Native Americans on Screen in 1939 and 2015
A Postcolonial Study on the Portrayal of the Indigenous People of America in Films and How to Adapt it into the EFL Classroom

Author: Emil Pettersson
Supervisor: Anna Thyberg
Examiner: Anna Greek
Semester: Spring 2017
Subject: English Literature
Level: Bachelor
Course Code: 2ENÄ2E
Abstract

The essay originates from the idea that the United States has a history of racism evidenced in the displacement and discrimination of Native Americans and that the representation of Native Americans in films reflects the changing views of the indigenous population in the surrounding society. The purpose of this essay is to investigate how the Native American characters are portrayed in western films. Two films are going to be analysed; Stagecoach from 1939 and The Revenant from 2015. The theoretical framework that is used for the analysis is Postcolonialism. The findings reveals that Native American characters are portrayed more humanely in The Revenant than in Stagecoach. By applying the findings into the classroom the students can be given the opportunity to discuss human rights, equal value and solidarity between people, which can lead to reflections about the fundamental values of the curriculum.

Keywords

Western film, Postcolonialism, Stagecoach, The Revenant, representation, portrayal, description, Upper secondary students, EFL
Table of Contents

1 Introduction ................................................................. 1

2 Method .............................................................................. 2

3 Previous Research and Theory ........................................ 4
  3.1 Postcolonialism .......................................................... 7
  3.2 Orientalism ............................................................... 9

4 Analysis of the films ....................................................... 12
  4.1 Stagecoach directed by John Ford (1939) ...................... 12
  4.2 The Revenant directed by Alejandro G. Inárritu (2015) ...... 15
  4.3 Classroom Adaptation ................................................. 17

5 Conclusion .......................................................................... 20

6 Works Cited ................................................................. 21
1 Introduction

Film has become a prominent teaching material in Swedish classrooms over the years. The curriculum and syllabus nowadays even state that teachers should use film in the classroom (Nat. Agency f. Ed. “Syllabus”). With the development of technical tools that are easily accessible for everyone¹, film analysis is now a method of teaching that is used on a regular basis in the classroom. Jeremy Harmer argues in The practice of English language teaching from 2007, that film is an excellent way of letting the students study different kinds of paralinguistic behaviour. The students can learn more about what kind of gestures follows specific phrases, and they can see how intonation goes together with different facial expressions (Harmer 308-9). That is of course one of the reasons why film can work as a great complement when teaching in the classroom, but are there other elements that students could learn from film? One of the aims of this essay is to investigate if film is a beneficial resource for teachers to use in the English as a foreign language classroom (hereby referred to as EFL) when working with critical thinking and evaluation of visible media. It will give an overview of what has been said about film in the classroom from previous studies and furthermore the essay will look at two films with western themes; Stagecoach from 1939 and The Revenant from 2015. These two films will be analysed and the aim of making the analysis is to investigate to what extent there has been any change in the way the indigenous people of America, the Native Americans, are portrayed in films. The films are going to be analysed with the help of Postcolonial theory, more precisely Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, which is the theoretical framework in this essay. What Postcolonialism and Orientalism focus on is presented in the section “Previous Research and Theory”.

Ever since Christopher Columbus arrived in what he believed to be India, which turned out to be America, European colonists started to settle around the country, driving the Native Americans off their lands and pushing them further into the country. These settlements eventually became the foundation of the United States of America, the ”greatest country in the world” and “the land of opportunities”. These are two of the catchphrases that Americans like to use when describing their beloved home country. It is part of the “American Dream”, the set of ideals that everyone in the United States wants: Democracy, liberty, equality etc. The list goes on and on. The American Dream

¹ Free streaming services, which Swedish schools are allowed to use, such as SVT Play, TV4 Play and many others are nowadays very easily accessed through the internet. This gives the
is deeply rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which states that all men are created equal and have the right to liberty, life and the pursuit of happiness (“The Declaration of Independence” UShistory). But is that the case? Is everyone in the United States looked upon the same way? This essay argues that the United States has a history of racism evidenced in the displacement and discrimination of Native Americans and that the representation of Native Americans in films reflects the changing views of the indigenous population in the surrounding society. This is something that might be shown through the analysis of the films. In film re-enactments, history comes alive in a way that allows us to reach a deeper understanding of historic events. It could be easier to learn from history when we are able to connect emotionally to individual characters on screen. By using Stagecoach and The Revenant in the classroom, or clips from the films, the discussion of racism and humans’ equal rights etc. can be brought up in context with the plot of the film. This way it could make it easier for teachers to discuss such things in the classroom and might give the students a better understanding of the cultural, political, social and living conditions in other parts of the world, which is something that is stated in the syllabus (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Syllabus”).

