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RESTORING NARRATIVES: HOW POST-TRUTH POLITICS AFFECTS THE MODERN FILM REPRESENTATION OF AMERICAN INDIANS

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ABSTRACT

The post-truth era is characterized by a shift from an emphasis on objective historical data to a concentration on the personal narratives that often mold such realities. Within this framework, American Indian cinema occupies a vital space for addressing the historical inaccuracies that distort representations of American Indian identity. This paper analyzes the work of Indigenous filmmakers who are contemporaneously confronting the manipulations of history and identity that are so prevalent in a post-truth society. Whereas films produced by Hollywood have traditionally sustained inaccurate portrayals of Indigenous peoples, such as the idea that they have somehow disappeared or are barbaric, movies directed by American Indians are providing not only a much-needed balance but also an unfettered reclamation of visual authority vis-à-vis their peoples and cultures. This paper explores how films like Smoke Signals (1998), Rhymes for Young Ghouls (2013), The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open (2019), Killers of the Flower Moon (2023) and the series American Primeval (2025), confront misinformation and the erasure of history in the narratives they present. It highlights the growing impact of digital activism and social media on Indigenous storytelling, with those new platforms enabling a much more direct confrontation with the opposing settler-colonial narratives that have long dominated as authoritative. And it contends that, far from being confined to artistic expression, Indigenous cinema represents a powerful and instructive decolonial intervention in ways that very much matter for the putative post-truth era.

KEYWORDS: *Indigenous Cinema, Post-Truth, Historical Erasure, Visual Sovereignty, Decolonial Resistance, Digital Activism, American Indian Identity, Cultural Reclamation.*

INTRODUCTION

The post-truth describes a sociopolitical state where objective facts hold diminished sway in molding public opinion compared to personal beliefs, emotions, and appeals to identity. In this sort of environment, it is narratives that serve to shore up ideological biases that take precedence over verifiable truth. Not infrequently, these are accompanied by a sizable dollop of misinformation and serve as the basis for quite a lot of not-so-well-concealed political manipulation. The term rose to prominence in the 21st century, gaining what received notable attention in being named the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year in 2016—that's when it became a widely recognized phenomenon. And with the advent of echo chambers and political propaganda on social media, post-truth is now very much a part of our everyday conversation.

In literature and cinema, post-truth takes shape as a form of storytelling that counters objective reality, jumbles the clear division of truth and falsehood, and alters the public's perception in order to influence societal discourse. This method employs a variety of tools: unreliable narrators, historical reinterpretation, and the familiar lie we all learned in kindergarten—that the more you tell it, the more it takes on the appearance of truth. Unhindered by either logical or temporal coherence, such narratives can bubble up from anywhere, and they don't need much in the way of stopping power to sink into the public conversation.

Indigenous American Cinema in the Age of Post-Truth Politics

An epoch characterized by "post-truth" governance—where emotional pleas and individual convictions tend to eclipse factual, objective reality—has emerged and left its mark on historical interpretations, particularly those dealing with the history of the American Indians. The political discourse that surrounds such debates as Thanksgiving and the history of westward expansion illustrates quite well that rendering faithful historical representations of the lived experiences of America's indigenous peoples is as much a contest over traditional values and threats to national security as it is an honest attempt to depict the not-so-distant past. This contest reflects a broader trend in which history is more frequently being rendered as a form of low-grade propaganda for one side or the other. Monica Butler quotes:

> Empirical evidence confirms that distortions of Indigenous peoples and cultures in literature and cinema negatively influence an individual's self-worth, their interactions with non-Native peoples, as well as their political struggles for sovereignty. (4)

Extended periods of time have served as potent mediums for public perception to be influenced, particularly concerning historical events and cultural identities. For a long time, though, Hollywood has been making American Indians look bad in very

