

Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film. Lee Schweninger. London: The University of Georgia Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780820345154

Lee Schweninger's book *Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film* is the latest text to examine the cinematic achievements of Aboriginal directors and actors in the rich and increasingly popular field of North American Indigenous cinema. Grounding his work in the ideas of Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor, Schweninger asserts that Aboriginal cinema acts as survivance texts through the construction of Indigenous stories as a means to upset or negotiate with images that Western films—either Hollywood or ethnographic—have constructed about Indigenous populations (1–2). Furthermore, Schweninger recognizes that these texts, particularly *Naturally Native*, *Skins* and *Tkaronto*, act as a forum to educate the general audience on Aboriginal culture, identity and/or conditions that exist on reservations. Schweninger devotes a chapter to each of thirteen films directed by a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers, allowing him to present a nuanced discussion on each film. The last film for which Schweninger provides an in-depth analysis in order to demonstrate the evolution of Aboriginal cinema since the late 20th century is *Four Sheets to the Wind*, as it not only cast actors who played roles in earlier Indigenous productions (203), but also presented “no overt references to Hollywood” (215). It is for the latter reason Schweninger concludes that *Four Sheets to the Wind* demonstrates “a different confidence in self-representation” possessed by current Indigenous filmmakers (215). Although Schweninger's text examines these Aboriginal films on an individual basis, this review will briefly discuss a number of interrelated trends which transcend individual films.

Firstly, Schweningen notes, many of the films he reviewed acknowledge the importance of representational sovereignty in their respective plotlines through the utilization of different onscreen strategies. For example, Schweningen notes that several characters in these films are directing the camera's gaze, which he believes "forces an awareness on the viewer and insists on a somewhat critical rather than merely a passive response to the viewing experience" (15). Schweningen elaborates on this notion through a nuanced discussion of the images constructed in *Medicine River* and *The Business of Fancydancing*, as Aboriginal characters in these films play an active role in the production of images. Furthermore, Schweningen highlights a direct relation between possession of the camera and North American Aboriginal stories, contending that these scenes "demonstrate the filmmakers' insistence on the importance of telling one's own story by holding and focusing one's own camera" (15). Conveying stories within these films acts as a means to demonstrate survival, to complicate or alter Euro-American conceptions of Indian identity, and to highlight issues that Hollywood films either ignore or relegate to the periphery of discussion. The importance Schweningen attaches to the relationship between North American Aboriginal films and stories is best exemplified through his examination of two films: *Medicine River* and *The Doe Boy*. Schweningen notes that *Medicine River* stresses that the stories the elders pass on are interconnected with the photographs that Will shoots of them, thereby challenging the role of images as the sole means of conveying Aboriginal identity. He further identifies the interrelationship between stories and Native identity in *The Doe Boy*, which critiques the way the American government legally classifies Indians through blood quantum. Although texts such as *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World* examine the importance of story-telling to Indigenous cinema, Schweningen elaborates on this connection

through a close textual reading of these films, thereby elucidating the vital significance of storytelling in Aboriginal forms of representation.

Secondly, Schweningen recognizes that Native American films incorporate references to Western films into their plotlines as a means to “serve as points of departure, as ways to challenge and refute stereotypes, and as a means of talking back” (14). He identified the manner in which *The Exiles* uses historical representations of Aboriginals in order “to remind the viewer of how ubiquitous such images of American Indians are,” and to contest long-held assumptions attached to these images that Aboriginal culture could not survive the threat represented by the larger Euro-American culture (38). Schweningen stresses that the objectives of *Harold of Orange* are to contest hegemonic Euro-American attitudes regarding Aboriginal history and identity and to negotiate with Western-constructed representations through the utilization of the trickster. Furthermore, although Schweningen recognizes the obvious “intertextual richness” of *Smoke Signals* (116), he identifies *Powwow Highway* and *The Doe Boy* as two additional examples of films that “speak back” in some capacity to the historical Indigenous identity respectively constructed by *Cheyenne Autumn* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. Schweningen further examined the importance of complicating one-dimensional notions of Aboriginal identity and challenging assumed “truths” in his discussion of *Smoke Signals*, in which he identifies several scenes that “[challenge] the viewer to contemplate the (im)possibility of honest and truthful representation in any medium” (116).

One of Schweningen’s prominent themes is the preoccupation of Hollywood films to utilize the death of Aboriginal characters as a means to represent “the erasure of the entire culture” (16). Schweningen recognizes that Aboriginal characters die in the Indigenous productions directed by Chris Eyre, Sherman Alexie and Valerie Red-Horse, but, he correctly

insists, “these films inevitably focus on and stress the impact a character’s life has on those who survive the individual” (16–17). Furthermore, Schweningen examines Masayesva’s film *Imagining Indians*, which privileges the voices of Aboriginal actors who were cast in Hollywood films and demonstrates that these individuals “are literal survivors of the deaths they acted as extras in those [Hollywood] films...” (22).

