**Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People**

**Credit: Media Awareness Network  
www.media-awareness.ca**

For over a hundred years, Westerns and documentaries have shaped the public's perception of Native people. The wise elder *(Little Big Man)*; the drunk *(Tom Sawyer)*; the Indian princess *(Pocahontas)*; the loyal sidekick *(Tonto)*-these images have become engrained in the consciousness of every North American.

Hollywood's versions of "how the West was won" relied totally on the presence of Native tribes, who were to be wiped out or reined in. "And, for the longest time," says Canadian Ojibway playwright Drew Hayden Taylor, "there wasn't a real 'Indian' to be seen on the movie sets: Native 'representation' was taken care of by Italians or Spaniards-anyone with dark enough skin to save on makeup."

As the portrayals of Native characters-either as primitive, violent and deceptive or else as passive and full of childlike obedience-extended to TV, novels and comics, they became familiar, comfortable signposts for much of Western civilization whenever it needed to acknowledge the Aboriginal presence. Since few people, especially in larger urban centres, actually came into contact with Indigenous populations, these portrayals, however inaccurate, had all the more impact. Though popular U.S. films rarely looked north of the border, these stereotypes etched themselves just as deeply into the Canadian psyche.

"We were well into the second half of the 20th century before it occurred to filmmakers that Native people were still around, and even leading interesting lives," says Taylor. "Groundbreaking films like *Pow Wow Highway, Dance Me Outside* and *Smoke Signals* provided fresh and contemporary-though still romanticized-portrayals of the Native community."

Film-maker Arthur Lamothe broke new ground in Québec from 1973 to 1983, with his 13 part documentary series *La chronique du Nord-Est du Québec*. The series, and Lamothe's subsequent work, puts First Nations people centre-stage and provides them with a venue to tell their own stories.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) made a real effort to improve the portrayals of Aboriginal people in its television dramas. *Spirit Bay*, *The Beachcombers*, *North of 60* and *The Rez* used Native actors to portray their own people, living real lives and earning believable livelihoods in identifiable parts of the country. The *Beachcombers* and *North of 60* drew substantial audiences among Natives and non-Natives alike.

Television in the United States has been slower to respond to criticism. Indigenous faces are still almost entirely absent from the small screen, except in the news or in documentaries. There have been a few efforts to change the situation, however. In the late 1990s, the American Indian Registry for the Performing Arts in Los Angeles published a directory of Native American performing arts professionals. And in 2001, after acknowledging that "Native Americans are virtually invisible on TV," CBS and NBC held talent showcases in major cities across North America to strengthen their databases of Aboriginal performers.

**Misrepresentation-How Many Ways?**

The new climate of "political correctness" has combined with genuine effort to counter some of the more overt forms of racism in films and television-but subtle vestiges of Native stereotyping still remain. Some of the most common stereotyping traps are various forms of romanticization; historical inaccuracies; stereotyping by omission; and simplistic characterizations.

**Romanticization**  
Some images of Natives that have captured the imagination of the non-Aboriginal world for nearly a century are the Indian Princess, the Native Warrior and the Noble Savage.

**The Indian Princess**  
The Indian Princess is the Native beauty who is sympathetic enough to the white man's quest to be lured away from her tribe to marry into his culture, and further his mission to civilize her people. "The Indian princess is strictly a European concept," writes Native American Joseph Riverwind. "The nations of this country never had a concept of royalty. We do not have kings, queens or princesses."

Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, director of research for Canada's Aboriginal Healing Foundation, agrees. In a 2000 exhibit called Indian Princesses and *Cowgirls-Stereotypes from the Frontier,* Valaskakis and Marilyn Burgess traced the use of the Indian Princess, from romanticized paintings intended to represent an "exotic, beautiful and dangerous New World" to gratuitous brand labels on fruit cans and cigar boxes. None of these women, says Valaskakis, remotely resemble the "powerful, competent, articulate" women she grew up with on her reserve in Wisconsin.

**The Native Warrio**r  
Surely one of the most widely used stereotypes in cinematographic history, the Native Warrior is fierce and formidable and a threat to civilized society. Bare-chested and brandishing a war lance, this warrior is the epitome of the savagery that must be courageously overcome by "progressive elements" pushing West. A more recent incarnation is the romanticized (and eroticized) figure of the strong silent brave flashing, as journalist Paul Gessell notes, "a lot of skin, [and] looking for some White woman to ravish."

These images appear in many forms and in surprising places. In his photo exhibit *Scouting/For Indians*, 1992-2000, Jeff Thomas, from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, captured images of the Warrior in forms ranging from historical statuary, and coats of arms carved on the walls of Ottawa banks and office buildings, to contemporary book covers. Thomas says he took these photographs to raise awareness of the often unconscious "demonization and eroticization" of Indians.