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simplistic terms. Films that have great influence, like The Searchers (1956), show Indigenous peoples as aggressive opponents. Such portrayals push forward an idea that is very colonial: the notion of the "noble savage." By contrast, Smoke Signals (1998) shows what is more like the kind of cinema one ought to make if one is seeking to portray Indigenous identities in a genuine and accurate manner. Movies such as this perform an act of counterbalance to the absurdly simple portrayals of Spanish-American history that other movies have presented. Time Magazine mentions:

> Indigenous people have been telling stories for centuries longer than the film industry has existed. Yet historically, Hollywood has ignored them. Throughout the 20th century, American movies largely portrayed indigenous people in limited, often non-speaking roles, and mostly confined them to narratives about the 19th-century period of frontier expansion. In 1998, *Smoke Signals*—the first film with a national theatrical release written, directed, co-produced, and acted by Native Americans—inspired a wave of indigenous filmmakers to produce films about their communities set in the present day. About 25 years later, more indigenous filmmakers than ever before are getting the green light to make TV shows and movies. (Waxman)

Native artists are increasingly turning to cinema as a means to recover their histories and counter disinformation. Figures like Sterlin Harjo (*Reservation Dogs*) and Jeff Barnaby (*Blood Quantum*) who, along with many others, are leading this burgeoning movement make use of the film medium to articulate and fashion direct-to-audience storied messages about the contemporary Native experience, all the while holding the past in plain sight and derailing the kind of ahistorical, post-truth narratives that serve the colonial imagination.

This paper explores the confrontation of post-truth distortions by the American Indian cinema, as well as the affirmation of Indigenous storytelling sovereignty in that cinema. Its specific thrusts are to:

1. Look into the ways that historical revisionism and plain old misinformation have affected the mainstream image of Native Indians of America.
2. See how Indigenous filmmakers use the moving image to counter those distortions and tell the sort of alternative narrative that Native America, and its peculiar epistemology, would find believable.
3. Understand the role that digital media and familiar activism play in giving rectification muscle to that alternative narrative.

Post-truth politics affect the representation of Indigenous peoples in profound and telling ways. They control the memories that people are able to piece together about the history of Indigenous nations, the near-constant cultural interaction that people have with them, and the ethical choices that are made as we cohabit the society of the 21st-century media landscape. Cinema holds the potential to operate as a much more potent and relevant site of cultural engagement with modern and contemporary Indigenous issues, as evidenced by the emergence of the much more controlled and conversant field of Indigenous cinema.

The study examines the means by which Indigenous cinema challenges post-truth narratives and historical inaccuracies. It investigates the storytelling of Native filmmakers, who use it as a decolonial resistance means to assert their agency and recover their cultures. This work is an investigation of nonsynchronous times. It is a comparative analysis of the visual sovereignty of Native-directed films and the persistent misrepresentation of Hollywood in regard to the histories of Natives. This study highlights Indigenous filmmaking at the very center of its work.

This paper uses a decolonial framework that reflects Indigenous ways of knowing, visual sovereignty, and post-truth studies to examine how Native filmmakers aim to correct misrepresentations of their communities and to reclaim their identities. The author employs qualitative methods to conduct both textual and visual analyses of the films used in the study and works with the films to uncover themes of resistance, identity, and decolonization. In conjunction with these analyses, the research utilizes fairly extensive backdrops provided by secondary sources from Native film critics and media studies scholars.

Post-Truth Politics and the Manipulation of Indigenous Histories

Politics in a post-truth era places great emphasis on feelings and convictions instead of on objective, verifiable facts. This has, in turn, placed huge pressure on any serious discussion or representation of Indigenous histories. Appeals to emotion often neatly side-step the kinds of historical evidence that should, and often do, anchor any respectful and responsible conversation about minority experiences, especially when those narratives challenge the mainstream version of history. Take, for example, recent efforts to address the history of American Indian boarding schools.

