

## REEL INJUN: ON THE TRAIL OF THE HOLLYWOOD INDIAN



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# REEL INJUN

Directed by Neil Diamond

2009 | Canada | 86 min

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of documentary film by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their classes, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some web links that provide starting points for further research or discussion. In separate packages, there will also be support materials available with information regarding general viewing and teaching principles for documentary film and the fundamental aspects of making documentary films.

### The Film

*Reel Injun* takes a critical yet humorous look at the depiction of Aboriginal Peoples in Hollywood films over the last 100 years. Structured around the director's road trip to tourist sites and film locations across America, *Reel Injun* considers the effect Hollywood stereotypes have had on the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples, as well as their effect on contemporary Aboriginal youth. Filled with clips from hundreds of classic Hollywood films (from *Stagecoach* to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to *Dances With Wolves*) and interviews with industry heavyweights Clint Eastwood and Jim Jarmusch, actors Adam Beach and Graham Greene, and Native American activists John Trudell and Sacheen Littlefeather, the film concludes with a look at how contemporary Aboriginal filmmakers such as Chris Eyre and Zacharias Kunuk are changing the way Aboriginal Peoples are portrayed on the silver screen.

### The Filmmaker

Director Neil Diamond is from the Cree community of Waskaganish, Quebec, on the coast of James Bay. His previous films include *One More River*, a 2004 film that looked at plans to construct a Hydro-Quebec dam on Cree land; *Cree Spoken Here*; and *Heavy Metal: A Mining Disaster in Northern Quebec*. Diamond is co-founder of *The Nation*, the first news magazine serving the Cree of northern Quebec and Ontario, and a member of the international creative team for Rezolution Pictures. *Reel Injun* won the 2011 Peabody Award for Outstanding Achievement in Electronic Media, as well as several Gemini Awards including Best Direction in a Documentary Program, Best Visual Research, Best Original Music Score for a Documentary Program or Series, and the Canada Prize, awarded to work that explores the racial and cultural diversity of Canada by fostering greater awareness.

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## VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

There are important themes in this film that have broad implications for students and their futures.

Take time to activate your students' background understanding of these themes before viewing.

This will help them as they come to their own understanding and develop their critical abilities.

The following three subsections, on this page, are intended to provide you with a range of pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes, and a page of web links for further investigation.

### Pre-Viewing Activities

Have students consider the title of the film and ask them to predict what themes might be present in a film entitled *Reel Injun*.

Have students work in small groups of three or four to discuss the following question: What effects might film stereotypes have on the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples? What effect would they have on Aboriginal identity? Have each small group report back to the large group.

Print the quotations from the Extension Activities on individual sheets of paper. Have students work in small groups or in pairs to discuss the ideas in the quotations. Then ask them to share their conclusions with the large group. As they discuss the quotations, ask students to think about the following:

- What is the main conflict in this film? How do you know this?
- From whose perspective is this story told? How do you know this?
- What values are being promoted? How do you know this?
- Whose point of view do the values represent? Are your values represented? Why or why not?
- Who is the intended audience for this film?

Have a large-group discussion about one of the Extension Activities quotations. Ask students to structure their discussion around the themes of identity, relationships, sovereignty and challenges.

### Viewing Activities

Have students take notes on the connections they see between the issues in this film and one of the Big Ideas in the Big Questions/Ideas/Themes section of this guide.

Have students describe what they see in the film. Ask them to withhold judgment and observe carefully. They can write notes or give an oral description.

Ask students to create a mind map as they watch the film. The mind map should contain the following key words: conflicts, techniques, purpose and perspective. To get students started, use the following prompts:

- What are the main conflicts we encounter in this film? Were the conflicts resolved at the end of the film? Why or why not?
- Who produced this media text, and for what purpose? Who profits if the message is accepted? Who may be disadvantaged?
- How would this story be different if told from the perspective of another character in the film?

Have students jot down three questions for discussion that the film raises in their minds.

### Post-Viewing Activities

Ask students if the predictions they made in the first Pre-Viewing Activity were correct. Have them give specific evidence from the film—facts revealed in images or voiceover/dialogue—that supports or disproves their prediction.

Have a large-group discussion guided by student questions written during the last Viewing Activity.

Have students revisit the quotations they discussed during the third Pre-Viewing Activity. Have a large-group discussion to see whether their opinions have changed after viewing the film.