2 Method

Firstly, previous research and theory is presented. The previous research deals with what researchers have discovered up until now about film in the EFL classroom and also what the Swedish curriculum and syllabus say about using film as teaching material in the classroom. Secondly, Postcolonial theory that will be used for the analysis will be presented and accounted for. Postcolonial perspectives will then be used to analyse the films in the section “Analysis”. The analysis will look at the portrayal of the indigenous people of the United States, the Native Americans. It will analyse how the other characters in the films talk with/about them, but also how they are presented by the filmmakers; camera angles, music, speaking roles etc.

The reason Postcolonial theory is the most advantageous choice for this essay is due to the perspective the theory takes. The essay claims that the Native American people are portrayed disadvantageously and unfairly in films. To analyse if this is the case, the best way to do that would be by viewing the films from the perspective of the Native American people and not from the westerners' point of view. By analysing the
films from the Native American perspective, it should become very clear how they are portrayed differently compared to the western people and if there are any differences between the two films. There will only be two films which are analysed in this essay, so it would not be accurate to assume that the findings represent all the Western themed films that have been produced.

The films that are chosen for this analysis have been selected due to the great timespan between them, more than 75 years. By choosing films which are produced so far apart chronologically, there should be greater differences compared to films produced chronologically closer in time. If there are differences in how the indigenous people of America are portrayed in the films, the differences should be clearly visible through the analysis of these two films. In this essay, *Stagecoach* will represent the older Western themed films, and *The Revenant* will be the representative for the modern day Western themed films. One of the most advantageous qualities of this essay is that while the representation of the Native American characters on film has been explored in numerous studies (LeValdo-Gayton; Mihelich to name a few), not much has been written about film studies of Westerns as part of the EFL classroom in Sweden which this essay addresses.

The analysis focuses on the portrayal of Native Americans, which only is a minor part of the films as a whole, but there are a great number of other aspects that can be analysed by using a different analytical focus. Due to the fact that there is a specific focus of this essay there are many features in the films that are not covered in the analysis. Aspects such as gender portrayal, character stereotyping and plot structure are examples of things that this essay will exclude in the analysis but would be interesting to look at in another context. Furthermore, the analysis will only consist of what is shown in the film without consideration to historical events that might have had an effect on the events in the films. When the analysis of the films is finished, the findings will be discussed and finally tied together in a conclusion.
3 Previous Research and Theory

In this section, parts from the Swedish curriculum and syllabus will be presented. Furthermore, the previous research on using film in the EFL classroom will be presented as well. In addition to that, the theoretical foundation which the essay will be based on is presented in this section. It consists of those theories and ideas that are of importance for the reader to understand when reading the analysis of the two films in the essay.

Since the use of film was introduced in the curriculum and syllabus it can be assumed that it is currently used more frequently in the EFL classroom than before. Due to the technical development, which has increased rapidly, and the ability to use multimedia material easily in the classroom (see footnote 1) there should not be any problems for the teachers to follow these guidelines. The Swedish curriculum states that the students, through their studies, should be given the opportunity for lifelong learning. The knowledge should come from many different sources so the students are trained in collecting information from many different places. The students should also be given the opportunity to reflect on the knowledge they gain and apply it to different situations (Natl. Agency f. Ed. 4-7). One of the bullet points in the curriculum section, which mentions the goals every student should reach at the end of their upper secondary school period, states that the students should be able to use modern technology to search for information (Natl. Agency f. Ed. 9). That can be connected to the usage of computers, cellular phones and television in the search for information during class.

The syllabus for English 5 states in the core content that the teaching should include: “Spoken language, also with different social and dialect features, and texts that instruct, relate, summarise, explain, discuss, report and argue, also via film and other media” (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Syllabus”). 2 This quote shows that the syllabus says that film should be used as part of the teaching. Students should also be exposed to different types of speech in the classroom. Film can be used in other ways than only for the reception of spoken language. The core content also states that the English lessons must give the students opportunity to learn about:

---

2 The core content is the part of the syllabus which states the content a course, in this case English 5, must cover.
Living conditions, attitudes, values and traditions, as well as social, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. The spread of English and its position in the world. (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Syllabus”)

This can also be done through the use of film. By showing a film which brings up items like the ones in the quote, the students can reflect on these matters and have a discussion after the screening of the film. It is therefore important that film is used as teaching material in the classroom occasionally, since it is mentioned specifically in the curriculum and in the syllabus for the subject of English. By using the medium of film in a way that engages the students to watch actively, for example having them take notes during the film and having a discussion afterwards or giving them an assignment to write after watching the film so they must watch the film from a certain perspective, film analysis can be just as valid a method of teaching as reading books or just listening to the teacher. Film can be so much more than just a reward for hard work or something to do when the teacher does not have anything planned. This is something that is stated in the curriculum: “Students should develop their ability to think critically, examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives” (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Curriculum” 5).