The historical revisionism—the intentional changing of historical truths to suit present-day political or ideological intentions—that has long been at work in American society has greatly affected the way Native histories are told and retold, both in media and in politics. One very salient example of this is the way the murders of the Osage people have been portrayed in mainstream history versus the way those same events have been represented in the film *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023). While historical documents have often minimized or downplayed the actual levels of exploitation and violence directed at the Osage people, the film very brazenly calls attention to the systemic and by now not-all-that-surprising levels of directorial incompetence and corruption that allowed the murderers of Osage citizens to go unpunished for years. In fact:

> Exterminating Native Americans became official government policy, and it rose to become the central mission of the American military. And this pattern, set

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> at the outset, repeated itself for four centuries. The killing lasted until the "Indian Wars" came to a close on the cusp of the twentieth century. (Warwick)

Post-truth media often features the erasure and romanticization of Indigenous history. One of the most obstinate narratives to this day is the glorification of the westward movement, which in more reasonable times could be referred to as the process of violent displacement and genocide. *American Primeval* (2025) takes on the post-truth media environment and offers a counternarrative to its more simplistic depictions of westward expansion. While it does work firmly within the Western genre, with many elements that make it Western, its overarching theme is one of striving towards not only the incorporation of Indigenous viewpoints but also a dismantling of the myth of Manifest Destiny.

Hollywood's Legacy: Myth-Making and the Stereotyping of American Indians

For millennia, Indigenous peoples in North America have asserted their rights and worked to build vibrant, life-affirming cultures. Yet, for just as long, Hollywood has portrayed them as anything but that. The archetypal American art form has consistently depicted Native peoples as violent, with iconic western films like *Stagecoach* (1939) portraying them as "barbaric" barriers to civilization. Such pernicious representations have surely had a hand in shaping the distorted perceptions of many Americans and the equally false narrative that Indigenous cultures are no longer viable.

One frequent theme in Hollywood is the "vanishing Indian" myth, which casts American Indians as a doomed race destined to disappear because of Euro-American expansion. Even films that try to present sympathetic portrayals, such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), inadvertently support this notion. They present Native characters as noble but doomed to extinction. This narrative serves settler-colonial justifications by suggesting that Indigenous peoples were naturally supplanted by settlers.

Traditionally, Hollywood movies have shown American Indians in a binary way: either as noble characters who help white heroes (think of Disney's *Pocahontas* [1995]) or as wild bad guys who threaten civilization (think of *The Lone Ranger* [2013]). But these two-dimensional portrayals obscure the real, messy complexities of Indigenous identities and experiences—and, some would argue, are good reasons for Indigenous people to want more accurate and positive portrayals of their cultures in movies. For far too long, Hollywood's distortions of Indigenous Peoples' histories and cultures have gone unchecked.

Indigenous Filmmaking as a Counter-Narrative

Films led by Indigenous people are changing how Indigenous peoples are shown in cinema. They are doing this by recapturing who gets to tell the story and by insisting on what kinds of visuals are used to tell it. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2002), for example, uses what for other filmmakers might be seen as hurdles—an Indigenous language, a storytelling form grounded in Ancient Inuit oral tradition—to make not just a film but also a potent political statement that dispatches with a long history of white people making inaccurate and harmful films about Indigenous peoples. One of those harmful films is *Nanook of the North*(1921). Stoddard et al. mention:

> Film and other visual media, in particular, may be better able to illustrate or represent the types of indigenous knowledge or indigenous epistemologies that are often excluded from historical canon or valued alongside more Western views of knowledge, in particular, views on the relationship between humanity and the environment.(11)

Post-Truth Resistance in American Indian Cinema

There is a significant counterpoint to post-truth that is undertaken by Indigenous filmmakers and certain Hollywood productions when it comes to popular narratives about Native peoples. These filmmakers and artists confront stereotypes, set straight historical inaccuracies, and render honest-to-goodness portrayals of not just their Indigenous experience, but the American Indian experience writ large. Stereotypes "define an individual by attributes ascribed to the group as a whole"(Fleming 216). One can see quite a lot of that in the five films and series in the following manner:

a. *Smoke Signals* (1998)

The 1998 *film Smoke Signals* is a key part of Native cinema. It holds the distinction of being the first feature film made by Indigenous people in the roles of writer, director, and producer. Inspired by Sherman Alexie's short stories, the movie chronicles a road trip taken by two young Coeur d'Alene men to collect Victor's late father's remains from a cliff in upstate Washington. The trip becomes an opportunity for them to get reacquainted and for Victor to confront his complicated family history.

