

TWO VERSIONS OF THE ROAD BACK HOME: NATIVE CINEMA IN THE USA AND CANADA

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Resumo

Native cinema is still a new on North-American screens and working to establish the sharp differences between Western America and the "Third World" reality on the reservations for Native Americans remain the poorest minorities in the US and in Canada. It is also new as the space where aboriginal people have control of their filmic representation, showing, for one, the diversity of tribal cultures preserved and thriving. The films analysed are *Powwow Highway* and *Medicine River*, both based on novels of the same title by David Seals and Thomas King, respectively. The theme is a very dear one to Native Literature: the trip back to one's community and the figure of the trices as mediator or guide of this return.

Keywords: Native cinema, North American cinema, literature and film.

It has been difficult for the North American tribes to get control over the films that talk about them: cinema is very expensive for communities many times damaged by poverty. Yet, there are a few films around, sometimes helped by funds outside the community, such as the money George Harrison put on for *Powwow Highway*, or Robert

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Redford and Sundance for *Incident in Oglala*. After the famous prize winner Inuit film *Atarnajuat*¹, one can say there are things going around but Native cinema is still new in North America.

The films which could be put in this category, including the ones written or directed by Sherman Alexie, a Coeur d' Arlene writer,² each depend on a different tribal culture, but those cultures do share a history of struggles against the whites, a difficult social situation, and their world views are nearer to each other than they are to the European cultures. As Buddy Red Bow says in *Powwow Highway*, the truth in Reservations is that "This here is the Third World, man". The sentence and the images related to it – old cars, old refrigerators abandoned in lawns, houses without panes in the windows, people with old clothes, drunks all around, no transportation – emphasize the difference between western USA and the reservations (a difference which in these films is positive when thought from the cultural point of view; very negative if read from the economical facts: Native Americans are the poorest minority in the USA, and Canada).

Powwow Highway and *Medicine River* are based on two novels (*Medicine River* by Thomas King and *Powwow Highway* by David Seals), which, as the films, are built around two very important motives in Native Literatures: the trip back to the community (which implies a rejection of the values of the *American way of life*) and the figure of the *trickster*³ (as the instrument which causes this trip or guides the protagonist in it).

Tricksters

Tricksters are essential in both films though only in *Powwow Highway* does the word appear explicitly in a key dialogue in which Philbert Whirlwind tells a typical *trickster* story to the people who go with him in the trip. The scene defines the genre of the film and relates it to the oral traditional stories of many tribes.⁴

This definition of the film's genre is given in a typical ceremonial *storytelling*: there is a narrator, Philbert; an audience, his friends who are all around him; and a story. As in ceremonial storytelling, the audience's reactions are part of the story. In the film, there are a number of reactions. Lobo and his family admire the narrator and thank him, as it is done in ceremonies; Buddy Red Bow, Cheyenne Reservation leader and coprotagonist of the film, despises the traditional tone Philbert is using to tell the story and says so.

The scene has the typical complexity of *trickster* tales. To go back to the community (because "home" is a place *and* a community in these world views, not a family), Buddy needs to learn to pay the correct respect to the *trickster* and storyteller; he needs to understand the importance of the story. In the moment the scene takes place, Buddy has no such respect or understanding. And yet, he has not abandoned the fight for his tribe and he has never gone to live in the whites' world. On the contrary, Lobo, who does show respect for the storyteller and the story, has just abandoned Pine Ridge Reservation because the violence exerted by whites is too frightening for him. The roads of both characters cross in this scene. No one is completely wrong, no one is completely right. Nothing is simple.

In *Powwow Highway*, there is not just one way to go back home:

-Philbert, a comical, fat, oversized character, has one: he has to travel away and then go back;

-Buddy Red Bow, a serious character, much more similar to a hero in the European tradition, has another one: he needs to learn tradition and tribalism from Philbert, the trickster;

-his sister, Bonnie Red Bow, who has lost all contact with the community and the tribe and whom the community rescues at the end through Philbert, Buddy and an elder, has a third one, maybe the more difficult one: she has to abandon the city and learn to retrace her steps towards her community.

As it generally happens in trickster stories, here to be a hero can also mean to be a clown. Philbert is clearly a clown but he is also a hero because he frees Bonnie from jail and he takes her and her kids away from the city, always a hell in Native literatures. When he frees Bonnie, he does it with a brave, dangerous and ridiculous act he copies from western movies: he uses his car to crash one of the walls of the jail. On the contrary, Buddy is a warrior (he fights the mining company that is trying to pollute tribal lands) but he is a man without roots, a man who has rejected his tribe's wisdom. That makes him quite comical at times, especially in the scenes in which he gets irritated by the slow rhythm Philbert imposes on the trip with his detours to sacred sites.

In *Medicine River*, the Canadian movie, there are two *tricksters*: Harlen and Bertha. They do not travel towards home because they have never left. But they help the protagonist, Will, to take that road and come back. They exert a kind of magical, terribly irritating medicine on Will and change his identity. Theirs is a comical magic whose main tools are humor, humiliation and jokes.

The Trips

Both trips are comical in nature.