Rania Hassen Kabooha has done a study on the use of film in the EFL classroom in Saudi Arabia. The study interviewed EFL teachers and their students about their thoughts of integrating film in the classroom to improve the students’ language skills. Both teachers and students thought that it was a very good idea to use film in the EFL teaching to improve the students’ language skills since the films exposed the students to native speakers of English. It was also found in the study that most of the students agreed that their vocabulary had increased considerably due to watching films instead of just working in text books and listening to their teacher. The interest for learning the language seemed to increase immensely when the students had the chance to learn through the use of film instead of only doing basic classroom work. However, the study’s findings showed that showing a film would not be beneficial for the students if the teacher did not give them the appropriate learning activities to go with the film (Hassen Kabooha 248-57).

A study made by Gölge Seferoglu on the use of film in the classroom reached the same conclusion. In the study, a class of pre-service English teachers were exposed to
films during their oral communication course and afterwards they engaged in discussions where they analysed their experiences. The study showed that it is very useful to watch films in order to gain authentic language input and for enhancing students’ language competencies, but also to learn about things that are not related to the language directly such as cultural issues and non-verbal communication. The study also states that it is possible to engage in a more focused analysis of grammatical structures and vocabulary if the teacher chooses to show shorter clips of a film, rather than showing the whole film without pauses. Seferoglu argues that the findings of the study suggest that showing films in the classroom could provide valuable learning opportunities for language learners if the films are used purposefully. Her study reached the same conclusion as Hassen Kabooha’s study, which argues that it is essential to set clear aims and tasks so the learners watch the film with a purpose and not just leisurely as they do at home. She argues that the learners must understand that it is not for relaxation purposes the teacher chooses to show a film during the lesson (Seferoglu 1-9).

Jane King is pointing at the same advantages of using film in the classroom. She argues that the whole point of watching films during lessons stands and falls with the teacher’s ability to construct a meaningful lesson for the students. King argues that when the students are provided with involving, meaningful assignments connected to the film, the students will benefit a lot from being exposed to films in their education. In her conclusion, she argues that using films, if approached from the right angles, is by far the best teaching method for the so-called e-generation (King 509-23).

These studies deal with language skills but do not address critical analysis or ideological content. They indicate a gap, which this essay addresses. Teaching and learning English should no longer be considered a universal and neutral endeavour but rather imbued with historical and cultural conditions and uniquely constituted in the local sociocultural context.

The only negative comments about using media content as material in teaching that has been found during the composition of this essay comes from the book *Children and Television*, written by Barry Gunter and Jill McAleer, which was published in 1997. The negative aspects that are mentioned are not directly focused on the learning outcomes for the students, and not even on film, but more on the fact that that television tend to show violence and other things that might make the younger audience aggressive, racist etc. This quote from the book clarifies above statement:
Television has been accused of encouraging children and teenagers to become more aggressive, to begin drinking under age, to use bad language, and to adopt sexist and racist points of view. Television is also seen as undermining the educational development of young people through cultivating mental passivity and laziness and by keeping children up too late. (Gunter and McAleer 217)

The authors argue that television can have a negative impact on children and teenagers and that they might take things they see on television and implement them in their real lives. They do not mention anything about negative aspects of using video and film for educational purposes. It is mentioned that watching television can have positive effects as well, if used constructively (Gunter and McAleer 217-20).

The previous research on using film as material when teaching in the classroom that has been analysed in this essay seems to point in the same direction. The assumption which can be made from the above information is that film is a useful tool to complement the regular teaching in the EFL classroom, if the teacher backs it up with a well-planned assignment, a clear aim and specified learning outcomes.

The method of how the analysis will be executed, and previous research on the subject has now been presented. Below follows the theoretical framework which is the foundations of the film analysis.

3.1 Postcolonialism

The theoretical perspective the analysis will have is the one of Postcolonialism. Postcolonialism is a complex cluster of theories that developed after the colonies had declared their independence. According to Ania Loomba, there is an ongoing debate concerning the term Postcolonialism. She argues that since the age of the colonial rule is over and the descendents of the colonised people now live all around the world, one could say that the whole world now is postcolonial. Furthermore Loomba argues that a country can be in a postcolonial state, as an independent country, and at the same time be what she calls neo-colonial, which means that a country still is culturally or economically dependent. This is why it is difficult to say if former colonised countries
can be viewed as properly postcolonial (28-29). Some have suggested that it would be more helpful to not just look at postcolonialism as something that came right after colonialism, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism. If we look at it from that perspective it would be easier to include people who are geographically displaced by colonialism as postcolonial subjects even though they now live in metropolitan cultures (32-33). Loomba quotes Jorge de Alva in her book, and he argues that condition of postcolonialism should ”signify not so much subjectivity ’after’ the colonial experience as a subjectivity of oppositionality to imperializing/colonising discourses and practices” (33). What de Alva wants to do here is to de-link the term postcolonialism from the formal decolonisation because he believes that many people in today’s society, from former colonised countries are still experiencing oppression that dates back to the colonial era (33).

