse and countless movie legends.

## OVERVIEW

This teaching guide contains discussion topics and questions grouped into key topic areas, chapters and themes, giving educators the flexibility to present excerpts from **Reel Injun** or the entire movie.

**Reel Injun** is suitable for classroom use in secondary and post-secondary education, in courses such as film studies, social studies, media and communications, ethics and history.

Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond, from northern Quebec (near the Arctic Circle), has made a documentary tracing the history of Hollywood's representation of Native Americans. **Reel Injun** is a rich tool to examine the most serious issues regarding these depictions, including topics such as:

- . "Injuns" in Hollywood
- . What is the difference between an "Injun" and a human being?
- . The evolution of the image of Indians in westerns
- . Cowboy-and-Indian myths: What do they mean to North America?
- . What are the effects of negative stereotypes on Native people?
- . Native activism (American Indian Movement)
- . Identities and cultural exchanges

**Audience age:** Suitable for ages 15+. This documentary addresses grave or controversial issues regarding the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples. Educators are encouraged to preview the film and research background information to contextualize these situations before screening the film in class.

## FILM THEMES: MAIN POINTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You can enjoy *Reel Injun* in an extended viewing or over several class periods. The film is chaptered by themes so you have the option of showing selected segments.

Following are some main points and possible discussion questions.

### **Native Representation**

#### **Reel Injun** – Chapter 1

Main points: Over 4,000 films shaped the image of the Native American in the last century, some offering stereotypical images, such as *They Died with Their Boots On*, others providing a more accurate focus, like *Little Big Man*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Dances with Wolves*, and some that are free of stereotypes, like *Smoke Signals* and *Atanarjuat*. When Native peoples watch Indians on television and cheer for the cowboys, there is a major problem of representation. Distorted images have caused a great deal of damage.

Discussion questions: What are the consequences of distorted representations of Native people with regard to their identity, self-esteem and social and cultural development? One hundred years of cinema have shaped the folkloric images of Native Americans to the point that some people believe that Indians still live in teepees. But what is an “Injun” in 2011?

### **Native Americans from Hollywood to Wounded Knee**

#### **Birth of the Hollywood Injun** – Chapter 2

Main points: Early movie images depicted the “Injun” as spiritual, noble and free. In the late 19th century, Thomas Edison filmed Laguna Pueblo dances that were shown for a penny in the peep shows in Times Square in New York City. But while the “savages” in the reels were dancing, some 300 women, men and children were being killed in the Wounded Knee Massacre on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Discussion questions: What were the main reasons for Native people being so widely represented in the movies? Some say that cinema was created to film First Nations people; on what basis can we support such a statement? Why would American culture treat Indians as myths or dinosaurs? In the movies, all Native people are supreme horsemen, at one with their horses, but most of them can't ride in real life. How was such a myth created?

### **The Good Indian**

#### **The Noble Injun** – Chapter 3

Main points: During the silent-film era, Indians became stars. The Native American perspective was seen for the first time. Native filmmakers directed their own movies and brought their own people to play the characters. *The Silent Enemy* (H. P. Carver) explores starvation and the idea of the Native vanishing. In those days, it was cool to be portrayed as Native.

Discussion questions: The silent era portrayed Native people as noble; how did that come to be? Why are some people excited by the idea of being Native regardless of the bad image projected by Hollywood? Do you think that the kids in the summer camp sequence in *Reel Injun* were only encountered Native people in Hollywood movies? According to Hollywood's criteria, what does it take to be a good or noble Indian?

## **Tonto Speech and Stereotypes**

### **The Savage Injun** – Chapter 4

Main points: In the 1930s, Native people were portrayed as savages. Americans needed heroes, and John Ford's *Stagecoach* delivered the goods while also damaging the reputation of Native people and establishing a trend that lasted for decades: showing the savages constantly attacking the Whites. Instead of using actual Native languages, Hollywood developed the Tonto speech—or the art of speaking English backwards—and all the big stars played Native roles (Anthony Quinn, Charles Bronson, Boris Karloff and even Elvis Presley). After the film industry saddled Pocahontas with all the stereotypical notions that a mythical princess deserves, she became the embodiment of *American* society, not of Native society, just as Hollywood dressed Native characters like Plains Indians in buckskin and headbands, even though they do not use them in their culture.

