

Authentic Stories About Native Americans Need Hollywood's Attention

*By Chris Eyre,
Joely Proudfit*



FEBRUARY 24, 2017 | 09:45AM PT

COURTESY OF LOREY SEBASTIAN

As the saying goes, seeing is believing. If Hollywood has shown us anything lately, it's that the tides are turning — albeit slowly — in favor of more authentic, diverse stories.

This story first appeared in the February 21, 2017 issue of Variety.

Consider one of the highest-grossing films of 2016. “Rogue One: A Star Wars Story” was lauded for its diversity, heroic minority characters, and Diego Luna’s real Mexican accent.

If films that promote diversity are reaching such huge audiences, should they not strive to be honest in their depictions? While representation is a great first step, authenticity should be the quick second. This raises the question of who controls the narrative, and how accountable they are to those narratives.

Taylor Sheridan’s “Wind River” does a fine job of honestly depicting present-day Native people on a Wyoming reservation. Yet when he penned “Hell or High Water,” Sheridan showed more restraint in owning that narrative with less Native representation. “Hell or High Water” ended up being one of the highest-grossing indies of 2016. So perhaps cultural authenticity makes fiscal sense, too.

Hollywood has always had great power in shaping societal attitudes toward underrepresented groups. For many people, their first exposure to other cultures, customs, and beliefs has come through movies and television. This is a great responsibility, one that industry gatekeepers should not take lightly.

But old habits die hard. We’ve seen examples of films that have suffered from inaccuracy and a longstanding tradition of whitewashing, despite the filmmakers’ best intentions. Take Cameron Crowe’s casting of Emma Stone as Allison Ng in “Aloha,” or Rupert Sanders’ casting of Scarlett Johansson as Motoko “The Major” Kusanagi in “Ghost in the Shell.” Both choices were bankable, A-list actors, but they ignited controversy that overshadowed the films themselves.

We’ve also seen examples of inaccurate cultural portrayals contributing to the marginalization and de-humanization of entire races. As Ava DuVernay’s “13th” points out, D.W. Griffith’s violent, savage African-Americans in the silent-era epic “The Birth of a Nation” contributed to a

resurgence in Ku Klux Klan support after its release. Native Americans know this fate all too well; we have typically been portrayed as one-dimensional whooping savages. Occasionally, we still see such depictions in shows like “Westworld.”

Film and TV have always been powerful weapons against Native people, whether it be negative portrayals that reinforce Manifest Destiny-derived mythologies or lack of representation overall. Look at U.S. media coverage of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe had been fighting the project on paper for almost two years before mainstream media networks deemed it newsworthy. Native people were camping out for months, risking their lives to protect water for everyone, before the press showed up, largely motivated by non-Native celebrity protests and battle scenes reminiscent of an old Western. Still, coverage was dwarfed by “key issues” in the presidential election.

Part of the problem is that most mainstream content is generated by non-Native people, without a true sense of partnership. These stories are usually influenced by archaic media representations of Native Americans. The implication is that Natives do not have enough value to bring to the table of the national narrative. When non-Native creators monetize stories about Natives without real connection to our people, it comes off as misappropriation and exploitation.

As Native Americans with decades of media experience, we know there is value in involving Native Americans in mass media. We’ve worked firsthand with organizations like the Sundance Institute, whose Native American and Indigenous Program deliberately lifts up voices like that of director Taika Waititi (“Thor: Ragnarok”).

We also know that many non-Native creators intend no harm. They just don’t know who to call for authentic, accurate input. In most cases, one consultant will not suffice; you need Native people who can write, direct, produce, and co-create your story — who contribute positive solutions, not just play cultural police.

That was why we founded The Native Networkers (TNN) in 2015, with a mission to provide resources to the industry that help foster more authentic representation of Native American and Indigenous peoples. Unlike traditional consultants, we collaborate with filmmakers and bridge subject matter at all stages of development, production, and distribution.

Since founding TNN, we have connected multiple productions to Native people who can help accurately portray Native Americans. We connected Chelsea Handler and her team to the Campo Kumeeyaay Nation and the Blackfeet Nation for her Netflix series “Chelsea Does.” We also worked on the set of “Hostiles,” the upcoming Scott Cooper-helmed Western starring Christian Bale, Rosamund Pike, and Ben Foster, because Cooper wanted to “do right by” the Northern Cheyenne. (In the film, Bale is nearly fluent in Northern Cheyenne.)

It should be noted that “doing right” by a group doesn’t always involve portraying them in a positive light. No people are perfect; to ignore that for the sake of public relations would be ignoring history, and that does no one any favors. All that matters is truthful representation — making your characters authentic and your context accurate. We can help.

If seeing is believing, then let’s make what we’re seeing worth believing.

Joely Proudfit is director, California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center, and department chair and professor of American Indian Studies at Cal State San Marcos; Heather Rae produced “Frozen River”; Chris Eyre directed the 1998 film “Smoke Signals.”

Want to read more articles like this one? [SUBSCRIBE TO VARIETY TODAY.](#)

Sponsored Content

Recommended by