Critics of postcolonial theory have blamed it for being too dependent on postmodern perspectives. They argue that the insistence on multiple histories and fragmentation in these perspectives have decreased the opportunities to clarify how the global capitalism works today. Loomba argues that a too-quick expansion of the term postcolonial can serve as a way of flattening the nuances of both past and contemporary situations (33-34).

Postcolonial theory attempts to shift the ways in how people look at the relations between the western world and the non-western society (Young 1-2). It means to turn the perspective around and try to look at things from the other side of the table, experiencing things from the non-western side of the story. If a person is from the western world, he or she probably has preconceptions of how non-western societies and cultures are. Postcolonialism is driven forward by the idea that all cultures should be seen as equal, and that everyone should have the same cultural well-being. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the world right now. According to Young the world today is full of inequality, and the greatest difference can be seen between the western and non-western societies. Postcolonialism can be used as an analytical tool when looking at these differences.

The colonisation process that took place back in the 19th century is a major cause to this difference that remains nowadays. When the European empires expanded, so did the European culture as well. The colonised countries were forced to adapt to the European ways of doing things, even though they had managed to rule their lands perfectly for many hundreds of years before the colonisers came and took over the rule.
The European colonisers defended their acts by portraying the non-westerners as incapable of taking care of themselves and thereby were in need of the colonisation to protect their country and keep it running in a smooth way. These thoughts might still linger in people’s minds today. Maybe not as strong, but it is a fact that the African countries, as an example, are behind the western world in many aspects due to the fact that their countries’ development was set aside to benefit the European colonisers (Young 2-4). The same parallel can be drawn to the view on women in the older days. All books and films were told from the man’s point of view. There was never a woman who was the main character, she was just an object to be observed and never the one that actually did something of interest. Men were assumed to be more intelligent than women (Young 4-6). The essay will use this way of seeing things, to turn it over and try to look from the other perspective, in this case try to look from the non-western perspective to find out how the Native Americans are portrayed in the two movies. How are the Native Americans pictured in these two films? Are they portrayed as objects, without their own voice or culture? And if so, is there any difference from the older film *Stagecoach*, that was made in 1939 and the newly produced *The Revenant*, which premiered in 2015?

This connects to the next part of the essay which describes Orientalism, one of the many aspects of postcolonialism. Orientalism deals with the process of Othering, portraying the non-westerners as something foreign and unfamiliar and, therefore, as inferior (Said 1-2).

### 3.2 Orientalism

Orientalism is one aspect of postcolonialism, which is a cluster of theories, describing the representations of the Orient, the countries which are in the eastern parts of the world. The person who was the leading man in exposing the pseudo-science of this field was Edward Said. His book *Orientalism*, which was published the first time in 1978, gave new perspectives on the cultural representations that are the basis of Orientalism. The book is seen as a starting point of post-colonial theory. *Orientalism* was a new kind of study of colonialism. It uses the concept of discourse to re-order the study of colonialism. Said argued that the representation of the Orient in European literature created a dichotomy between Europe and the Other. Said showed how the knowledge-production about non-westerners was part in the process of remaining in
power over them. Knowledge about the non-westerners was always biased because it was produced by westerners. Said argued that the study of the Orient was a political vision that promoted an opposition between Europe and the Orient. This created a 'we against them' feeling which painted the picture of the Orient as strange and unfamiliar (Loomba 60-64). A historical summary will be presented below in order to gain further knowledge about the concept of Orientalism and to distinguish why it is important for the analysis.

Since the days of the colonies the western civilisation has considered itself superior to the eastern countries. As a matter of fact, people from the west thought that the eastern countries could not take care of themselves. Many argued that the colonies were the best solution for the people in the east. As an example, the British occupation of Egypt during the late 19th- and early 20th century was considered to be the best thing that could happen for the Egyptian people. Arthur James Balfour, who was a politician in the British parliament at the time, described the whole situation as a necessity to make sure that Egypt remained a great nation. He argued that the experience western society had, compared to the Egyptians, would make them the best rulers that Egypt as a country had ever seen. He argued that it was not only beneficial for Egypt and the eastern countries, but for all of Europe as well (Said 31-33). It is curious that Balfour seems to have this idea that the British Empire is doing something good and helpful for the Egyptians. It does not say anywhere that the Egyptians appreciated, or even understood, this so-called favour that he argues the British Empire are doing them. Not once in the text is it possible to read something about what the Egyptians think of the situation. Balfour explains this rather peculiar situation by stating that if he let an Egyptian speak, he or she might be an agitator that wishes to cause trouble. These statements served as justifications for the British Empire to remain in control over Egypt at the time and to keep their economic interests close at hand (Said 33-34).

