Reel Injun: Hollywood's “Indian” and the camera's conventions

NBE3U, Unit 2: Behind the Image, Lesson 6. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

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.

What students do: Students learn the characteristics of the Hollywood western, identify the conventions (casting, costume, music, camera angle, dialogue) used to create stereotyped characters, view teacher-chosen excerpts of Reel Injun, and explain how conventions convey meaning and influence audiences.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
E2.1	identify general and specific characteristics of a variety of media forms and explain, with increasing insight, how they shape content and create meaning in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures
E2.2	identify conventions and/or techniques used in a variety of media forms and explain, with increasing insight, how they convey meaning and influence their audience in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures
E1.1	explain how media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, are created to suit particular purposes and audiences
A2.3	make inferences of increasing subtlety about attitudes towards First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content in various contemporary and historical text forms, providing explanations that draw on a range of appropriate evidence to support their opinions

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning how film forms and conventions create meaning. • We are learning how Indigenous filmmakers analyse Hollywood's images.	• 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.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Reel Injun deck.
- **Handouts:** Conventions Tracker (page 1), Documentary Notes (page 2).
- **Media:** Reel Injun (2009; directed by Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge and Jeremiah Hayes; Rezolution Pictures with the NFB). Check your board's licence or the NFB. Preview: the film includes scenes from violent westerns.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Picture a western.	Discuss.	
8–22	**The form**	The western's conventions.	Note.	
22–52	**Reel Injun**	View excerpts.	Track conventions.	Conventions explained.
52–68	**The documentary**	Purpose and audience.	Analyse.	
68–75	**Reflect**	Exit.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** A tracker with examples filled in for the first excerpt.
- **ELL:** Captions on; a pre-taught list of film terms.
- **Challenge:** Compare Reel Injun with a western's trailer: who speaks, and in which language?

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Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Conventions Tracker and Documentary Notes	Media forms (E2.1), conventions (E2.2), purpose and audience (E1.1) and attitudes (A2.3)

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.

Teacher notes

- Reel Injun (2009) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival; it was directed by Neil Diamond (Cree, from Waskaganish, Quebec) with Catherine Bainbridge and Jeremiah Hayes, produced by Rezolution Pictures and the NFB, and won a Peabody Award (2011) and three Gemini Awards (2010). Interviewees include Zacharias Kunuk, Adam Beach, Wes Studi and Jesse Wente (Wikipedia, “Reel Injun”).
- Choose excerpts of about 25 minutes total. Preview: some western clips show violence and slurs. Do not show sacred or ceremonial scenes for analysis.
- The title uses a slur deliberately, to name and challenge it. Students say the title only, not the slur on its own. Historical texts use the words of their time, including terms now considered offensive (for example, “Red-skin,” “savage,” “squaw,” “half-breed,” “Eskimo”). We quote accurately when analysing, explain why these terms are harmful, and use today's terms (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigenous, or the specific Nation) in our own words. Readers may say “[skip]” instead of reading a slur aloud.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 7, In the Textbook.

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