

HISTORY

“INDIAN PICTURES”: FILM PORTRAYALS OF NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE SILENT ERA

A CREATIVE PROJECT (3 CREDIT HOURS)

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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The project is currently available at <http://jannasoeder.wix.com/silent-natives>.

The idea for this digital history project was borne out of my interest in Native American<sup>1</sup> images in films and the opportunity to realize it as part of my master's degree in history at Ball State University under Professor Dr. Douglas Seefeldt's supervision. For my master-of-education degree in history and English at the Westfälische-Wilhelms Universität Münster, I had already studied the Indian image in movies of the second half of the twentieth century in my thesis *Image(s) of the American Indian Movement in the Movies Thunderheart and Lakota Woman*. The main emphasis of the thesis was an effort to evaluate whether movies in the early 1990s had noticeably progressed in their depiction of Native Americans. My interest in the silent era developed partially because of a wish to explore the roots of present-day stereotypes and partially because new digital tools allowed me to approach the subject from a different angle.

The idea to structure the project around a quantification of on-screen time of different categories of representation of Native Americans was shaped by the availability of tools allowing me to measure the length of specific shots as well as assigning these shots different labels. This is an already established method of a new field in the study of film history called cinematics. Cinematics is the study of films' speed and timing by calculating its different cutting rate to analyze the cutting swing, cutting range, and dynamic profiles.<sup>2</sup> The cinematic

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1 None of the multiple terms for talking about the indigenous population of North America is indisputably correct (Devon A. Mihesuah, *American Indians. Stereotypes & Realities* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2002), 16). Out of the necessity to choose, this paper uses the term 'Native American' in preference to other terms such as 'American Indians' or 'First Nations'. When talking about the cinematic representation of Native Americans, the term 'Indian' is used to reflect the constructedness of the concept (Allen L. Woll and Randall M. Miller, *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Film and Television. Historical Essays and Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 327).

2 Tsivian, Yuri. "Cinematics, Part of the Humanities' Cyberinfrastructure." In Michael Ross, Manfred Gauer,

measurement software Frame Accurate Measurement Tool (FAMT), which was designed as a collaborative online tool by film historian Yuri Tsivian of the University of Chicago [<http://www.cinematics.lv/>]. It allows users to divide films into their single shots, record their number and their length, and to connect the shots with up to eight different categories, which I used to denote different types of Indian images. Uploading the recorded data to the Cinematics database offers the viewer basic statistics for the entire film and per category, such as the number of shots or time on screen per category as well as average shot length. The database entries are completely open, the log-information for the lab requires only an email address which is not visible for other users, making the data recorded for my analysis accessible for any interested researcher. Judging from the Cinematic database this tool is often used to analyze the speed of a movie or different modes of camera movements. I employed the tool to denote different types of Indian images, using the eight categories for this purpose. The tool's usefulness for me derives from the possibility to make approximate calculations for time on screen for the different representations of Indians, which then again allowed me to make educated guesses about the prevalent Indian images presented in the silent era "Indian pictures" and received by movie goers, contributing to the popular image of Native Americans.

The final decision of what should be the categories for the analysis could only be made after having watched several films and deciding on those films to be analyzed. Choosing the films for this project was predominately shaped by the factor that over 90 percent of silent films made before 1920 are lost, leading to a significant limitation of choices.<sup>3</sup> Another major decision was to exclude Westerns in favor of Indian-centered and

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and Bernhard Freisleben (eds.) *Digital Tools in MediaStudies: Analysis and Research. An Overview* (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2009), 93-100, 96.

3 German, Kathleen. "American Indians in Silent Film, 1894-1929." In Elizabeth DeLaney Hofman (ed.) *American Indians and Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara/CA: Praeger, 2012), 17-32, 17.

Indian-themed movies. Westerns are different from “Indian pictures,” which was a contemporary term to describe Indian-centered and Indian-themed movies, mainly in content and perspective. The former genre portrays Indians as the all-purpose enemy of white settler or cowboy societies and shows them as the perpetual antagonists in conflicts connected to the frontier region and the settler society.<sup>4</sup> Indian-centered and Indian-themed movies respectively focus on Indian narrative exclusively or mostly, and many favor an Indian perspective.