The theory of west and east is further explained as such: There are people of the west and then there are people of the east, Orientals. The Orientals needs to be dominated, normally meaning that their country has to be invaded and occupied. The country’s assets need to be controlled thoroughly by the western, dominant country and these assets should be made available for the western country’s disposal, in this case Great Britain (Said 35-36). These subordinate races, as they describe the Orientals, do not have the ability to rule their country. They cannot understand what is best for them and which decisions should be made at what time. The Oriental people were described
as the same type of people wherever someone went in the Orient, even though the countries referred to as the Oriental are the countries east of the Mediterranean in all of Asia and some countries in Africa, like Egypt. They all acted the same, had the same thoughts, looked the same etc. Therefore, it was so easy to come to their countries and rule. They all wanted the same things and did not know what was best for them and that was very convenient for the British people. They believed that they could act the same way around all the Orientals, thus making everything great and helping them rule their countries (Said 35-37). The British politician’s argument went further than this. He argued that the Orientals completely lacked the ability to think logically and that they were unable to draw the most obvious of conclusions. He provides the example that the Orientals are not even able to walk on a road or the sidewalk because they would not know what the sidewalk’s purpose is. This is how the western people were portraying the Orient and their inhabitants in the early 20th century. They saw it as a relationship between a strong partner and its lesser ditto. All the signs of a European man are described in a positive manner: mature, rational, virtuous etc. In other words a normal, strong man. The Oriental man is described as childish, irrational etc. They are portrayed as different, and not in a particularly pleasant way (Said 38-41). This is an example of how the westerners portrayed the people from the Orient as the Other, creating the illusion that the people from the Orient were different than them and equating difference with inferiority (Loomba 63-64).

In conclusion, Orientalism is basically the perception of the Orient from the perspective of the western people. In this essay, Orientalism figures as a historical background. The worldviews and ideological underpinnings of the British empire were still in effect during the time of the expansion of the Western frontier of the US, and it is relevant to know about these ideas in order to analyse the films where orientalising representations of Native Americans are made.
4 Analysis of the films

In this section the two films are going to be analysed. Before the analysis there will be a brief plot summary of each film to make the reader aware of the films’ major events and stories. Furthermore, there will be a didactic discussion about how the findings of the analysis can be applied to a classroom situation.

4.1 Stagecoach directed by John Ford (1939)

The film is set in the late nineteenth century and is about a stagecoach filled with different people and the viewers get to follow them during their travels. The travel companions are going to Lordsburg, New Mexico for various reasons. As they begin their journey the news reach them that the Apache tribe, with their leader Geronimo, are on the warpath. During their travels, they pick up some new people that ride along in the stagecoach and they make small stops at different stations where they eat and rest. After a few days, they reach a ferry stop where the Apaches have burned the station and the ferry. As soon as they cross the river, the Apaches attack. After a long chase where the people in the stagecoach run out of ammunition and it looks like the Apaches are going to kill them all, the cavalry comes to their rescue. They reach Lordsburg eventually, with some casualties amongst the passengers, but most of them arrive safely.

The film portrays the Native Americans without culture or as if they do not have a voice at all. An example of that can be seen in the opening sequence of the film where three higher ranked officers talk to each other over a table in a soldiers-camp. They discuss the whereabouts of the Apache leader Geronimo and that he has been seen in a certain area. One of the officers says “He had a brush with them last night” and points at a Native American man standing in the background. “How do we know he is not lying?” another officer asks, but instead of asking the Native American man he turns to the other officers for an answer. “He is a Cheyenne, they hate the Apaches more than we do” the first officer replies. The camera shows the native man briefly before switching back to the officers again. During the three seconds the native American man is seen in the close-up, he does not move a muscle. He just stands completely still and if it was not for a small sway, it could just as easily have been mistaken for a photography. He does not say anything during the rest of the scene. He just stands in the background, completely still and quiet, like a mannequin. By depicting the Cheyenne man as
immovable and stoic, the director conveys the stereotypical notion of Native Americans as fierce warriors. Also, there is an example of silencing here.