The movie presents its Native characters in a way different from most of Hollywood's movies. Typically, Hollywood portrays them one-dimensionally, as either heroes or villains. But this film reveals that Native people today come with many challenges and experiences, and their self-identities can be far more complex. The two central characters are Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Their efforts to understand themselves may seem off-kilter or extreme, but that's also part of the story. Their lives are harder than many others because they are poor and live on a reservation. They need to work harder to figure out who they are. They are up against a world that often views Native men as violent, or strange, or something in the middle. The movie muddles around all these ideas to help us think anew, which is why we need to see these people portrayed with care and respect. It helps dismantle stereotypes and make them out to be actual, complex human beings.

Smoke Signals clearly demonstrates how vital it is to represent oneself in order to counteract harmful stereotypes. The movie's humor and realism reclaim Native storytelling and identity while undermining false narratives about Indigenous life.

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b. ***Rhymes for Young Ghouls*** (2013)
The brutalities and lasting impacts of Canada's residential school system are starkly portrayed in director Jeff Barnaby's film. It is an Indigenous story that revolves around the character Aila, a teenage girl. She lives in a world marked by the dictatorial control of Indigenous people, a control made possible by the residential school system. There is educational value in this film and its artistic choices.

A combination of realism and stylized storytelling is employed by Barnaby to bring to light the post-truth narratives that wish to brush the residential school atrocities under the rug. The themes emphasized, embedded even, in this tale are good old intergenerational trauma and resilience. (Both are personal and political kinds of resilience.) All of this frames Aila's struggle on the way to justice in the much larger context of the ongoing fight for Indigenous justice, which is a good way to set the scene. "Rhymes for Young Ghouls" contests post-truth historical revisionism by confronting the violent legacy of residential schools and, in turn, the resilience and resistance of Indigenous people against colonial oppression.

c. *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* (2019)
It is a film directed by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Kathleen Hepburn. It takes a look at the crisis surrounding missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW). The narrative centers on Aila, a middle-class Indigenous woman, who encounters Rosie, a young Indigenous woman escaping a cruel relationship. Using real-time filming techniques, long takes, and natural lighting, the film surrounds viewers in a raw, documentary-like experience. The film contrasts with mainstream portrayals that usually sensationalize violence against Indigenous women. It presents a nuanced and compassionate depiction of the marginalization of these women and the many systemic factors contributing to it. In this way, the film is a bold critique of the sorts of MMIW narratives that minimize, deny, or even lie about the kinds of ongoing crises that drive this appearance and breach of dignity. The film ends with a statement that goes hard on making clear just how real and serious the problem of violence against Indigenous women is.

d. ***Killers of the Flower Moon*** **(2023)**
The Osage murders of the 1920s form the basis of Martin Scorsese's 2023 film "Killers of the Flower Moon." During this dark chapter in American history, money-hungry scalawags undertook the planned and illegal elimination of the wealthy members of the Osage Nation for their oil fortune. Scorsese adapted the film from a work of nonfiction by author David Grann. The film showcases the halting yet considerable progress being made in the historically accurate portrayal of Indigenous peoples within American cinema. But it also lays bare the stubbornly enduring challenges that Native individuals confront as they work to claim rightful positions in an industry that seldom acknowledges them.

e. *American Primeval* (2025)
The Netflix series "American Primeval" (2025) tackles the glorified mythologies associated with westward expansion that have long been part of the American story. It pushes back against the conventional Western and the way that particular form of cinema served as a founding falsehood in the idolization of settler colonialism in U.S. culture. It does so with some very sharp critiques, offering up a range of well-informed, diverse perspectives on the issue. Those critiques and perspectives form the basis of a reclamation narrative for the millions of Indigenous people living in North America.