Discussion questions: By developing the Tonto speech, did Hollywood harm the existing Native languages spoken by US tribes? Robbing nations of their identity is an act of colonialism, but why did the Plains Indians attract more attention than the Pawnees or the Mohawks? What are some of the misguided notions surrounding the Indian princess Pocahontas?

## **A Violent and Racist Icon**

### **The Cowboy** – Chapter 5

Main points: A great icon of American cinema, John Wayne used violence with no mercy. But his actions seemed excusable, and they set the standard for how Indians should be regarded. “The kind of hunky white guy representing the moral standards of America, that is not real smart and that will do the right thing, chasing the Indians away, marrying the school woman and disappearing in the sunset.” (Jim Jarmusch)

Discussion questions: When John Wayne shoots a dead Indian that was dug up from a burial ground in the eyes to make sure he will not be going to the spirit world, what kind of message is Hollywood sending? What about the use of Native languages in the movies: Is it desirable in order to improve the pride and self-esteem of First Nations people?

## **Indians or Human Beings?**

### **A Good Injun . . . is it a Dead Injun?** – Chapter 6

Main points: As a kid, Neil Diamond did not realize that Bugs Bunny was killing Indians, and Graham Greene was doing the same thing when he would pretend to be Gary Cooper. On the other hand, Russell Means' brother refused to look at the Indians being slaughtered and fought white kids outside the movie theatre. “To erase the memory of being a human being, predatory mentality uses the word ‘Indians’ so Natives will lose track of the notion of being a human.” (John Trudell)

Discussion questions: Retrace the history and the meaning of this famously racist pronouncement by General Philip Sheridan: “A Good Injun . . . is a Dead Injun.” Why would Hollywood use such neo-colonialist propaganda to confuse the feelings of young Native people? Regarding the notion of human beings, why does John Trudell place so much emphasis on language as an instrument of war? What does it mean to you to be a human being?

## **The American Indian Movement (AIM)**

### **The Groovy Injun** – Chapter 7

Main points: In the 1960s, the hippies became Indians, trying to imitate them but at the same time trying to remember who they were and where they came from. The hostility of the media towards Native people subdued their spirit somewhat, but films like *Billy Jack* heralded a new fight against injustice, not just in the movies, but in real life as well, with First Nations people politically asserting themselves by seizing Alcatraz Island and Wounded Knee to recapture their land and freedom. Hollywood would in turn come to the rescue: Marlon Brando refusing to show up at the Academy Awards to protest against “the poor treatment of Native Americans in the film industry” and the FBI’s actions at Wounded Knee. Sacheen Cruz Littlefeather would be Brando’s messenger, asking the government to change its treatment of North American Indians. After that turning point, productions like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and many others would forever change the way “Injuns” are depicted on screen.

Discussion questions: Every human being is the descendant of a tribe, and there was a time when non-Native people wore feathers and beads. Try to find out which tribe you come from and at what point in history you lost your feathers and beads.

In the 1970s, the US government infiltrated a tribal council (on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the town of Wounded Knee) and in 1973 AIM activists seized the town. Retrace the framework of events that led to the uprising.

## **No More Stereotypes and Stoic Indians**

### **The Renaissance** – Chapter 8

Main points: Even though the government had wiped out the Native political movement by the 1980s, a cultural artistic voice emerged, composed of Native filmmakers, songwriters and visual artists. *Smoke Signals*, directed by and starring Native people, ushered in the golden age of Aboriginal cinema. The story was not about what occurred one hundred years ago but about current-day “nativeness,” where there are no stereotypes and no stoic Indians.

After travelling the United States in search of the truth, filmmaker Neil Diamond found the answers he was looking for in the Far North of Turtle Island (a.k.a. North America), in Igloodik. *Atanarjuat*, by Zacharias Kunuk, paved the way for a new generation of storytelling. A new age of cinema was born!