The six films analyzed in this project fall into different genres and span fifteen years of cinematic history in the hope of offering a small but representative analytical base for the project. The romantic drama *White Fawn's Devotion* (1910) was one of the few films directed by a Native American director, James Young Deer, and all Indians are played by Native actors. Native Americans playing themselves is something not achieved again until decades later and Native American directors remained rare until late into the 1990s, thus already making *White Fawn's Devotion's* production process a statement for the difference of the silent era. The next two films were chosen both for their directors and their content. *The Squaw's Love* (1911) was directed by the well-known filmmaker D.W. Griffith who directed *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and about thirty Indian-themed or -centered movies. *The Squaw's Love* is an example of the latter, as it deals with an exclusively Indian love story set in the period before white contact. Thomas Ince's 1912 film *The Invaders* is a historical drama that includes a story line closest to the Western genre of all included films, but used Oglala Sioux actors for all roles except for the chief's daughter. Thomas Ince's production of Indian-themed and -centered movies rested on his collaboration with the aforementioned tribe, whose camp in California became known as “Inceville”. Buster Keaton's 1922 comedy *The Paleface* was

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Andrew Brodie. *Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood* (Boulder/CO: University Press of Colorado, 2003), 6.

added to the historical drama and the romantic drama, to include all three major motion picture genres of the time. The last two movies are both literary adaptations. *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920) is one of multiple silent renderings of James Fenimore Cooper's popular classic and deals with historic Indians, strongly promoting the idea of the 'vanishing Indian'. This theme is also present in *The Vanishing American* (1925), which was based on the contemporary novel by Zane Grey. It deals with contemporary Indians who suffer due to the reservation system, corrupt whites, and WWI.

After having watched the films several times, I chose the categories based on their usefulness and workability for all six movies, which took some practice with the tool and some initial revision of my categories based on a trial-and-error system. The categories were also influenced by the secondary literature dealing with Native American portrayals in the silent era. I was limited to six categories because two of the eight categories needed to be 'title cards' and 'other' respectively, 'other' denoting everything that is not Indian in the films. Even though the strict categorization of visual content in only six categories is only approximate and cannot be taken as definite, it allows for a rough quantification of the time on screen for different Indian types and stereotypes. The category 'chief' denotes both a visual category that usually entails the wearing of feather-bonnets as well as a character that functions as a leader. He is separate from the 'warrior' in the sense that the warrior might have a following but is not a leader with authority. Like the chief, the warrior is usually a positive character and often appears as a suitor to the Indian maid or a white woman. The Indian maid appears as either the love interest of an Indian warrior or a white hero, the latter being the more frequent case. In this function, she chooses a white man over an Indian suitor and often helps the whites against her own or another tribe. Very rarely does she appear as a mother and wife. Because miscegenation was frowned upon, oftentimes she dies at the end of the

movie.<sup>5</sup> I used the category 'group' to characterize Indian groups in which none of the characters stand out. Whenever Indian groups consisted only of warriors, I used that category instead. The villain is characterized by his hostility towards the whites and his degraded, bloodthirsty and savage character. I used this category both for individuals and hostile groups. The category 'family' was borne of the necessity to denote scenes that showed Indian life outside the most frequent categories of chief and warrior. I used it to measure the time on screen of children, entire families, and situations in which the depicted Indians were engaged in activities other than warfare, councils, and flirting. This category is especially important because the depiction of children, joking individuals, laughter, and families humanizes Indians on screen. It disappeared almost completely in the Western of the following decades and, thus, establishes the difference of the silent era the best.

Although by no means absolute or all-encompassing, together these categories allowed me to evaluate what types of images were most prevalent on the silent screen. Even though it is impossible to guess what contemporary audiences might have found most memorable or impressive about the Indians, the screen time allows for an educated guess about which image might have been dominant in their mind. Some of the stereotypes associated with the Western genre from the late silent period onward are absent in the early “Indian pictures” which offer characters that are more developed and less stereotypical.<sup>6</sup> Some of the most notable differences between “Indian pictures” and later cinematic representations of Native Americans is the presence of Indian children, the presence of specific motivations for specific actions that could be interpreted as hostile, and the overwhelming majority of time on screen for 'good' Indians.

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5 Marubbio, M. Elise. *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film* (Lexington/KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 26ff.

6 Bowser, Eileen. *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915* (New York/NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 173.

To allow readers to trace the steps of the analysis both in a topically organized approach as well as by film, the digital history project provides access to the content via the section “themes” and the section “films”. The readability of the data collected from the cinemetric database is guaranteed by reducing it to the essential categories of shots per category and lengths in minutes of said shots since the original diagram in the database require some practice for successful interpretation (the diagram for each film is linked to the section for each film and to the reference section nevertheless). The use of pie charts allows easier access since they visually transport information about the time on screen of each category and how the time on screen translates into number of shots and percentage of the total. I chose different or matching colors to underline certain statements in my interpretation.

