



April 2003

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Recommended Citation

Fielding, Julien R. (2003) "Native American Religion and Film: Interviews with Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol7/iss1/5>

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Native American Religion and Film: Interviews with Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie

Abstract

For decades Hollywood films have cast the American Indian as the savage, the medicine man and the noble warrior, stereotypes that either demonize or romanticize a people. Ritual and religion rarely receive much better treatment. One of the reasons for this poor representation is that filmmakers are coming from a white perspective. Director Chris Eyre and writer-director Sherman Alexie, both American Indians, have emerged in the last decade to rectify the situation, jointly creating the film *Smoke Signals*, a buddy road picture that forces the protagonists to rethink Indian identity and the bonds that tie them. Eyre and Alexie examine how their films deal with religion.

Sweat lodges, peace pipes, peyote journeys to the spirit world, sun dances and animal totems are all part of American Indian religion. We know this because we have seen *Dances With Wolves*, *A Man Called Horse*, *Young Guns* and *(The) Mountain Men*. But, as much as Hollywood wants to teach us native spirituality it cannot do it. For the most part, Hollywood relies on what sells and that has frequently been more fiction than fact, leaving viewers with a confused idea of exactly what American Indian religion entails.

Chris Eyre, a director of Cheyenne-Arapaho descent, and Sherman Alexie, a writer and director of Spokane-Coeur d'Alene descent, are slowly trying to redress this misrepresentation; Eyre with such films as *Smoke Signals*, *Skins* and *Skinwalkers*, and Alexie with his screenplay for *Smoke Signals*, which he adapted from his short story "This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," and *The Business of Fancydancing*, which in 2002 marked his directorial debut.

If Hollywood revels in one-dimensional characters and fanciful representations, these filmmakers are doing anything but. Rather than try to place the American Indian in history, Eyre focuses on contemporary issues - life on the reservation and questions of identity. "I'm not an expert on Native American religion. I just know what I believe," he said from California. "I wouldn't do ceremony in my films because I don't know how to capture it. It's subjective. Those who exploit it do a disservice to it. *A Man Called Horse* bastardized the Sun Dance,

and vision quest sounds so cliché if it's not done in the right way. There's nothing that can capture it. Indian religion isn't considered a real thing. People regard it as nonreligion, not a real religion. I think we've fallen short of portraying Indians in the media. Indians have never been portrayed in a respectful way, someone always over romanticizes or over glorifies them on an iconic level. They don't know how to portray them. We don't need to make another *Dances With Wolves*, because it's not an Indian movie. When Indians portray themselves, then we have a different perspective. I've been asked about making period pieces but I've never read one that wasn't about guilt, and I'm not trying to make a guilt film."

Alexie agrees that the most accurate way to portray American Indians is in the present. "We have to deal with now, far too many deal with politics - Indian politics are incredibly narcissistic - or nostalgia; the pre-Columbian days," he said from his home in Washington. "And they are filtered through a white voice. Black Elk himself disavowed Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* before he died, a fact which is conveniently omitted in any discussion of the book." But more than simply putting a modern face on American Indians, Alexie, who grew up on a reservation, seems intent on shattering preconceptions. For instance, in his buddy road film *Smoke Signals* the protagonist, Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams), is a good-natured, bookish, spectacles-wearing storyteller; basically a nerd. His sidekick, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach), conforms to the handsome, warrior ideal but is more than

the stone-faced, monosyllabic Indians of Hollywood's past, a stereotype Alexie pokes fun at on pages 61-2 of his screenplay.¹

Victor

"I mean, you just go on and on talking about nothing. Why can't you have a normal conversation? You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances with Wolves*? A hundred, two hundred times? Oh, jeez, you have seen it that many times, haven't you? Man. Do you think that shit is real? God. Don't you even know how to be a real Indian? . First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic. You got to look mean or people won't respect you. White people will run all over you if you don't look mean. You got to look like a warrior. You got to look like you just got back from killing a buffalo."

Thomas

"But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fisherman."

Victor

"What? You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? It ain't *Dances with Salmon* you know? Man, you think a fisherman is tough? Thomas, you got to look like a warrior. There that's better. And second, you can't be talking as much as you do. You got to have some mystery. You got to look like you have secrets, you know? Like you're in a secret conversation with the earth or something. You don't talk. You just nod your head. See! That makes you look dangerous."

Throughout *Smoke Signals*, Alexie punctuates the events with humor and moments of joy, something that Eyre said he particularly liked about the script. "In *Smoke Signals* Thomas tells stories then laughs," he said. "You don't have to show the steps of the Sun Dance. The real spirit is laughter, and I try to have it in every one of my movies. (In *Smoke Signals*) there's an element of love and understanding

between the characters; humor is a part of religion. Icons are an oversimplification. For the most part, no film will teach you about native religion. Look at About Schmidt. That's awesome. That's religion that transcends culture."