Discussion questions: Director Neil Diamond mentioned that he found the answers he was looking for in the North. What exactly was the object of his quest? On what basis can we say that *Atanarjuat* is the “most Native” movie ever made? How would you describe “nativeness” in the 21st century?

## SUGGESTED CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

### Viewing and discussion

You can show *Reel Injun* in its entirety and discuss it with your students. If you don't have the time, or it isn't relevant to your course's subject matter, you can assign the film for viewing outside of class and replay key chapters in class. You can also select key chapters in the film to trigger classroom discussion or show chapters in conjunction with short clips of your choice from among the movies listed in the documentary.

### Role-playing

Students can role-play different personalities such as John Wayne, John Ford, Marlon Brando, Iron Eyes Cody, Graham Greene, Gary Farmer, John Trudell, Russell Means and Zacharias Kunuk and discuss the representation of "Injuns" in westerns.

*Note: This exercise will require a certain amount of research in order for the students to learn more about these individuals and go beyond what is covered in *Reel Injun*.*

### Hold a debate

You can explore ethical and historical issues by way of a debate, in which one team must attack and one team must defend a position. In all cases, there is no correct side. Divide the class in half. Ask the sides to meet to develop positions (reminding them that the job is to defend the position, not what they think is right), or more casually simply ask students to chat for a few minutes with their neighbours. Then ask one team to speak in defence of the position using arguments from the film. Ask members of the other side to refute that position, using other arguments from the film. Some debate topics might be:

- Many Native kids would never identify with the Indians in a western because they didn't want to be the bad guy.
- *Black Robe* (Bruce Beresford), *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (Michael Mann) were made during the "Renaissance era" of Native portrayal in Hollywood yet there are still some racist stereotypes in these films.

### World Café

As a conversational process, the World Café is an innovative yet simple methodology for staging conversations about questions that matter. These conversations link and build on each other as participants move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important in their life, work or community. The World Café can evoke and make visible the collective intelligence of any group, thus increasing people's capacity for effective action in pursuit of common aims. Divide the group into a few teams and select facilitators for the teams. Assign a question to each facilitator, who will go from one team to the other with that question and take into account the most relevant information that emerges. Each team must answer each question; after the exercise, the facilitators will address their main concerns in front of the group.

- Is the documentary approach used by Neil Diamond in *Reel Injun* valuable in terms of changing people's perceptions about the mythological and one-dimensional stoic Indian?

- Is it only because Native Americans are directing their own films now that real change has occurred, or are there other reasons?
- After the silent era, Native Americans were not able to show their perspectives on the screen. Why did it take so long for them to regain control of their true image?
- Why do you think Russell Means and John Trudell, famous AIM activists and Hollywood detractors, agreed to participate as actors in certain Hollywood productions (*Natural Born Killers*, *Thunderheart*, *Smoke Signals*)?

## **SAMPLE TEACHING MODULES FOR CINEMA STUDIES, SOCIAL STUDIES, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, ETHICS AND HISTORY**

Here are some sample modules, organized by curriculum area for secondary school and early post-secondary studies. You can customize the modules or use them as a spur to your own invention.

### **Cinema studies**

Goal: To investigate the range of narrative approaches that shaped perceptions of the Native American throughout the history of cinema.

View some movies that date from the “Birth of the Reel Injun” era, such as Edison’s Laguna Pueblo Native American rituals and dances, *They Died with Their Boots On* (Raoul Walsh), *Custer’s Last Fight* (Francis Ford), *The Plainsman* (Cecil B. DeMille), *Stagecoach* (John Ford) and *Captain John Smith and Pocahontas* (Lew Landers), and from the “Groovy Injun” era, like *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman), *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch), *Powwow Highway* (Jonathan Wacks) and *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner), and lastly, from the “Renaissance era,” such as *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori), *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre) and *Atanarjuat* (Zacharias Kunuk). Discuss with students what they understood to be the plot and the structure of these films and compare the representations of the Native American over these different periods of time.