In addition to a analysis predominately based on visual aspects, character development, and story line, the idea to add a brief textual analysis of the title cards arose early on as well. The statistical analysis of texts makes the analysis of large corpuses possible and allows the study of words that are too frequent to be studied one by one.<sup>7</sup> Voyant, developed by Stéan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell [<http://www.voyant-tools.org/>], provides its users with text analysis tools and offers different visualizations to display the results. It allows users to upload text files either individually or as a corpus and to display word frequencies and relations in word clouds, word lists, graphs, and other visualizations. Even though the tool offers many exciting visualizations, the most interesting functions for me were the Cirrus, a word cloud visualizing the word frequencies in a document or corpus, and the word list 'Words in the Entire Corpus'. This allowed me to analyze word frequencies for the entire corpus, which consisted of the title cards of all six movies, and to determine what the most frequent words are in terms of talking about Indians. It is useful to keep in mind that

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7 Burrows, John. "Textual Analysis." In Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (eds.) *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/>.

since *The Vanishing American* and *The Last of the Mohicans* are the longest films and therefore have the most title cards, they are over-represented in the results. The comparative analysis used for establishing differences between word choices in print media and films was established with Google Ngram Viewer, a free online tool forming part of Google Books. It provided the data necessary for a comparative analysis that establishes differences between word choice in print media and films between 1910 and 1925. Google Ngram Viewer derives its corpus from Google Books and displays the percentage of the entered search terms in comparison to all words in English-language publications currently available in the Google Books database over a period of time that can be specified by the user. The results suggested that the usage of derogatory terms such as “savage” or “red man” were more common in print publications than in film. Due to their improvised nature, the results of the textual analysis are more meant to be food for thought than an equal part of the analysis, which is visible already in the fact only one page is devoted to this section.

I chose to organize and display my project as a website using the web design platform wix.com for this purpose [<http://jannasoeder.wix.com/silent-natives>]. Creating an open website does not only allow me to share my research with anyone who might be interested, it also allowed me to organize my content both by themes and by films. This organization would have been impossible to realize in a print-paper form since it would have unnecessarily and redundantly reproduced the same content several times. The interactive interface provided by the template I chose allows users to access the same content – such as charts and title cards – through different paths. Furthermore, links in between the different sections and pages of the website allow a reading that does not rely on a linear approach from “introduction” to “sources and data”. Lastly, the website allowed me to present not only the results of my research but to upload the data sets used to accomplish the analysis. This



transparency in research is desirable because it allows other researchers to profit from the data that I have already created.

## Sources and Data

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*The Squaw's Love*, directed by D.W. Griffith, Biograph, 1911.

*The Invaders*, directed by Thomas H. Ince, Kay-Bee, 1912.

*The Last of the Mohicans*, directed by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown, Associated Producers, 1920.

*The Paleface*, directed by Buster Keaton, First National, 1922.

*The Vanishing American*, directed by George B. Seitz, Paramount, 1925.

*Reel Injun*, directed by Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes, Domino Film, 2009.

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## VISUALIZATIONS

### Cinematics

Cinematics graph for *White Fawn's Devotion* (1910)

Cinematics graph for *The Squaw's Love* (1911)

Cinematics graph for *The Invaders* (1912)

Cinematics graph for *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920)

Cinematics graph for *The Paleface* (1922)

Cinematics graph for *The Vanishing American* (1922)

Pie chart visualizing the total Indian time on screen per category

Pie chart visualizing time on screen of villains compared to other Indians

Pie chart visualizing time on screen of villains compared to other Indians, title cards, other

Pie chart visualizing time on screen of chiefs and warriors compared to other Indians, title cards, other

Pie chart visualizing time on screen of maids and family compared to other categories

Pie chart visualizing time on screen of maids and family compared to other Indians

Pie chart visualizing time on screen per category for *White Fawn's Devotion*

Pie chart visualizing time on screen per category for *The Squaw's Love*

Pie chart visualizing time on screen per category for *The Invaders*

Pie chart visualizing time on screen per category for *The Last of the Mohicans*

Pie chart visualizing time on screen per category for *The Paleface*

Pie chart visualizing time on screen per category for *The Vanishing American*

### Textual Analysis

Voyant Word Cloud for all title cards

Voyant Word List for all title cards

Google Ngram Viewer statistics about the use of "Indians", "Indian", "chief", and "American Indian" in publications between 1910 and 1925

Google Ngram Viewer statistics about the use of "red race", "redman", "red man", "red men" in publications between 1910 and 1925

Google Ngram Viewer statistics about the use of "savage", "savages", "chief", "Indian" in publications between 1910 and 1925

## ELECTRONIC TEXTS

title cards for *White Fawn's Devotion* (1910)

title cards for *The Squaw's Love* (1911)

title cards for *The Invaders* (1912)

title cards for *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920)

title cards for *The Paleface* (1922)

title cards for *The Vanishing American* (1925)

## DATABASE

list of all Indian-centered and Indian-themed films of the silent era, compiled from reading secondary literature: definitely not complete, probably includes many Westerns