Although Schweningen does an excellent job highlighting the objectives of indigenous directors, he does not simply direct blind praise at these films, but also notes some of the problematic images embedded within these texts. For example, Schweningen points out the problematic nature of having a non-Indigenous actor selected for the character Tosamah in *House Made of Dawn* (54–55). He further critiques the director’s decision to film the Peyote ceremony, which he later employed as a segue into a discussion regarding the accountability that Chris Eyre demonstrated in filming the sweat ceremony in *Skins*. Furthermore, Schweningen noted that Aboriginal films themselves are not immune from promoting stereotypes, as evident in the stereotypical “Indian princess” images developed in *Naturally Native*. Moreover, Schweningen also discusses these cinematic texts in relation to one another in order to demonstrate where certain films fill a void in the field of North American Aboriginal cinema. His analysis contrasts *Naturally Native* with films such as *Smoke Signals*, in which female characters are relegated to the periphery, and concludes that “*Naturally Native* is indeed groundbreaking in its presentation and representation of American Indian women” (144). In his discussion of *Skins*, Schweningen notes that the film develops a “a middle ground” (165) and “more realistic depictions of alcohol consumption” (166) than the binarism promoted in both *Naturally Native* and *Smoke Signals*, in which characters either use alcohol excessively or abstain completely.

Some may critique Schweningen for the broad manner in which he defined a North American Indigenous film: “The films under discussion have in common that they include some but not necessarily all of the criteria one can establish to characterize and define Indigenous films. With only one potential exception, the authors of the source material, writers, adapters, and/or screenwriters of the primary films examined in this study are Indigenous [and]...that Native actors are performing in films that center on Indigenous characters and primarily develop what can be termed Indigenous issues” (5). Although Schweningen expresses self-awareness regarding the broadness of the definition, he leaves himself vulnerable to criticism regarding his decision to include or exclude certain films from his survey. It is evident that defining North American Indigenous cinema can create problems, something Houston Wood attempted to solve in *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World* by conceptualizing film in relation to an “Indigenous to non-Indigenous continuum” (66–67). Although one may choose to fault Schweningen in this manner, it should be acknowledged that constructing a definition for a Native American film that will receive unanimous consensus presents challenges, and in some cases, a certain degree of ambiguity regarding whether a film is considered Indigenous can potentially exist.

Although Schweningen provides a solid overview on the field of Aboriginal cinema, a number of drawbacks surround his text. While Schweningen studied a variety of different films encompassing several genres, he did exclude a number of films that perhaps deserve greater attention. For example, he failed to provide an in-depth analysis of the short film *A Thousand Roads*, which was produced for the National Museum of the American Indian. After all, the film was directed by Cheyenne-Arapaho director Chris Eyre, the screenplay was written by Joy Harjo (Muskogee/Creek) and W. Richard West, Jr. (Southern Cheyenne) fulfilled the role of executive

producer. Furthermore, the short film employed a number of professional and non-professional Aboriginal actors superbly fulfilling the various character roles in the film. It deserves greater attention due to its connection to the National Museum of the American Indian and its potential to be viewed by millions of visitors who enter the museum's doors. This is an important film to assess, particularly since, as Schweningen correctly stated, Indigenous-directed films can have trouble capturing an audience, and the images constructed in this film have the potential to reach broader viewership. Secondly, in his desire to highlight the importance of Mouse in Sherman Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), Schweningen perhaps over-emphasizes the importance of this character's influence on Seymour's literary works: "...every [reviewer's italics] poem is to some extent about Mouse as much as it is about Seymour the poet" (130). In a dialogue between Seymour and Aristotle in *The Business of Fancydancing*, Seymour states, "I bet you don't even recognize yourself in my stories, do you? I have more insight into you than you ever will...that's why I write about you," demonstrating that the stories are more than about Mouse and suggesting that Schweningen should direct greater attention toward the relationship between Aristotle and Seymour. Lastly, Schweningen labels the song "Osinilshatin" in *The Business of Fancydancing* as being performed in the Salish language, when in fact the film's credits note it is Spokane (137). Although Schweningen's commentary on *The Business of Fancydancing* is slightly flawed, his conclusion that "this alienation [between Seymour and the Spokane reservation] implies a connection between what the poet is doing and what Hollywood has been doing since the beginnings of the industry: stealing Indigenous stories and thereby causing American Indians to vanish..." is still sound (137-138).

Despite these limitations, Schweningen's work is an excellent addition to the growing body of analysis of North American Indigenous cinema. Schweningen's text would be an

appropriate addition to a first-year university course on film studies, or more specifically a course on Aboriginal cinema, as it gives a broad overview of the films that exist, and provides a readable discussion on the strategies filmmakers use for survivance and to contest stereotypes. Furthermore, the book also presents an excellent analysis of the issues surrounding the translation of literature to film, particularly in Schweninger's discussion of *House Made of Dawn*, which is not surprising given his interest in North American Indigenous literature. Although much of the literature on North American Indigenous cinema focuses on the images filmmakers construct, one future area of research that scholars interested in Aboriginal film may examine is the films' effectiveness in challenging the long-standing assumptions and attitudes the general population may have regarding North American Indigenous populations due to stereotypes and Western media. While some academics have touched the surface of this issue, it is an area that requires more attention.