#### Discuss:

- What narrative strategies do the filmmakers employ during
  - a) the Reel Injun era?
  - b) the Groovy Injun era?
  - c) the Renaissance era?

and why?

- What is required of the audience in each of these situations?
- Which design elements and aesthetic choices affect the storytelling?

- Individual performances by people like Chief Dan George (*Little Big Man*), Graham Greene (*Dances with Wolves*) and Gary Farmer (*Dead Man*) were invaluable in changing people's perceptions of the one-dimensional stoic Indian. How did they achieve this?
- What are the elements of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* that made it a film by, about and for Native people in North America?

## Social studies

Some filmmakers could be compared to sociologists in the way that they depict significant and interesting aspects of real life. *Reel Injun* shows how important social issues are addressed in fiction movies.

1. Goal: To demonstrate that various forms of racism, whether overt or inferential, exist in cinema.

Stuart Hall, the Jamaican sociologist and cultural theorist, addresses the notion of racism in contemporary popular culture: overt racism (intentional and/or obvious harmful attitudes or behaviour towards another minority individual or group because of skin colour) and inferential racism (e.g.: black people are good at sports, white people can't dance, Middle-Eastern people drive cabs, and Asians can't drive).

Discuss:

Watch some of the films presented in the chapters "The Savage Injun" and "The Groovy Injun," look for examples of overt racism and inferential racism, and explain why you have selected them.

2. Goal: To understand and apply Stuart Hall's typology of racial grammar.

Stuart Hall developed a typology of racial grammar based on the images of the slave, the indigenous person and the clown in a relationship of domination/subordination and the question of superior or inferior natural species. Nineteenth-century popular literature didn't help by recounting the great adventures of settlers in foreign countries and their social, moral and physical supremacy over the indigenous people.

Discuss:

In the films presented in the chapters "Birth of the Hollywood Injun" and "The Cowboy," find examples of indigenous people confronted by a relation of domination/subordination and the notion of superior or inferior natural species, and explain why you have chosen them.

## Media and communication

Since all forms of media are constructs and different people experience or express messages differently, the reception theory of communication focuses on the concept of encoding and decoding messages sent by the media to a particular audience.

1. Goal: To understand and apply Stuart Hall's reception theory on how media messages are produced, circulated and consumed.

Stuart Hall does not agree with Claude Shannon's information theory because it only focuses on the exchange of messages and neglects the relational structures of communication like production, diffusion, distribution/broadcasting and reproduction. He argues that meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender, the message is never transparent and the audience is not a passive recipient of meaning. Distortion is built into the system, and there is a lack of fit between the moment of the production of the message (encoding) and the moment of its reception (decoding). Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist, agrees with Hall about cultural hybridity and the uncertainty of the messages that are built, received and adapted.

Discuss:

Since you cannot predict how an audience will receive a message and how it will negotiate its signification according to cultural identity, find examples in Diamond's documentary and in US history where Native people encoded and decoded distorted images of them.

## Ethics

Ethics addresses questions about morality (good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, etc.). Throughout the history of the Hollywood "Injun," stereotypes were used without any ethical concern about damaging their subjects—the Native Americans. According to the sociologist Charles E. Hurst (2007), one reason for stereotypes is the lack of personal, concrete familiarity that individuals have with persons in other racial or ethnic groups.

Goal: To raise and explore ethical choices in filmmaking.

Discuss:

*Atanarjuat* paved the way for the Renaissance of the "Injun," but since stereotypes die hard, it's going to take a lot more movies along the lines of *Atanarjuat* before the image of the noble savage is erased from people's minds.

