NBE3U Behind the Image, Lesson 6

Reel Injun

Hollywood's “Indian” and the camera's conventions

- Westerns
- Conventions
- Documentary
- Indigenous cinema

Today's goals

We are learning…

- How film forms and conventions create meaning.
- How Indigenous filmmakers analyse Hollywood's images.

I can…

- Identify the characteristics of the western as a media form.
- Explain how one convention shapes an audience's view.
- Explain the purpose and audience of a documentary.
- Infer the attitudes behind a film image.

Today's plan

Time	What we're doing	You will…
0–8 min	**Hook**	Discuss
8–22 min	**The form**	Note
22–52 min	**Reel Injun**	Track conventions
52–68 min	**The documentary**	Analyse
68–75 min	**Reflect**	Write

Warm-up



Where did you first see an Indigenous character in a film or cartoon? What were they like?

Sentence starters

“I remember…”

“They were always…”

“They never…”

How it works

- Pairs: 3 minutes.
- Describe roles, not actors' ancestry.

Big idea

For a century, movies taught the world what “Indians” were: warriors in feathers on horseback, wise old chiefs, doomed princesses. Many of the actors weren't Indigenous. In Reel Injun (2009), Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond travels across North America to ask how those images were made, and what Indigenous filmmakers have done since.

The western as a media form

form	A type of media text with typical features. *The western: frontier, horses, heroes, open land.*
convention	A familiar technique audiences recognize. *Drums signal danger; a low angle signals threat.*
casting	Who plays a role. *Many “Indian” roles went to non-Indigenous actors.*
redface	Non-Indigenous actors in makeup and costume as “Indians.” *Common in Hollywood for decades.*

Conventions to track

Casting

Who plays the role?

Costume

Accurate to a Nation, or invented?

Music

What does the soundtrack tell us?

Camera

Low angles, distance, silhouettes.

Dialogue

Who speaks, and in which language?

Setting

Whose land, and in which century?

Reel Injun (2009)



Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian

Neil Diamond (Cree, Waskaganish), with Catherine Bainbridge and Jeremiah Hayes; Rezolution Pictures and the NFB

nfb.ca (check your board's licence)

While you watch: Track five conventions on page 1. Note one moment when the film made you see a western differently.

Track and explain

On page 1, during and after viewing:

1. Note one example for each convention.
2. Explain its effect on an audience.
3. Which convention is most powerful?
4. Compare with a partner.

Reading the documentary

Question	Reel Injun
Who made it?	A Cree filmmaker who grew up watching westerns in Waskaganish
Purpose	Expose how the images were made; celebrate Indigenous cinema
Audience	General viewers, through festivals, television and the NFB
Techniques	Road trip, interviews, archival film clips, narration

Documentary notes

On page 2:

1. Purpose and audience.
2. Techniques the documentary uses.
3. One idea that changed your view.
4. How does it answer the westerns?

Two cameras

Hollywood's camera

- Looks from the cavalry's side.
- Invents costumes and languages.
- Indigenous characters rarely speak.

Indigenous filmmakers' cameras

- Look from inside communities.
- Use real languages and places.
- Characters with full lives.

Unit 6 returns to Indigenous filmmakers.

Check yourself

Be honest. This helps you choose what to work on next.

Success criteria	Not yet	Almost	Got it
I can identify the characteristics of the western as a media form.			
I can explain how one convention shapes an audience's view.			
I can explain the purpose and audience of a documentary.			
I can infer the attitudes behind a film image.			

Behind the camera now

Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki)

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance (NFB, 1993).

Zacharias Kunuk (Inuk, Igloolik)

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001), in Inuktitut.

Tasha Hubbard (Cree)

nîpawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up (NFB, 2019).

First Nations and Inuit filmmakers telling their own stories. More in Unit 6.

Exit ticket

1. One convention of the western and its effect.

2. The purpose of Reel Injun.

3. One attitude a western image reveals.

Next class: In the Textbook.

Teacher reveal

Reel Injun: key points

The western: A form built on frontier conflict, open landscapes, horses, heroes and “savages”: Indigenous characters as obstacles to settlement.

Conventions: Casting non-Indigenous actors, invented costumes, drumming music for danger, low angles for threat, broken-English dialogue.

Effect on audiences: Generations of viewers, including Indigenous children, learned to see “Indians” through the camera of the cavalry.

The documentary: Purpose: to expose how the images were made and to celebrate Indigenous cinema; audience: general viewers, through festivals, TV and the NFB.

Change: Indigenous filmmakers such as Zacharias Kunuk tell stories in their own languages and from their own perspectives.