

A World at Odds and Apart (A Study of Indigenous Themes in Cinema)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

As curious viewers of indigenous themes made manifest within world cinema, we venture to the far reaches of the globe to get a rare glimpse into the lives and hardships of the first peoples. Through the exploration of four feature films with indigenous protagonists, we learn about life on a reservation, survival in the harsh Arctic wilderness, the cost of tradition and deeply rooted colonialism. We will also explore how the lead indigenous characters struggle to find themselves in a world at odds or far removed from the prevailing societal order.

In Songs My Brothers Taught Me, we meet Jashaun and her older brother Johnny, who both live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. While Johnny is in his last year at Little Wound High School, he keeps busy by boxing, training wild horses and illicitly selling booze clandestinely at night. Jashaun, who has a special bond with her older brother, grows up in the plains and badlands of South Dakota, attending tumultuous bull riding rodeos, sneaking into rowdy late night house parties and selling homemade clothes from the back of her older friend Travis' motor vehicle. While a love relationship comes to an end when Johnny's girlfriend Aurelia is accepted to a college a considerable distance outside the reservation, Johnny soon rekindles a friendship with his younger sister Jashaun and finds he fits in quite well in the Oglala Lakota Nation reservation, where work, friends and family surround him.

In Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, we meet Amaqjuat and Atanarjuat, sons of Tulimaq, as they carry out their daily lives in and around Igloodik, building igloos, hunting seal, walrus and cariboo with their dogteams and conversing in Inuktituk. While the youngest Atanarjuat is the preferred suitor for the young Atuat, he must duel the fierce and mean-spirited Oki and ward off his gang as they threaten to displace the worthier warriors and take over the tribe through murderous conspiracy in a harsh wilderness where Inuit tribes live far apart in frigid isolation.

In Whale Rider, a Maori chief feels perplexed and disillusioned when a young male tribe leader does not manifest himself within his set system of patriarchal tradition. Instead, his free-spirited granddaughter, who is deeply in touch with the tribe's ancestral link to the baleen whales of the region, emerges as the worthy leader of the tribe, after proving her worth as its noblest warrior and living up to her birth name "Paikea".

In Even the Rain, a film crew from Spain is in the vicinity of Cochabamba, Bolivia in the year 2000 to shoot scenes in the Andes for a historical film on Spanish colonialism and Christopher Columbus. While on location, filmmaker Sebastian and his producer Costa hire a small group of extras from the local indigenous population and begin to feel pressure as they near the completion of their ambitious project when protests over privatization of water— led by a local actor on their set—eventually become violent and result in a state-of-emergency in the region. While the Spanish film crew came to the region acknowledging the presence of colonialism in many parts of

Latin America, the water wars at the dawn of the 21st century in Cochabamba serve as a stark reminder that embedded colonialism is ever-present with its dire effects on the the Aymara and the Quechua peoples of the region.

Each film studied is set in a different region with its own unique indigenous culture and set of traditions from the Lakota First Nation of South Dakota, USA, to the Inuit of Nunavut, Canada, to the Maori of New Zealand and finally the Quechua of the Bolivian Andes. While living in the insular environment of a reservation, a tribal hamlet, or small indigenous ghetto, the lead characters rely on their heritage, customs and oral history to fight (or flee) negative gang influences or jointly tackle prevailing cultural oppression. While modernity, encroaching industry and commodification creeps into even the farthest reaches of the globe, such localized indigenous traditions become even more crucial as a safeguard and model form of stewardship of the land.

Films:

1. Songs My Brothers Taught Me (2015). Dir. Chloé Zhao. Kino Lorber. USA. 98 min.
2. Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001). Dir. Zacharias Kunuk. Odeon Films. Canada. 172 min.
3. Whale Rider (2002). Dir. Niki Caro. Pandora Film. New Zealand and Germany. 101 min.
4. Even the Rain (2010). Dir. Isíar Bolláin. Morena Films. Spain. 104 min.