Have students build a conceptual map showing the web of ideas, topics and associated subtopics in the film. Using the conceptual map as a guide, ask students to create questions they think will represent the important issues. Then, using the questions and the conceptual map, ask students to

make interconnections among elements of the text (film). This should take the form of an argument, including a thesis statement and evidence from the text. Have students make a final judgment about the text based on the argument they created above. Students will learn that their evaluations and feelings are informed by description, analysis and interpretation.

Have students reflect on the processes of description, interpretation and evaluation they completed during the Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities. Ask students to write a personal reflection summarizing what they have learned and how the processes of describing, interpreting and evaluating have informed their understanding of the film.

Using the conceptual map students created in the fourth Post-Viewing Activity, have students create a one-page newsletter summarizing the issues discussed in the film. The newsletter should contain text, illustrations and/or photos and quotations from some of the people interviewed in the film. To get them started, have them visit the websites listed in the Websites and Online Resources section of this package.

## THE BIG QUESTIONS/IDEAS/THEMES

### Multiple Perspectives

What is the subject of this film? Can you determine the filmmakers' perspective on this subject? What evidence can you find in the film to support your view?

How does this film help you analyze and interpret points of view about issues that concern people?

Does the filmmakers' perspective foster respect for diversity and an inclusive society? If so, how?

### Identity

Whose story is told in this documentary? Whose story is not told? How does this story, and the way it is told, help you understand your own community/life?

How do the people in this film identify with their community? What are the common bonds among the people in this film? What challenges do they face in expressing their identity?

What film techniques do the filmmakers use to convey the identity of the people in this film?

### Citizenship

What insights does this documentary offer about the ideals of good citizenship in the community depicted in this film?

How does the film deal with issues of freedom, equality, human dignity, and individual and collective rights and responsibilities?

### Change and Continuity

How does this film help you understand a community's values and its attitudes towards an issue at a particular time?

What changes do the people in the film experience? What causes those changes? What are the consequences of those changes for the people in the documentary?

### Culture and Community

Which aspects of a people's culture does this film focus on? Why do you think the filmmakers focused on those aspects?

How do the images, themes and message of this film help you understand the filmmakers' attitude towards the subject?

What do you think might have been the intended audience's attitude towards the documentary subject?

### Individuals, Societies and Economic Decisions

What economic systems are at work in this film? What are some of the causes and effects of the economic decisions made by the people in the film's community?

Does money play a part in the decisions being made in the film and what does it tell you about their local culture?

### Power and Governance

What system of government control do we see in this documentary? How is power distributed within this society?

What are the implications of that distribution on issues affecting the people's well-being and freedom?

### Global Connections

What global issues are addressed in this film? What is the filmmakers' point of view on the opportunities and challenges of those issues?

Adapted from NFB Documentary Lens: <http://www.nfb.ca>

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Have students review another film directed by an Aboriginal filmmaker (suggested films include *Powwow Highway*, *Smoke Signals*, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, *Once Were Warriors*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Whale Rider*). Their reviews should include the following elements:

- A title for the review.
- The title and type of film they are reviewing.
- A brief summary of the content or story of the film, including the main conflict, the setting and the characters.
- Some analysis of the director's work: does the film seem to flow well from scene to scene and from sequence to sequence, or is it hard to follow? Do viewers know why the characters are doing what they're doing? Is it visually pleasing? Is the pace appropriate? How does the soundtrack add to the film? Does the director get the intended reaction from the audience?
- Comments on the camera work, editing, lighting or other visual impacts of the film.
- An overall assessment of the film, employing analysis and commentary that includes the central theme of the film (the point the film tries to make, its lesson or the central idea) and whether it holds the viewer's interest and why.

### Additional Questions for Pre-Viewing or Post-Viewing Activities

How does the recent upsurge in films made by Aboriginal directors reflect the changing relationship Aboriginal Peoples have with non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada and worldwide?

How would not being able to control their own image or tell their own story affect an Aboriginal person's identity?

How might the concept of sovereignty—the right to govern oneself—relate to telling one's own story?

What challenges might Hollywood stereotypes still create in contemporary society?