Although some have attempted to interpret *Smoke Signals* through American Indian spirituality, Alexie says it is a stretch. "I grew up Catholic - my dad is very Catholic - and then I went to college in Spokane at a Jesuit university," he said. "I still am heavily Catholic - and Christian-influenced. I write about what I am not what I want to be. A lot more (Indians) pretend to be more traditional and connected than they are. It's been fun to see people try to understand (the film) through Native American spirituality."

A number of key scenes in *Smoke Signals* were inspired by Biblical stories, Alexie said. "There's the scene where Victor's mom is tearing the fry bread, half of that is Jesus stuff going on," he said. In the scene Thomas claims that Victor's mom's fry bread is "so good they use it for Communion back home. Arlene Joseph makes some Jesus fry bread, enit? Fry bread that can walk across water. Fry bread rising from the dead." A few moments later, he relates a story of how one time "there was a 100 Indians at that feast and there were only 50 pieces of fry bread. Arlene kept trying to figure out what to do. Arlene was magic. She knew how to feed a 100 Indians with 50 pieces of fry bread." To solve the problem, Arlene holds the piece over her head and rips it in half.

The main characters in the screenplay, like Alexie, are Salmon people, and this symbol of the fish appears several times in the film. It is no coincidence that this image has strong ties to Jesus's association with the fish or ichthus. In one scene, on page 139 of the screenplay, Thomas tells Victor that he is "going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss these ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon. He'll rise." These words find fulfillment at the end of the screenplay, when Victor delivers his father's ashes to the wind. "Just before the ash reaches the water, a salmon rises from the water through the ash and splashes back into the river" (147). "Salmon is very Jesus," Alexie said. Finally, Alexie said one scene was inspired by the Book of Isaiah in the Bible; about 90 percent of the monologue came from it. The writer just paraphrased the language into Thomas's diction.

Like Alexie, Eyre, too, was raised as a Christian. "I was raised Presbyterian and I am proud of that," he said. "My mother was liberal and tolerant to religion. As I got older I kept those traits into my adult life. My saving grace was that my parents were so homogenous, they never gave me an (American Indian) perspective. They didn't try to give me what's not theirs. They said I was a Cheyenne-Arapaho. They couldn't deny I didn't come from them because physically I knew I was different. It's natural to fill that other side in. There's a genetic memory there." As Eyre began learning more about Cheyenne ceremonies

he said he came across the prophecies of Sweet Medicine, a 19th century prophet, and detected some similarities between what he was saying and Christian teachings. This made Eyre wonder if this was a case of all religions being the same or if the Christian missionaries had, by their presence, affected a change in native philosophies. "I believe there was an influence - although it's not a bad thing," he said.

The assimilation of beliefs also affected Alexie's people, the Coeur d'Alene. "One of my great-great-great-great grandmothers first saw the coming of the black crows," he said. "She had a dream about European contact. She dreamed about three ravens with white stars on their necks showing up and coming to the people, and the ravens saying, 'If you don't listen to us and do what we say, you're all going to die.' A week later, three Jesuits showed up, in black, with white stars at their necks." The moral was, to assimilate or be annihilated.

Eyre may not overly depict religion in his films, but one still can find it there. "There's always a form of the trickster in my films," he said. "Thomas (in *Smoke Signals*) is the trickster. He can be likened to the jester. In *Skins* (the trickster) is more articulated. Rudy (Eric Schweig) has a really versatile character although some of it by circumstance. He has two sides like Jekyll and Hyde. He's a cop who uses the channels of normalcy of the overculture but he also sees it's futile. And that's why Rudy gets so incensed. He realizes it's a bunch of bull. He's really

the trickster like Evan Adams (who portrays Thomas Builds-the-Fire) is in *Smoke Signals*. He does stupid things but he does them to make us think. He's the one who changes the world at the end. It's about claiming the good and the bad." (According to American Indian legend, a trickster can be a creative, transformative force, embodied by the coyote, raven and spider, that shakes up convention.) As long as the end is in the right spirit, that's Indian. Sharing and giving, that's Indian. I don't believe in boxing another culture out to make yours better. It's a crutch I don't rely on. Some talk of a Utopia where a film is all native cast and crew. There is no Utopia. That's a crutch. I'm interested in expanding myself as an artist. *Skins* is a cultural movie to me."

Alexie agrees. "Since Sept. 11, I've let go of making decisions based on tribalism. I don't want to make decisions on people who look like me. Indians often speak of themselves exclusively; how it benefits them. I try to be more inclusive. I play basketball with Catholic lawyers, two urban raised black men, one Hawaiian, one Korean and two gay men. That's my life. If you're making art that doesn't dig into who you are, then you're only dealing with metaphors. Once you get into yourself, it's scary, most people can't do that."

