

Maile Schoonover

Anthro 131

The Problem of the Modern Western: A Critique of The Lone Ranger

The Lone Ranger is an iconic fictionalized character who grew in popularity on a radio show during the early 1930's, and later was conceived into an equally popular television show in the 1950's. It is the story of a masked Texas Ranger who fought outlaws in the Old American West, with the help of a Native American man named Tonto. In 2013 this old story, which many deem to be an American classic tale, was rebooted into a live action film starring American actor Arnie Hammer as the Lone Ranger, and American actor Johnny Depp as Native character Tonto. The film was also directed by American director Gore Verbinski, who is well known for his work with Depp in films such as Rango and the Pirates of the Caribbean series. The film was ultimately deemed a flop, with critics citing its racist elements—a common occurrence in dealing with the portrayal of Native Americans in cinema. Not only is Depp's character problematic in that he is a white actor playing a Native American (i.e. a performance of "redface"), but it also reveals the ways in which the Hollywood industry and the media continues to perpetuate stereotypical images of Native Americans in our modern culture. This is an issue that is almost to be expected of a Western film—which is the traditional setting of White-Indian conflict—and yet problems of misrepresentation are often overshadowed by a mass cultural fascination with the American Old West and romanticized notions of the frontier. As such, the central problem of this film lies not only in Depp's portrayal as Tonto, but in the tendency of Western cinema itself to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of Native Americans and treat issues of historical oppression with nonchalance.

The idea of the Indian as a relic figure is one that The Lone Ranger establishes from the onset of the film. The opening scene depicts a young boy entering a museum, where he sees an aged Tonto displayed in a desert setting, brandishing a weapon. The display is entitled, "The Noble Savage," a term

historically used to depict Indians as uncorrupted by modern civilization; a primitive, and technologically non-advanced people. This dangerous myth has long been used to refer to Indian people as simplistic and belonging to an old way of life. This is extremely problematic today, as it reinforces the idea that all Native peoples are merely relics of the past or dead, rather than a living race of people. Often times, this idea seems to create misrepresentation of Native culture as unchanging, stagnant and preserved in past tradition. For example, throughout the film Tonto can be seen feeding the dead crow on the top of his headdress—an action that is met with a quizzical reaction from the young boy in the museum. This scene is meant to evoke an amused reaction from the audience as well, again seeming to pin the Indian as a backwards and silly character whose actions are displaced and nonsensical to modern, civilized peoples. Indeed, the idea of the “Noble Savage” creates issues of visibility and understanding of Native issues for today’s Native people. As a people they are often left out of the modern discourse and issues go unheard and unresolved. As author MJ Rowland states, “When indigenous peoples are stereotyped as 'noble savages' they are once again frozen in the past and therefore can have little to contribute to human history” (Rowland). Furthermore, this misrepresentation creates issues for Native peoples to be seen as intelligent individuals capable of achievement and advancement—they are merely understood as representations of the past, as mystical beings who commune with animals, or as roadblocks to progress.

The most prominent element of Tonto’s characterization is the clichéd use of broken English. The omission of definite articles in his simplified speech is one that has long been used in the portrayal of Natives in cinema, and it is a culturally damaging stereotype that portrays Native peoples as less intelligent or less advanced in their language capabilities. Examples of this language include lines such as “Do not touch rock. Rock cursed.” The film is filled with several other stereotypical Native images as well. The few times we see the Comanche people, they are either preparing for war, dancing around a

fire, or yelping, all while wearing masks or displaying painted faces. The use of these images are damaging in that they not only simplify Native peoples as primitive, they additionally have the effect of grouping all Native cultures together. Audience members are not given anything culturally specific to distinguish the Comanche from other tribal groups, and instead are met with clichéd, stock images and practices. This problem is further complicated by the film's use of the Wendigo myth. From the start of the film, Tonto refers to himself as a "Wendigo hunter," however, the original Wendigo folklore can be traced back to part of the traditional belief system of a number of Algonquin groups, such as the Ojibwe, Cree, and Innu people, whilst Tonto identifies as a member of the Comanche tribe in the film. This process of selectively appropriating elements of Indian culture is what Ted Jojola refers to as "revisionism," and is more concerned with appealing to the view of the outsider. In the case of cinema, it can be argued that Indian peoples and culture are marketed towards an audience for the sake of commercial gain. (Jojola 13). The conflation of cultural mythology with an entirely different group of Native peoples in *The Lone Ranger* is indicative of how the Hollywood industry treats the grouping of diverse Native customs to become singular and overgeneralized.