### Quotations From the Film to Explore

*"Up here, we don't wear feathers or ride horses. But because of the movies, a lot of the world still thinks we do."*

*"We'll never be able to change the fantasy of who and what 'Indians' are. That fantasy will always be there."*

*"The [dominant] culture wanted to perpetuate the idea that these people are now mythological. They don't even really exist; they're like dinosaurs."*

*"White people playing Native roles? I love it because it's funny."*

*"This is an ingenious act of colonialism. You're essentially robbing Indians of an identity and grouping them into one."*

*"When you're kids and you're trying to play cowboys and Indians, and if you're an Indian, well, doesn't that mean you're going to lose all the time?"*

*"We're not Indian. We're not Native Americans. We're older than both concepts. We're the people; we're the human beings."*

*"Native American people became a great allegorical tool, to stand in for virtually any oppressed people."*

*"What has kept us alive is humour, our ability to laugh. I mean, it just gets ugly sometimes. And our ability to laugh at the ugly—the humour has saved us."*

*"You don't always have to make great representations of Native people. We're not asking for that. We're not asking to be nobles or righteous or good all the time. We're asking to be human."*



## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITY: "USEFUL" STEREOTYPES? OR JUST DON'T GO THERE?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Mark: \_\_\_\_\_ /40 (See rubric)

The film includes a clip from a famous commercial from the 1970s called "The Crying Indian," featuring Iron Eyes Cody (who wasn't Native American, but Italian). Created by an aluminum company that was promoting recycling, the commercial was part of the environmental movement that began in the 1970s. In the 1990s, after *Dances With Wolves* won the Academy Award for Best Picture, Aboriginal Peoples became very popular in Europe, where they were seen as a symbol of freedom. For this assignment, you will watch two online videos:

- The "Crying Indian" commercial (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7OHG7tHrNM>)
- A commercial for Mustang jeans that aired in Poland in the 1990s (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-6UmAtBqIE&feature=related>)

After viewing the videos, you will be responsible for writing an essay that discusses the messages in the videos and the connection between those messages and the images chosen by the video directors. Your essay must include the following:

- A summary of the images and content of both commercials, including what (if anything) they are selling.
- A definition of the word "stereotype."
- A discussion of whether any images and/or dialogue in the videos are stereotypical, and if so, why.
- How stereotypes might affect the identities of non-dominant peoples living within a dominant society.
- How stereotypes might affect the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.
- A discussion of the message or idea in each video.
- An opinion on whether those messages/ideas are useful or harmful, and whether any stereotypes that may be present are affected or excused by the nature of the messages/ideas, supported by information from both the online videos and the film *Reel Injun*.

You may also use ideas from the Pre-Viewing, Viewing and Post-Viewing activities/discussions, the questions from the Big Ideas section and the rubric categories to help guide your writing.

## "USEFUL" STEREOTYPES? OR JUST DON'T GO THERE? RUBRIC

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	Level 1 (50-59%)	Level 2 (60-69%)	Level 3 (70-79%)	Level 4 (80-100%)
Knowledge and Understanding	5.0 5.2 5.4 5.6 5.8	6.0 6.2 6.4 6.6 6.8	7.0 7.2 7.4 7.6 7.8	8.0 8.2 8.5 9.0 10
Understands the meaning of "stereotype" and how they apply to indigenous peoples	Demonstrates limited understanding of stereotypes as they apply to indigenous peoples	Demonstrates some understanding of stereotypes as they apply to indigenous peoples	Demonstrates considerable understanding of stereotypes as they apply to indigenous peoples	Demonstrates thorough and insightful understanding of stereotypes as they apply to indigenous peoples
Explains how stereotypes relate to concepts of identity, self-determination and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples	Explains how stereotypes relate to concepts of identity, self-determination and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples with a limited degree of understanding	Explains how stereotypes relate to concepts of identity, self-determination and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples with some degree of understanding	Explains how stereotypes relate to concepts of identity, self-determination and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples with a considerable degree of understanding	Explains how stereotypes relate to concepts of identity, self-determination and the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples with a thorough and insightful degree of understanding
Thinking/Inquiry	5.0 5.2 5.4 5.6 5.8	6.0 6.2 6.4 6.6 6.8	7.0 7.2 7.4 7.6 7.8	8.0 8.2 8.5 9.0 10
Uses critical and creative thinking skills to arrive at reasonable conclusions	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with limited effectiveness	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with moderate effectiveness	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with considerable effectiveness	Uses critical and creative thinking skills with a high degree of effectiveness
Communication	5.0 5.2 5.4 5.6 5.8	6.0 6.2 6.4 6.6 6.8	7.0 7.2 7.4 7.6 7.8	8.0 8.2 8.5 9.0 10
Uses relevant information and ideas to explain how stereotypes are linked to identity, self-determination and relationships	Communicates relevant information and ideas with limited clarity	Communicates relevant information and ideas with some clarity	Communicates relevant information and ideas with clarity	Communicates relevant information and ideas with clarity and insight