Alexie challenges American Indian identity in this latest effort *The Business of Fancydancing*, a short film that again allowed him to work with Evan Adams.

"We are very similar," he said. "We both belong to Salmon tribes, both from Pacific Northwest tribes, both reservation kids. He's the Sherman Alexie of Canada."

In the film Adams plays Seymour Polatkin, a homosexual American Indian poet who must confront his past when he returns to the reservation to attend a friend's funeral. "I wrote it in 1.5 months and shot it in two months," Alexie said. "It's making the rounds, and has played at about 40 film festivals and in about 30 cities." Adapted from his first book of poetry, the film has garnered the first time filmmaker critical praise but hasn't endeared him to some American Indians, who despite the fact that many perceive them as crystal wearing universalists, can be quite homophobic, he said. "Indian country is not liberal, it's full of fundamentalists."

If one believes Hollywood, all American Indians share a common mythology and ritual. Not true, Alexie said, "These are always tribal specific. Spokane is different from Lakota; it's all geography based." Although certain places of the United States are sanctified to different tribes, Eyre said in his films he wants to push this idea of sacrality even further. For instance, if a script mentions that a place carries religious significance, many filmmakers would go to Zion National Park or some equally picturesque location. Not Eyre. He said he would rather choose a desert, a generic rock, a basin or average landscape to represent the place. "Spirituality is about the day to day, hanging in there," he said. "We always try to

ascribe (the spiritual) to something overly majestic when what I'm interested in is when I see the mundane, normalcy, I'm thankful."

When scouting locations for *Skins*, Eyre decided that only Pine Ridge Reservation would do. "I actually made the choice to shoot there, because it felt like it was a character," he said. "We could have gotten 40 cents on the dollar in Canada and I did scout Canada in a helicopter but it wasn't Pine Ridge. There is no substitute for Pine Ridge. I felt it was such an important element to the story that it had to be based there. The tribal council allowed me to shoot (there); trusting me as an Indian. I made the movie with my heart. You see the poverty in Pine Ridge but I also wanted to show the spirit of life because that's what Indians are about." "Skins" was the first film to be filmed on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and the first to receive permission by the U.S. Parks Service to shoot on Mount Rushmore, a symbol of cultural enslavement and genocide to many native people who consider the mountain sacred.

Eyre began his film career nearly a decade ago. While working on his master's degree at New York University Film School, Eyre wrote and directed several short films, including *Tenacity*, a short Indian drama that won the university's Best Short Film, the Mobile Award and a place at the 1995 Sundance Film Festival, where he was invited to participate in a directing workshop. Under the tutelage of Robert Redford and Steve Zaillian, Eyre worked on a short screen

adaptation of Alexie's screenplay. The following year, the director shot a full-length feature of the project; his cast comprised of predominantly American Indians, including Gary Farmer and Adam Beach. The film debuted at Sundance, winning the Audience Award and Filmmaker's Trophy. Released by Miramax, *Smoke Signals* went on to gross more than \$6.5 million. For his sophomore effort, Eyre turned to *Skins*, a story written by Adrian C. Louis and adapted by Jennifer D. Lyne that focuses on the loving but strained relationship between brothers Rudy and Mogie who also attempt to cope with life on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. As a criminal investigator for the Pine Ridge Police Department, Rudy deals with the prevalent unemployment, poverty, alcoholism and domestic abuse on a daily basis, while Mogie finds himself caught in a destructive spiral of alcoholism and memories of Vietnam. *Skins* premiered at Sundance Jan. 14, 2002. Recently for PBS he directed *Skinwalkers*, which he said was the station's most successful film in the last 10 years, and he continues to adapt Peter Matthiessen's *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*. His goals as a filmmaker, he said are to keep making movies that are important and that show Indian people progressing into the rest of the American pie. "I looked for those as a child," he said.

Alexie began his career as a poet, publishing his first collection in 1992. Not long after, he completed a book of short stories that was titled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.² Two novels - *Reservation Blues*³ and *Indian Killer*⁴

- and nearly a dozen collections of short stories and poetry followed. Grove/Atlantic will release another short stories collection, *Ten Little Indians*,⁵ in June 2003. He is also working on a biography of Jimi Hendrix.

¹ Alexie, Sherman. *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay*. New York: Hyperion, 1998.

² Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Perennial; Reprint edition (September 1994)

³ Alexie, Sherman. *Reservation Blues*. Warner Books; (September 1996)

⁴ Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer*. Warner Books; (January 1998)

⁵ Alexie, Sherman. *Ten Little Indians*. Grove Press; (April 4, 2003)