The Native American is deprived of his voice and used as an exotic stage prop. The use of a close-up in that situation, showing the feathers in his hair and the non-western facial features, and the fact that he just stands there without moving a muscle, enforces the feeling that he is not like the westerners. The director is creating a difference which allows the audience to define who they are by what they are not. They are not like the Other, and it becomes possible to project all sorts of qualities on the Other which mostly are negative. The opposite feeling is created amongst the westerners. The pregnant woman tells the others that she needs to get to her husband who is stationed in Lordsburg, she wants to be with him when she gives birth to the baby. Stories about characters makes the viewer feel connected to them in another way than to the silent native man. It creates the ‘we against them’ feeling, which Edward Said wrote about using the term the Other, and portrays the native man as something unfamiliar and foreign (1-2). By dehumanizing the Native Americans, the audience connect to the westerners and starts to support them. Due to the support for the westerners, the audience accept how the Native Americans are treated, because they feel more connected to the westerners.

The way the Native Americans are portrayed negatively in the film is visible in many scenes. During their travels, one of the passengers talks about the leader of the Apache tribe, Geronimo. He refers to him as “that Apache butcher Geronimo. A nice name for a butcher.” In this scene, the Native Americans are described as butchers, meaning that they ride along and kill people just as regularly as a butcher would kill an animal. Without having seen Geronimo and his warriors on screen it already feels as the Native Americans are the villains in this story. The same thing happens later when the stagecoach arrives at the ferry station where they find it burnt down by the Apaches. Again, without knowing anything about the Apaches’ motives to why they did it, all that is shown is how brutal and savage-like they are.

The Native Americans are all portrayed as savages, no matter the context. When the party reach one of the stations where they stop to rest the owner’s wife, who is an Apache, enters and one of the men screams “savages!” Even though it is the innkeeper’s wife they instinctively believe they are under attack and become very upset.

---

3 An image in which the distance between the subject and the point of view is very short (Corrigan 183)
that he has a, what they call, savage wife. This shows that they see all the Native Americans the same way and make no difference between the warriors and the women and children. It is just like Edward Said argues, that they are all identical in the eyes of the westerners (35-37).

The negative portrayal of the Native Americans is clearly shown in the scene where they are introduced. The Apaches are introduced moments before they begin their attack on the stagecoach. The camera is filming the stagecoach from far away, with optimistic music playing in the background, before rapidly changing to showing the horde of Apaches standing with their horses on a hill. The music changes to a more threatening, powerful melody. It sets the tone for the whole scene by showing the Native Americans with music that implies the feeling that they are the villains. By using music, the director can enforce characteristics that he or she wants to emphasize in the scene (Corrigan 77-79).

Apart from two very short close-ups on the leader Geronimo, the Apaches are shown in long shots\(^4\) at all times. By doing this, the identity of the Native Americans remains unknown and they are only portrayed as a large mass of savages who wants to kill the people in the stagecoach. During the fighting scene that follows, the Native Americans do not have any speaking roles at all. In comparison of the people in the stagecoach who communicate with each other throughout the scene, with close-ups on the characters and showing them struggle with survival, it becomes evident that the characters to cheer for are the westerners. The Native Americans are stereotypically represented as a mass of bloodthirsty warriors. Since they do not say anything and only are shown as anonymous attackers, the focus is clearly on the westerners’ side of the story. The whole fighting scene is shown from the stagecoach’s point of view\(^5\) which suggests that it is only the people in the stagecoach that are important. The Native Americans that get shot are only shown from very far away and their deaths are overlooked in favour of showing the westerners taking care of their wounded, trying to escape the Apaches. The use of camera angles in this scene works as a powerful distancing mechanism which dehumanizes the Native American characters.

---

\(^4\) An image where the distance between the camera and the subject is great (Corrigan 185). In this context, the Native Americans are shown as a group and not individuals.

\(^5\) The position from which an action or subject is seen, often determining its significance (Corrigan 185).
Just as the party in the stagecoach run out of ammunition, and it seems as if they are going to be captured, they hear the sound of the cavalry trumpet. The cavalry come riding to their aid, chasing away the Apaches and rescuing the stagecoach from a certain defeat. Powerful music is accompanying the sound of the trumpet, indicating that the cavalry men are on the good side, heroically chasing away the savage Apaches.

In sum, it seems like the director had no intention of letting the audience know anything about the Apaches’ culture or their lives. The focus is on the westerners and their stories, which makes it feel as if the director purposely put an invisible wall between me as a viewer and the Native Americans to make them stand out as the villains.

4.2 The Revenant directed by Alejandro G. Inárritu (2015)

The film is set in the beginning of the nineteenth century on the western frontier. The protagonist Hugh Glass guides a group of men that are in the fur trading business. The group’s camp is attacked by the Arikara Indians, who are looking for their chief’s daughter, and the survivors must leave their raft behind and continue on foot due to the great risk of being killed by the Arikara if they continue along the river. Glass is attacked by a grizzly bear and is badly wounded. John Fitzgerald agrees to stay behind with Glass to take care of him, but when the others leave he tries to kill Glass and leaves him behind to die.