Comments:

Total: \_\_\_\_\_/40



## EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Grade 9 Native Studies: Expressing Aboriginal Cultures, Open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• describe the elements of culture reflected in various art forms.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of how Aboriginal art forms reflect cultural identity.</li> <li>• explain how art forms can be an expression of sovereignty.</li> <li>• identify different interpretations of sovereignty exemplified in various art forms.</li> <li>• demonstrate how Aboriginal art affirms Aboriginal cultures.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of issues related to the production of Aboriginal art forms.</li> <li>• identify how new and evolving art forms reclaim, revive and sustain Aboriginal cultures.</li> </ul>
Grade 10 Native Studies: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada, Open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal Peoples in 20th-century Canadian history.</li> <li>• identify the factors responsible for the development of relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and other groups.</li> <li>• identify historic and contemporary events affecting the self-determination of Aboriginal Peoples.</li> <li>• describe the many aspects of Aboriginal identity.</li> <li>• demonstrate understanding of how to analyze and evaluate information when conducting research on an historical topic or issue.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 Native Studies: Current Aboriginal Issues in Canada, University/ College Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the influences on Aboriginal societies that have an impact on their sense of identity.</li> <li>• describe Aboriginal perspectives related to issues of identity and sovereignty.</li> <li>• describe the impact of media, literature and popular culture on contemporary Aboriginal society.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 Native Studies: Aboriginal Beliefs, Values and Aspirations in Contemporary Society, College Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify aspects of cultural identity related to specific Aboriginal Peoples.</li> <li>• compare Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives on the contemporary cultural identities of Aboriginal Peoples.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the cultural practices of Aboriginal Peoples.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the varying perspectives on Aboriginal Peoples' right to self-determination.</li> <li>• describe the efforts of Aboriginal Peoples to attain autonomy in their lives.</li> <li>• identify challenges presented by the ways in which the media deal with Aboriginal issues.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 Native Studies: Aboriginal Beliefs, Values and Aspirations in Contemporary Society, Workplace Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify aspects of cultural identity related to specific Aboriginal Peoples.</li> <li>• compare Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives on the contemporary cultural identities of Aboriginal Peoples.</li> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal youth in their interaction with Canadian society.</li> <li>• describe the efforts of Aboriginal Peoples to attain autonomy in their lives.</li> <li>• describe how the values and beliefs of Aboriginal cultures are affected by the media.</li> <li>• describe how Aboriginal Peoples are attempting to rectify the stereotypical images of themselves that are portrayed in print and other media and how they use the media to their advantage.</li> </ul>
Grade 11 & 12 English, University/College/ Workplace Prep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts.</li> <li>• identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.</li> <li>• reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding media texts.</li> </ul>

## WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

The CBC Arts and Entertainment archive features an interview with director Neil Diamond.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/film/story/2010/02/17/f-neil-diamond-reel-injun.html>

A review on the *Film Threat* website suggests *Reel Injun* is lacking in its analysis.

<http://www.filmthreat.com/reviews/22172>

The official website for the movie *Reel Injun* includes the official trailer.

<http://www.reelinjunthemovie.com/site>

This summary of the film suggests some reasons why stereotypes were necessary to achieve the colonization of Aboriginal Peoples in the Americas.

<http://www.thesociologicalcinema.com/1/post/2011/12/reel-injun.html>

This review of the film is by *Toronto Star* critic Linda Barnard.

<http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/article/767790--reel-injun-witty-doc-shoots-barbed-arrows-at-hollywood-sterotype>

## Various Links for Lesson Plan Ideas, Media Awareness, Critical Literacy and Documentary Films

Center for Media Literacy: A U.S. website which provides several resources for making, understanding and criticizing media.

<http://www.medialit.org>

Hot Docs Library: Dozens of online Canadian documentaries, including a number with education support material to aid with classroom viewing.

<http://www.hotdocslibrary.ca>

Hot Docs' Looking at Documentaries: A teaching guide that sets out questions designed to help teachers include the study of documentary film in their curriculum. Free PDF download.

<http://www.hotdocs.ca/youth>

Media Awareness: A Canadian non-profit media education and Internet literacy resource library.

<http://www.media-awareness.ca>

NFB Education: Rich in resources and activities.

<http://www.nfb.ca/education>

CAMPUS: Your online media solution from the NFB. Ontario teachers—activate your profile today at

<http://www.nfb.ca/campus/go>