Another problem with the character of Tonto is the casting of Johnny Depp. While the actor has claimed to have distant Native ancestry, his fame as a white actor makes his portrayal of an Indian character seem nothing short of "redface." This is a practice seen time and time again in the movie industry, most notably with issues of blackface and yellowface characterizations. The problem with "Redface" not only lies in the misrepresentation of Native peoples, but additionally the exclusion of actual Native peoples in the forefront of cinema. Historically, people of color are often cast in very limiting roles in film, often cast as sidekicks, comedic characters, or sexual objects. In other words, while white actors are featured as the stars in most Hollywood cinema, people of color are often secondary characters. It is interesting to note that in a recent *TIMES* article entitled, "Is the Lone

Ranger Racist?” Comanche film consultant Wallace Coffey states that the casting of choice of Johnny Depp was one that he supported. While some Native peoples such as Coffey believe that it is important to see a Native American character in a major Hollywood film, regardless of the actor’s actual race, others condemn the film for its inappropriate whitewashing (Rothman). In her paper, *An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers*, Julia Boyd identifies the problem of whitewashing as a method of eradicating real Native Americans from the screen in favor of a white cast. She explains that, “audiences learn nothing about present-day Indian culture and do not see an Indian actor in a role they are qualified for. By casting white people over Indians consistently, Hollywood sends a clear message about whom they value.” (Boyd 4)

Another problematic element with the Lone Ranger film can be attributed simply to the nature of Western cinema itself. Often, we watch Western films with a sense of nostalgia; a reclaiming of the lost frontier and the early freedoms of the West. For some, the memory of the West is seen as a destination to be revisited, and is intimately connected to our sense of nationhood and patriotism. But while many consider The Old West to be crucial to our sense of identity as Americans, undertones of Manifest Destiny and the horrific history with Native Americans are often overlooked. The Old West as a place of conflict between Western settlers and indigenous is seen as merely secondary or forgotten altogether. Such treatment of indigenous is seen in The Lone Ranger toward the films conclusion when the Comanche tribal members are riding into battle. During this scene, the Comanche people are completely slaughtered by an early mock of a machine gun, and we are to understand the entire tribe has been slain at the hands of the white man and his modern advancements. After this slaughter takes place, the only remark we are given from Tonto is a passive joke about the odd temperament of his white horse, who he spots in a tree. No other reflection is offered in regard to this massive genocide of indigenous.

The Lone Ranger can be further criticized for many other stereotypically racist choices, however, it is important to note that the original story of the Lone Ranger and Tonto is simply too racist and unlikely of a pairing to be considered for a successful and progressive reboot. From Tonto's characterization as a relic figure of the past, to the misuse of Indian customs and elements of revisionism, to the very problematic nature of Western cinema in itself, The Lone Ranger reboot only serves as an example of what the Hollywood industry ought not to duplicate in future depictions of Native Americans.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boyd, J. (2015). "An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers." *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 6(1).
- Jojola, Ted. "Absurd Reality II: Hollywood Goes to the Indians." *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. Lexington: U of Kentucky, 1998. 12-26. Print.
- Rothman, Lily. "Johnny Depp as Tonto: 'The Lone Ranger' and Racism." *Entertainment Johnny Depp as Tonto Is The Lone Ranger Racist Comments*. *TIME Magazine*, 03 July 2013. Web. 19 July 2016.
- Rowland, MJ. Return of the 'Noble Savage': Misrepresenting the Past, Present and Future [online]. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, No. 2, 2004: 2-14.