Miraculously, Glass survives and begins the journey back to the fur trading fort. After a long journey, where he meets a refugee Indian and rescues the Arikara chief’s daughter from the French, he reaches the fort and tells everyone what happened. Fitzgerald escapes before the commander of the fort can arrest him. Glass sets out to hunt Fitzgerald down and eventually finds him in the forest. After a long fight, he defeats Fitzgerald and hands him over to the Arikara Indians that show up. They kill him, but spare Glass because he rescued the chief’s daughter.

Comparative Analysis

It is true that the prejudices that were expressed in Stagecoach are allowed to be stated in a film produced in 2015, which we see in the scene where Fitzgerald is talking about Glass’s half-Native American son. “A savage is always a savage, no matter what” he says, suggesting that the son could be an ally to the Arikara tribe that attacked them. However, it is significant that in The Revenant they are said by the antagonist whose
explicit racism then further emphasis his abominable character (Said 35-37). In another scene, Fitzgerald tells the story about when the Arikara scalped him and “[they] were laughing and whopping and hollering” during the time they were doing it. This portrayal of the Native Americans, as savages who enjoy scalping people, is similar to how they are pictured in *Stagecoach*.

In the opening scene of the film the Native Americans attack the camp and there is a long battle. During this scene, everything is shown from the westerners’ point of view, just like in *Stagecoach*, and it seems as if the Native Americans are yet again the villains that just kill for the pleasure of it. However, after the battle has ended something interesting happens. The camera follows the Native Americans’ point of view, showing them grieve the dead amongst their warriors. The chief talks in Arikara saying “[My daughter] is not here, we need to continue the search”. This shows a new side to the Native Americans. They have their own language and when they are portrayed with voice they seem less savage-like. Since the reason for the attack is explained by the search for the chief’s daughter who has been abducted, the effect on the audience is a sense of compassion that is developed for the Native Americans.

All in all, the Native Americans are portrayed more humanely in *The Revenant* than they are in *Stagecoach*. An example of that is a scene where the Arikara are trading with the French. The French commander says that they need to honour their agreement and the Arikara chief replies:

You stand there in front of me talking about honour? […] You all have stolen everything from us. Everything! The land. The animals. Two white men snuck into our village and took my daughter, Powaqa. We leave you these pelts because honour demands it. I take your horses to find my daughter. You are free to try and stop me (*The Revenant*).

This scene gives a deeper understanding to why they are attacking the westerners and killing them. It sheds new light on the situation and gives the Native Americans a valid reason for the attacks, compared to *Stagecoach* where it seems as the Native Americans are attacking and killing for the amusement of it. By using scenes where the Native Americans’ perspective is shown, the director creates understanding and
compassion for them. Native American characters are no longer dehumanized but actually feel just as human, maybe even more, as the westerners.

Another sign of that the westerners and Native Americans are alike is shown when Glass has an encounter with a refugee from the Pawnee tribe. The man gives him food and takes care of Glass during his healing process. The men bond over their fates. Both have lost their families and it does not matter that they have different coloured skin and have different cultures. They are humans in need of each other and that is all that matters. Both their stories are equally important in this scene and it is clear that the director has used this scene to emphasize that no matter where we come from, we are all humans.

In contrast to the negative depiction of Native American characters in *Stagecoach*, it is rather the Americans that are portrayed as villains in *The Revenant*. For example, when Glass rescues the Arikara chief’s daughter from the French, the commander is shown raping the daughter and his men are laughing in the background. The Native Americans are portrayed as honourable people and everything they do has a background story which explains why they act in that manner. The way this film is composed, it seems as if the director wants to acknowledge the fact that the United States used to belong to the Native Americans, and that it is the westerners who have stolen the country from them.

The idea that the Native Americans only acted the way they did because they wanted to find the chief’s daughter is enforced in the last scene where they spare Glass’s life. Glass and the chief give each other a look and then the Arikara ride past him. This shows that the Arikara only hunted down the westerners to find the daughter and that they were not the savages that the westerners believed them to be.

### 4.3 Classroom Adaptation

This essay has been looking at the portrayal of the Native Americans and analysed how the other characters in the films talk with/about them, but also how they are portrayed by the filmmakers. It has also analysed if there are any differences in the portrayal of Native American characters between *Stagecoach* and *The Revenant*. How this will be adapted into a classroom setting is going to be discussed in this section of the essay.

One of the learning objectives when working with the films could be that the students can practice their ability to critically analyse the impact of directorial decisions
on a film. The two films, *Stagecoach* and *The Revenant*, give a rather different portrayal of the Native American characters. This is something that can be discussed in the classroom from a critical standpoint where the students discuss why the Native American characters are so differently portrayed in the films. They can analyse the differences and which they are, but also the similarities in the portrayal between the two films. This is connected to the curriculum, which states that the students should be able to critically examine and assess what they see, hear and read in order to be able to discuss and take view on different issues concerning life and values (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Curriculum” 9).