- Movies like Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* feature honest depictions of Natives. Compare these movies, from an ethical perspective, with Disney's depiction of Pocahontas as a Barbie Doll Indian Princess.
- Many people who watch *Reel Injun* aren't going to be happy as it pulls the rug out from under American icons like John Wayne and western movies in general. If you had to debate with these people, what kinds of arguments would you use to maintain an ethical perspective on their views?
- Keeping an open mind when watching this film, why do you think many Native Americans are so offended when they see mascots in sports (e.g.: Chicago Black Hawks, Cleveland Indians, Atlanta Braves, Cincinnati Redskins, etc.) representing them, or when they see how they are depicted in films?
- Finally, is there something almost pornographic in the lurid black-and-white images of the Laguna Pueblo dancers captured by Edison? Was this the first naive representation of the "noble Injun"?

## History

The American Indian author and historian Vine Deloria addressed Indian stereotypes and challenged white audiences to take a new look at the history of American western expansionism. When *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969) was published, the American Indian Movement was gaining momentum and the book helped draw attention to the Native American struggle. Deloria worked to demythologize white Americans' perceptions of American Indians.

Goal: To raise awareness of Native history from the perspective of Native people.

### Discuss:

- Begin by brainstorming and try to figure out why the American Indian Movement (AIM) came to be and what impact it had on Native struggles in the 1970s and 1980s, and continues to have today.
- For each of these emblematic figures of the Native struggle—Crazy Horse, John Trudell, Russell Means, Leonard Peltier and Sacheen Littlefeather—describe their contributions to the history of America.
- On the morning of December 29, 1890, the Lakota chief Big Foot and some 350 of his followers camped on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek. Surrounding their camp was a force of US troops charged with the responsibility of arresting Big Foot and disarming his warriors. The scene was tense. Trouble had been brewing for months; 300 Lakota Natives were killed by the US government.

Eighty-three years later, blood spilled in Wounded Knee once again. Richard A. “Dick” Wilson, the Oglala Lakota tribal chairman, formed a private militia sponsored by the US government to kill AIM members during their occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973. During that period of political turmoil, some Native people, such as Anna Mae Aquash, were murdered, and others were charged for the 1975 killing of FBI agents. Leonard Peltier was among those charged without any proof for these crimes, and subsequently received a double life sentence.

What exactly happened in Wounded Knee in 1890 and in the 1970s, and why is Leonard Peltier still in jail?

- In 1979, John Trudell's pregnant wife (Tina Manning), his mother-in-law and three children were killed in a fire at their home on the Shoshone/Paiute Reservation in Nevada. Trudell, as well as many other activists in the movement, still believe that the fire was not accidental. It occurred within twelve hours of his burning of a US flag on the steps of the FBI building in Washington, DC.

Considering AIM's short history, what is your position regarding that event? Did someone kill Trudell's family members, and if so, who was it?

- The Treaty of Fort Laramie (1868) between the US and the Lakotas included provisions to return all retired, abandoned or out-of-use federal land to the Native people from whom it was acquired. Indians of All Tribes used that treaty as the basis of their occupation of Alcatraz Island and claimed it by “Right of Discovery.” From what you know and have learned, are Native people better off fighting on political grounds and engaging in direct action or should they develop a cultural, artistic voice to gain their right to self-determination?
- Given what you have discovered about Native American history, was Crazy Horse the inspiration for the mystical-warrior stereotype?

## REFERENCES

### URL Addresses

[aigenom.com](http://aigenom.com)

[aimovement.org](http://aimovement.org)

### Books

BAUMAN, Zygmunt, *The Making and Unmaking of Strangers*, in WERBNER, Pnina and Tariq MODOOD, *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, London: Zed Books, 1997.

DELORIA, Vine, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, New York: Macmillan, 1969.

HALL, Stuart, *The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media*, in BRIDGES, George and Rosalind BRUNT, *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties*, Lawrence and Wishart, London: 1981, pp. 7–23.

HALL, Stuart, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Glasgow: Sage Publications & Open University, 1997.

HURST, C. E., *Social Inequality: Forms, Causes, and Consequences* (sixth edition), Boston: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007.

MATTHIESSEN, Peter, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*, New York: Penguin, 1992.

ROTH, Lorna, *Something New in the Air: The Story of First Peoples Television Broadcasting in Canada*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.

### Films

*Incident at Oglala: The Leonard Peltier Story*, Michael Apted, 1992.