

Chapter 6

Constructing Aboriginal Australian's Historic Past in Australian Films: Movies and Cultural Construction

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ABSTRACT

Culture is a dynamic entity learned through several social institutions. While books, a social institution, used to serve as the major space which educated citizens about culture, in a digital media age, media is considered a social institution that plays a strong role in reinforcing the beliefs, values, and norms that influence cultural beliefs. Of the various forms of media, movies on streaming services and their characteristics of creating a more lively and global impact took over the educational aspect of books. In spite of the growing relevance of media to cultural studies, there has been an ongoing debate on how media represents the cultures and the history of a community. Hence, this study investigates the media depiction of Aboriginals in three award-winning Australian Aboriginal movies released in the 21st century on the most popular streaming service in Australia- Netflix. Agenda setting theory has been combined with theoretical understandings of culture to understand the correlation between media, culture, and education.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, education and learning has been heavily dependent on media technologies where media continuously contributes to the process of learning. Media such as television shows, movies, social media, and news has occupied an important space in the life of the community members. The impact and the learning through the media have been intense in this era of rapidly developing new media technologies which not only allow the people to passively consume the media contents but actively participate in the creation, consumption, and dissemination of the content. Erving Goffman states that

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media contents help create impressions which help people to understand and define situations. Such definitions of situations, according to Hifsteade (2001) consists of people's behaviours, interpretations of behaviour, and interactions, which constitute culture. Hence, pulling together Goffman and Hofstede it could be argued that media contents provide valuable means for learning about the cultures. That is media, i.e., a device used for selection, transmission, and reception of information, through the portrayal of everyday life and political power become the transmitters and contractors of cultures.

According to a data published by The Economic Intelligence Unit and Peppercomm and Statistica, the average time spent reading book in USA in 2020 versus time spent watching video streaming services was 16 minutes to 20.4 minutes. Statistica (2022) further reflects that while the minutes spent on reading is gradually decreasing, the average time spent on watching streaming services is rapidly increasing. As impressions created through watching or readings are connected to learning, creating impressions and influence one's ideas, it could be argued that streaming services contribute heavily to educating the citizens. However, the current academic studies lack a deep inquiry on the use of media and its contribution to education. Hence, this chapter aims to answer and analyse how the representations in the mainstream media constructs people's understanding of the communities and cultures including developing an understanding of the past.

For the purposes of this chapter, I look into an outstanding national heritage, that is the case study of Australian Aboriginals. According to Australian Government statistics (2013), Aboriginal Australians comprise 3% of the overall Australian population. These populations are one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse populations and oldest surviving Aboriginal cultures in the world and have repeatedly endured oppression by early European settlers since the early 1800's. Macdonald and Boyd (2008) stated that "Australianness" could not be understood without mentioning race – a marker of difference, permeated the colonial and national psyche. Australia consists of two histories which run parallel to ascertain race/racial differences and especially white hegemony. They are, 1. The oppression of Aboriginal Australians and, 2. the colonial history. As a result, the Aboriginals have been repeatedly discriminated and their discrimination has been often justified (Macdonald & Boyd, 2008). Even when Australia decolonised from Britain in 1901, the Aboriginal people were entrenched as 'others' by the Federation and hence continued the suppression and negligence of Aboriginal cultures. Although the various policies by the Australian Government have to some extent closed the gap between the mainstream Australians, i.e., the non-Indigenous Australians and the Aboriginals, the Australian Aboriginals still lie at the lowest levels of the society with low economic development and lower life expectancy. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) states a current gap of 11.5 years for male and 9.7 years for female life expectancy between the non-indigenous and Aboriginal Australians.

Each culture and its practices are different. That is different cultures classify the world and its people on a different way which then forms the semantic structures that shape the society. Dakrouy (2014) states that media and culture are interconnected, such that media contents impact the cultural understandings and day to day practices and behaviours that shape a civilisation or a group of people. That is, cultural understandings are actively constructed through the media representations. However, while there has been continues debates on media's role in creating authentic images or culture, it is not clear how these images would educate the society about one's culture, believes and identities influenced by these believes. The current mediascape requires a deep study on the use of media in many fields, in particular- education. Especially because, media, both new and old media, are changing the way people get in touch with each other. The way people communicate and learn about the other. Hence, in this chapter, I aim to study how the movies on the streaming service-Netflix represent the Aboriginals and reflect on the cultural pasts.

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