Each of these films and series helps to counter post-truth distortions by delivering narratives that center on Indigenous perspectives, highlight historical injustices, and assert storytelling sovereignty. Taken together, these case studies allow for a clearer view of the confrontation between media representation and historical accuracy in the celluloid depiction of the American Indian experience. They even allow one to glimpse the roiling conflict over territory that is at play in this cinematic war of conquest.

Digital Media and Indigenous Activism
"The institution most responsible for creating and transmitting biased representations is the media"(Eason 74). Indigenous communities see digital media as a vital tool for taking back their stories, correcting the lies told about them, and making real the representations of not just their histories but also their lived experiences. When those in the trio of a potent combination—social media, independent journalism, and digital filmmaking—are put to work, the result is a three-speed reach of Indigenous activism that often runs circles around the challenges faced in a post-truth world.

Indigenous activists are using social media to directly engage with the narrative mainstream media try to portray of them and also to talk about issues that are particularly urgent to them. One such instance is the Dakota Access Pipeline movement, which saw direct action taken by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and also many allied Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous United States citizens. The push to stall and then stop the DAPL saw activists utilizing social media in almost a real-time journalistic way to cover the movement. Glaring contrasts were drawn between what was being shown on social media and what was being portrayed by mainstream media. The reaching out of these narratives via hashtags has been another way of utilizing social media in a semi-journalistic way to give direct-to-audience coverage of Indigenous issues.

Misinformation travels fast in the digital age. This makes it all the more necessary for Indigenous communities to create and control reliable online spaces where their narratives can be heard. Post-truth occurrences in Native affairs are met straight-on with accurate reporting by **Indian Country Today** and **Indigenous Rising Media.** These two media organizations seek to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are front and center in all Native policy

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and history discussions. Scholars, activists, and content creators working from the Native knowledge base use TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter to reinforce that which is historically accurate concerning Indigenous peoples. They seek to set the record straight regarding all kinds of egregiously harmful revisions of history. These spaces are major learning hubs.

The Convergence of Indigenous Filmmaking and Online Advocacy

"The modern form of bias against Native Americans includes not only negative ideas and representations, but also the omission of positive, multidimensional ideas and representations of their group"(Eason 77). Filmmaking and online media have come together as a potent instrument for Indigenous activism, with Native filmmakers and advocates leveraging online platforms to convey their narratives on their own terms.

a. Filmmakers from indigenous cultures use platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, and Instagram to distribute and screen short films and documentaries that discuss vital and urgent matters such as climate change, cultural preservation, and land rights. For instance, films like *Water Warriors* showcase Indigenous-led resistance against the environmental degradation that reaches its audience through film festival circuits and subscription platforms like YouTube.

b. Crowdsourced Storytelling: Digital media allows Indigenous communities to reclaim their history by creating and sharing their own content with an audience big enough to constitute a hit film or documentary. This digital platform offers access to narrative content for everyone, whether they reside in towns or the countryside, and regardless of how much or how little money they may have. It allows for the molding of narrative in ways that fit, or even just snugly accommodate, one's personal, lived experience.

The rise of digital media has changed Indigenous activism, allowing Native communities to regain their narratives, deal with false information, and get their cultures represented in ways that the old media system never really could. Traditional media, in any case, has been replete with misrepresentations and outright lies about Indigenous cultures, and now, as cultures face the onslaught of post-Trump narratives, activists within those cultures are using digital platforms as a defense against cultural erasure and a vehicle for moving on to better portrayals, for a revival.

CONCLUSION

This paper underscores the crucial role Indigenous cinema plays in battling post-truth narratives and restoring historical accuracy. It makes clear that the Indigenous filmmakers being studied serve as modern historians, using film to maintain oral traditions and to remythologize the culture—i.e., to make positive and transformative the myths as tools of cultural memory that all humanity, including Indigenous Peoples, is said to once have used. The study emphasizes as well that in all this, and for the public at large, the memory that is made for any culture by film and, in earlier times, by the oral tradition is of primary importance.

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