

# Depiction of native americans in american film

Countries, United States



Depiction of Native Americans in American Film Stereotypes of different cultures have a large role in the opinions we hold. One culture which has endured stereotypes since America came to exist is the Native American. This analysis intends to look at the different stereotypes Native Americans have been branded with and how these stereotypes have been incorporated into American Film, in particular *The Searchers*. The current stereotypes we hold of the Native Americans stem from the first encounters of Europeans with the indigenous people. These indigenous people were the first humans of a different race and ethnicity the Europeans had encountered. Since the ways of these native people were 'foreign' to the Europeans, it was decided the natives must be assimilated into the European, or white, culture. The Indians were viewed as primitive and hostile and in order to assimilate them, they were not allowed to hunt and were instead put on reservations to ironically learn about agriculture. These reservations however were often plots of land which were deemed unsuitable for agriculture and the Native Americans struggled with starvation. The stereotypes the Europeans created for these 'foreigners' disregarded the more than two thousand cultures and languages present among the different tribes. In the movie *The Searchers*, the main character Ethan (John Wayne) sets out on a mission to rescue his niece Debbie from the Indians who kidnapped her and killed her family. His companion on this mission, Martin, a man who is one-eighth Cherokee, is the half-brother of Debbie. The two men endure a search that takes years and the companionship of many other westerners before they find Debbie. Throughout the movie the actions of each character depict the stereotypes of the Indians which we have sadly come to know. Early films, such as *The*

Searchers, quickly picked up on the stereotypes of the Native Americans and used them to create characters. The Indians were depicted as a barrier to western expansion and their elimination was a means of 'civilizing the continent'. This can clearly be seen in *The Searchers* within the first few minutes of the movie. As the movie opens, Ethan is riding home from a long journey to a house in the middle of the plains which is symbolic of the western expansion of white man. As the movie progresses, a group of male Indians attacks the home for no reason and kills the entire family except Debbie, whom they kidnap. This scene sets the mood for the rest of the movie since the audience now has a dislike for the Indians and has viewed their 'savageness'. Often, the picturesque scenery and romantic lifestyles of the frontier were compared with the 'savages'. *The Searchers* portrays this through the relationship between Martin and Laurie and the relationship between Scar and Debbie. There is an obvious connection between Martin and Laurie from the letter Martin writes to Laurie when he is away. When Laurie reads the letter and finds it is about another woman, she panics. That shows the jealousy of love. On the other hand, when Martin returns from his journey to find Laurie marrying Charlie, the mail carrier, he panics through the same emotion of jealousy. The relationship between Martin and Laurie is compared to the savage relationship between Scar, the chief of the Comanche tribe, and Debbie. Although very little of the communication between Debbie and Scar is actually viewed, when Martin and Ethan visit Scar, the impression is given that Debbie is kept in a corner of a teepee to string beads all day. This is of course not the reality of relationships between men and women of Native American tribes. It is often left up to the

filmmakers to reconstruct native cultures based on their own biases. In *The Searchers* Ford shows little of the village life besides when the Indians are under attack or when Ethan and Martin confront the Comanches about the whereabouts of Debbie. When the village is shown it appears to be a village of savages. There are teepees and horses running loose as well as scalps hanging on sticks. The Indians are also depicted in stereotypical dress. The men wear headdresses and their hair is worn in long braids. The women wear beads and also wear their dark hair in long braids. While some of the stereotypes may hold some truth, Native Americans often live on reservations which have been 'civilized' by white man. These reservations often contain a blend of contemporary and traditional lifestyles with the presence of log cabins and teepees on the same reservation. The dress of many Native Americans has shifted to a more modern style with 'normal' clothing and long beads around the neck. The savageness of the Indians is best depicted with their treatment of white women in this film. The women apparently are raped into insanity by the Indians and must be rescued by the white man. As Ethan put it, "Livin' with Comanches ain't being alive". This quote alone holds meaning to the entire film. As Ethan sees it, Comanches, or more broadly, Native Americans, are not real human beings. To him they have no soul, no religion, and no education. But in comparison, that statement is much like saying living with Germans isn't being alive. Just because another culture practices another religion, or has a different education system, or has a different social structure from the white 'normal' does not mean they are not human beings. To Ethan the only way to live is the white way. The stereotypes and racism found in *The Searchers* did not

strike the audience back in 1956 when the film was made as it does today. This may be a result of a larger portion of the population in the United States is of different ethnicities then back in 1956 and we as a nation are coming to recognize that judgment based on ethnicity is wrong. Or maybe movies that are blatantly stereotypical are not as common now. Either way, the opinions we hold of Native Americans now are more realistic and that is a step in the right direction.