The fact that the films are produced more than 75 years apart is also a factor which should be taken into account when discussing them. The students can reflect on what the values and traditions were during the middle of the twentieth century, when *Stagecoach* was produced, and the difference between the values of today’s society and 75 years ago. How that is visible in the films is an interesting matter to discuss. It is something which can be connected to the aim of the English subject which states the following objective:

Students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. Teaching should encourage students’ curiosity in language and culture, and give them the opportunity to develop plurilingualism where skills in different languages interact and support each other (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Syllabus”).

By discussing the aspect of the different eras in which the films were produced, the students are engaging in reflection over cultural features and social issues in different contexts, in this case the different contexts being the timespan. The fact that historical narratives in films can be used as a reflection of contemporary norms and ideals is something which should be taken into account and discussed.

In *Stagecoach*, they are portrayed as stoic warriors and without voice. In one scene, a Native American man is used as human props when he stands in the background without moving a muscle during the whole scene. The students can discuss the portrayal of the Native Americans from a critical standpoint where they analyse all
the attributes that have been brought up in this essay. In the same way, the students can
discuss how the different aspects affect them. For example, how the use of different
camera angles make them feel a certain way for the characters and how they might have
chosen to do it in a different way to portray something else that they want to shed light
on. This is something that is discussed in Paran and Robinson’s book Literature (122-
23). The way the portrayal of the Native American characters contributes to make the
viewers feel as they are something different, the so-called Othering as Edward Said
describes it (1-2), is also an aspect that can be reflected upon. How the director is
moving away from the Othering process in The Revenant and what effects it has on the
film.

The Revenant has a scene which provides material for discussing human rights,
equal value and solidarity between people. It is the scene where Hugh Glass has the
encounter with the refugee Pawnee Indian. Even though he is very sceptical to Glass at
first he shares the meat with him and does not shoot him. The two men bond over the
fact that they both have lost their families and are on a journey for revenge. The fact that
they have different coloured skin and come from different cultures does not matter at
that point. The director chooses to portray them as just men, equally exposed to the
world at that time and they need each other to survive. The discussion regarding this
scene can revolve around the fundamental values: “The inviolability of human life,
individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people and solidarity between
people, which are some of the values which are to be included and interpreted in the
classroom” (Natl. Agency f. Ed. “Curriculum” 4). This also connects to the work
against racism, which is something that is important to implement into the classroom
situation on a regular basis.
This essay has argued that the United States has a history of racism evidenced in the displacement and discrimination of Native Americans and that the representation of Native Americans in films reflects the changing views of the indigenous population in the surrounding society. The essay’s aim was to investigate how the Native American characters were portrayed in Western themed films, and also if there were any differences between how the Native Americans are portrayed in *Stagecoach*, which is an older film from 1939, and *The Revenant*, a newly produced film from 2015. The findings of the analysis show that the Native American characters in the older film, *Stagecoach*, are portrayed very stereotypically negative, as savages without feelings who kill the westerners for fun. None of the Native American characters have a speaking role in the film which enforces the claim that the portrayal of them is staged in this way to make sure that the viewers feel resentment towards them, creating the feeling of the Native Americans being the Other, which Said argues in his book (1-2). The obvious intention of portraying the Native Americans as the villains is seen throughout the film, both in how the other characters talk about them and also when they are shown on screen, in terms of camera angles. In the newer production, *The Revenant*, the Native American characters are portrayed in a more humane way. They are given voice; they have their own language and have long conversations with each other. The reason behind their actions are explained in the film and gives the viewers an understanding to why they are acting the way they are. It creates compassion for the Native Americans and the viewers can relate to, and feel for, them just as much as for the westerners.

The findings of the analysis can be adapted into a classroom situation where the students discuss the difference in the portrayal of the Native American characters between the two films. They can also discuss how the different aspects of the films affect them, for example how the directorial moves influence how they are feeling towards the characters. The films provide material for discussing human rights, equal value and solidarity between people, which can lead to reflections about around the fundamental values of the curriculum.

There are interesting areas in which future researchers can continue where this essay ends. The role society’s formation and values has played, and still does, during the production of films, and how the script is written, is one of them. Another interesting aspect which could be further examined is how the fact that almost every
film is written and produced in the United States can have an impact on how the historical events in films are portrayed.

The portrayal of minority groups in films is something which always will be biased due to the fact that films normally are directed by persons who do not belong to a minority group themselves. It is therefore important to critically examine the representations of minority groups when analysing a film and reflect on how representations compare to reality.
6 Works Cited


