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RHCS 105: Media, Culture, and Identity

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Videographic Criticism Reflection Paper

Before I had even heard of *Smoke Signals*, I had seen, heard, and spoken of the ‘Indian.’ The ‘Indian’ is an effective device in the Western – you need barely whisper the syllables, and the scene instantly assumes a sense of occasion (quite often of menace.) Somehow – perhaps by some form of cultural osmosis – I had already assimilated a lot that the media ‘Indian’ stood for without having seen any media in which Native Americans were depicted; just like how everyone knows of Sherlock Holmes without having read the short stories or seen the Basil Rathbone films. There are two problems with this scenario: first, that their roles in Hollywood seem to be (for the most part) circumscribed to the confines of the ‘native’ role, and second, that even within the cinematic monolith of the genre in which they are most frequently seen (the Western), their roles are so clearly demarcated and hierarchized. This, combined with the pervasive nature of their representation, proves to be an insidious problem.

These aspects of their media representation were what attracted me to *Smoke Signals* for my videographic criticism topic. What made the film remarkable, in my opinion, was that it told an impactful story without the burden of capturing Native Americans in a fashion similar to what are contemptuously called ‘Indian sympathy films’ (Rollins & O’Connor, 2011, p. 3). Instead, what *Smoke Signals* attempted to do was tell a modern, relatable, moving tale in which Native Americans occupied central roles. It seemed that the agenda was first and foremost to tell a story about parental relations and through this prism, capture the contemporary Native American experience in an authentic, accurate, three-dimensional manner. In this manner, it ended up refuting bad representations of Native Americans very effectively. Furthermore, the film was exemplary in how much control members of the Native American community had on it: the co-producer, writer, director, and actors were all Native American, which scholars like Jojola consider essential for creating better images for Native Americans (Rollins & O’Connor, 2011, p.3).

Hence, in the video piece, I attempted to argue how *Smoke Signals* exposes the inaccuracy of these stereotypical representations, depicts the power wielded by the media which propagate these representations, and acts as a vehicle to challenge them. The power of the media lies in ‘constructing reality’ through its symbolic power, which has resulted in the stereotypical representations of Native Americans (Couldry, 2017, p. 146). However, the team involved in producing *Smoke Signals* comments on and resists these representations through the film’s own depiction of Native American characters and lifestyle (Hearne, 2012, p. 3). The keywords which felt the most pertinent to me were ‘representation’ (because those were what *Smoke Signals* ended up combating), ‘stereotype’ (which representations are capable of being, and in the case of Native American representations, often are), and ‘power’ (since the media which produce those representations do it by exercising their symbolic power.) Initially I had settled on ‘memory’ instead of ‘power.’ After all, the prominent Hollywood representations of Native Americans affected the public memory of the community. The keyword also had to do with how due to media’s ability to carry representations across expanses separating places and times, representations of Native American are insidiously static (Lipsitz, 2017, p. 121). However, I reconsidered and shifted it to ‘power’ since it was equally relevant to the discussion, and could be much more cogently integrated with the other keywords to create a cohesive thesis.

The clips I chose were a few moments from *Smoke Signals* which I believed really captured the essence of the argument I wished to make. One was the famous ‘oral tradition’ scene from when Thomas relates an anecdote about Victor’s father to get a ride to the bus station. The other was from when Victor tells Thomas what it means to be a ‘real Indian’ during their bus ride.   
 Translating my thoughts on audiovisual form was challenging to say the least. I feel that video essays mimic the most natural form of thought – image and sound. However, an argument using the media methodology took much more effort than typing away on a keyboard on a Friday afternoon does. Crafting a video essay requires thinking along many more dimensions than text. Organizing even text requires careful consideration, but in the case of an audiovisual presentation like a video essay, not only must clips from your film (including their video and audio) be rearranged in a way which brings out your points as saliently as possible, but even the text you use has to be spatially arranged in a way which makes the flow of your argument smooth. Combined with the audio aspect, the analogy which comes to mind is the film *Arrival* (spoilers follow) in which the protagonist gains the ability to perceive all of time at once. You must see all the audio, all the text, and all the video and the positions which they must occupy relative to each other at once, in service of making your point.   
 My strategy in making the video essay was to focus on particular clips and do a close reading or otherwise supplement the clip with external information to make my argument. For example, in order to illustrate *Smoke Signals*’s point about how media portrays Native Americans, I decided to use the Arnold Joseph anecdote. In the anecdote, Victor’s father’s picture makes it to the cover of a prominent magazine and is distributed nationwide. The manner in which he is pictured embodies stereotypical depictions of Native Americans (‘savageness’ through the allusion to war paint and a gun, nobility through the braids and his protest.) My idea was to overlay the audio of Thomas reciting his tale with relevant text about the stereotype he was subtextually discussing. I also matched it with 2 short clips from *The Searchers* (one in which Martin is talking to some Native American traders, and one in which Scar attacks the search party.) The actions from the two clips onscreen were supposed to match with what Thomas was speaking about (braids in the first clip and a gun raised above the head in the second.) In this way, the juxtaposition of the two elements was supposed to (hopefully) make an apparent and impactful point about how pervasive the stereotypes are.

The process of creating the video influenced my perception of media, culture, and identity. In creating the video essay, I was creating what would qualify as ‘media content.’ Not only did I get firsthand experience of making choices about media content which media producers make, but the topic itself invited me to consider the ramifications of representations in how society perceives communities, topics, people, and ideas. Similarly, in the process of watching and making a video essay on *Smoke Signals*, I was also allowed to peek into experiences of Native American culture and life, portrayed more authentically than most films involving Native Americans. Even though the video essay will probably not make it into mainstream media, I had the opportunity of adding to the conversation about Native American culture and its portrayal. Finally, the video essay itself dealt with the effect of media representations on identity and how it is expressed (as in the clip in which Victor talks about being a ‘real Indian.’) In essence, the process of making the video essay, whether through the manner in which I presented material, or the material itself, encouraged me to think deeper about presentation (both in terms of who is presented and how one can present ideas and people effectively and accurately.)

References

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