**The Noble Savage**  
In an effort to redress past wrongs, there has been an increase in another time-honoured romantic stereotype -- the mythic Noble Savage. Elevated to a sphere of goodness unreachable by those in contaminated white society and usually possessing some spiritual connection to the land, the Noble Savage (who American academic Rennard Strickland calls "the first ecologist") communes in a cloud of mysticism and places no value on material possessions. Not even the popular *Thunderheart* avoids the romantic brush. "That movie says that every time you get half a dozen Native people in a room, you can get a prophecy or a vision," says Canadian Cayuga actor Gary Farmer.

**Historical Inaccuracies**Farmer cites the successful Canadian film *Black Robe*, about a Jesuit missionary's quest to save the Huron's souls, as typical of the one-sided historical accounts that upset Aboriginal people. "*Black Robe* misses a key element," says Farmer. "Nobody explains the Iroquois Confederacy's five centuries of peace between the six nations. The Hurons saw the devastation from the alcohol brought by the newcomers as a decay that had to be rooted out. The Iroquois told the Hurons that everyone not affected should leave, and they would go in and clean the area out." Farmer contends that there's never been an understanding of why that was done-and so the story of a classic conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has never been told.

All vestiges of truth-and thereby of intercultural understanding-give way here before the onslaught of movieland's mythic creation.(Source: Ward Churchill, "Fantasies of the Master Race" in From A Native Son: Selected Essays in Indigenism, 1985-1995, 1996)

Film and TV producers have never let details get in the way of a good story. Nowhere is this more true than in depictions of Aboriginal life, where artistic license is liberally taken in portraying dress, customs, livelihoods and spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. This reduction of cultural heritage and diversity (which most audiences do not even notice) is seen by critics as both a symptom of the problem (not taking Aboriginal people seriously) and an unconscious yet systematic way of perpetuating erroneous stereotypes. What occurs in many films, says social critic Ward Churchill, "is roughly parallel to having a Catholic priest wear a Rabbi's headgear and Protestant cleric's garb while conducting High Mass before a Satanist pentagram, simply because each of these disparate physical manifestations of spiritual culture is visually interesting in its own right."

**Stereotyping by Omission**  
Most film depictions of Native people are set in a 50-year period in the mid-19th century. Where were Native North Americans before the coming of the white man, and where are they now? Apparently "Indians" did not survive the transition to modern society.

The article "Stereotyping Indians by Omission" notes that Indians are "the only population to be portrayed far more often in historical context than as contemporary people." Considering the size of Chicago's Native population, for instance, the article asks, "why has not one Indian ever received emergency care on ER? And where are the nurses, a primary career choice for many Native women?"

The most flagrant omission in movies and television is the Aboriginal woman. When she is included, it is most often as a "sexual savage" (who cannot be tamed and must therefore be degraded and eventually conquered). In Canada, the National Film Board of Canada tried to counter this cultural amnesia in 1986 with a four-part drama series entitled *Daughters of the Country* -- produced to "re-open the history books" and document the evolution of the Métis people through the lives of four strong women.

**Simplistic Characterizations**  
Perhaps most destructive to the image of Aboriginal people is the lack of character and personality accorded them by the media. Aboriginal people are almost always cast in supporting roles or relegated to the background, and are rarely allowed to speak or display a real personality. And what character they do have tends to reveal itself only in terms of their interactions with white people. Rarely is an Aboriginal portrayed as having personal strengths and weaknesses, or shown acting on his or her own values and judgements.

Nor is the Native ever allowed to tell his or her own story. Most stories are conveyed through the lens of the European experience. A common device used by Hollywood to attach familiar values to Native acts has been to script a white character as narrator (*Dances with Wolves, Thunderheart*). While this purports to treat the American Indian sympathetically, the reality is that the Aboriginal is robbed of voice.

**The Bigger Picture**  
A number of academics contend Hollywood's depictions of Aboriginal people are based on much broader motives than simply winning audiences. In American Indians: *Goodbye to Tonto*, J.R. Howard says that in the American psyche, Native people have fulfilled their purpose: "Indian resistance having served to fuel the myths of conquest and glory, and the American divine right to conquest."

And there's a whole school of thought that believes that the stereotypes of Native people and the "Wild West" must still be maintained in today's society. "Somebody is benefiting by having Americans ignorant [about] what European Americans have done to them," writes Wendy Rose in her *New Yorker* article, "Who Gets to Tell Their Stories?"

Ward Churchill argues that the myths and stereotypes built up around the Native American were no accident. He maintains that they served to explain in positive terms the decimation of Native tribes and their ways of life by "advanced" cultures in the name of progress, thereby making it necessary to erase the achievements and very humanity of the conquered people. "Dehumanization, obliteration or appropriation of identity, political subordination and material colonization are all elements of a common process of imperialism," he says. "The meaning of Hollywood's stereotyping of American Indians can be truly comprehended only against this backdrop."