Medicine River opens with a scene which is a summary of what will happen to Will in the rest of the movie: Will refuses to take a photograph of a war lord in Malawi, Africa. "I am not a portrait photographer", he says, but two seconds later, when the leader threatens him with death if he does not do it, he takes the camera and shoots. This is a metaphor of the trip home he will undergo. The tone is clearly comical, as should be in a *trickster* story. Will –who says he only takes photographs of "disasters, wars, catastrophes" – has to learn how to photograph people, how to be part of a human community. Only this lesson will make him a true photographer, as Bertha, the *trickster*, tells him ironically ("A photographer who does not take portraits of people? What kind of a photographer are you?"). In the movie, the two *tricksters* play

with Will, manipulate him, threaten him, humiliate him, as the war lord in Malawi has done, and he learns to follow their guide and saves his own life because he finally becomes himself again. He goes home.

Red Bow and Philbert, on the contrary, start in the Reservation and travel to the city of Santa Fe where Bonnie Red Bow is in jail. That way, at the level of dialogue, there are two opposite statements as regards traveling in the films: in *Medicine River*, Harlen tells Will that to see the Sacred Mountain is to know that one is home and Will is making exactly that trip, from Toronto to the Reservation; in *Powwow Highway*, old aunt Harriet (an *elder*) tells Philbert “take your pony out of my garden”. She is telling him to go out of the Reservation, to see the world outside.

But the apparent difference is not so big. There is also the matter of the intention of the characters. When he goes to the funeral of his mother in *Medicine River*, Will does not know the kind of trip he is starting. Only the two *tricksters* know what he is doing, they guide him with irritating humor. On the contrary, in *Powwow Highway*, Philbert knows that the trip to Santa Fe is a search for identity and follows the steps of the traditional *vision quest*: he goes to come back changed, he goes to come back a better person and he goes in ceremony. He chooses his “pony” (the car) carefully, gives it a name, Protector, and follows the steps of the ritual: he knows that the ceremony will give him four objects for his pouch, his sacred bag and that he will have to stop in certain places and do certain things. He is ready to receive the signals. He is already a *trickster*, unlike Will. Unlike Will, Philbert is a traditional...

In *Powwow Highway*, the characters who resemble Will more are Buddy and Bonnie Red Bow. Accordingly, *Powwow Highway* has two protagonists, one who understands his belonging to his tribe as a political act in the western sense of the word (Buddy) and one who understands it in the Native way (Philbert). Buddy, as is the case with Will, has to learn to follow Philbert, the *trickster*. This close resemblance is obvious in two similar scenes in the movies: in *Medicine River*, Will sings the ritual song for the baby he has named *South*

Wing and in *Powwow Highway*, Buddy sings with Philbert in the middle of the river. Both men have had to make a deep effort to do this and it is clear that they feel ridiculous doing it but for both of them the rite is a triumph, a necessity.

Bonnie, the girl in jail, is even farther away from the tribe than her brother and therefore she has a longer trip home. As Will, she is a “city Indian” but here the role of the city is less subtle than the role of Toronto in *Medicine River* because Toronto is not destroying Will physically. On the contrary, it offers the Native photographer the most important values of the American way of life: success and riches. To go back to the tribe Will has to reject professional success, fame, the luxury of his apartment and the love of a white woman. On the contrary, Santa Fe does not give anything to Bonnie: the city means jail for her and a forced separation from her children. The government takes her as hostage to exert pressure on Buddy and get the approval of the tribe for the mining company.

The distance between Bonnie and the tribe is evident when it becomes obvious that her children – as the old Native woman in the street says when she lends them money – know that they are Native but don’t know which tribe they belong to. In the city, they are alone, they are defined by the white people (as Indian) and not by themselves (as Cheyenne).

Powwow Highway proposes two opposite scenes to show the two extremes of the Red Bow family’s trip from the city to the Reservation. The scene where the old Native woman gives some pennies to the children shows what an Indian is in the city. The children are totally alone: only other Natives help them. On the contrary, at the beginning of the film, in the Reservation, when Buddy asks Philbert to carry him to Santa Fe in his newly bought car, Protector, Philbert’s answer is “*We are Cheyenne*”. He means I am your brother, I will not say no. And at the end, it is the whole tribe’s solidarity what rescues the group when the elder takes everybody home in the truck. *Medicine River* shows the same thing: everybody in the Rez tries to help Clyde Whiteman when he gets out of jail and when Will decides to be part of the community, he will do the same. Everybody in the tribe is everybody’s relative.

So, in spite of differences in form and story, in both movies, the brothers Red Bow and Philbert on the one side, Will on the other, are more Native, more part of their own tribe, at the end than they were at the beginning. What all of them do is a comic pilgrimage towards life in their tribes, a life which is deeply related to at least two elements: land and community, a life far away from European individualism.

Land and Community

As in all Native stories – whether they are told in words, images, music, dancing or plays – here place is not mere background. Place is the center of everything, humans belong to place and never the other way around. Both films use panoramic views to show certain important places. This type of take is not frequent in any of the movies and therefore, when it appears, it is very meaningful, and in general, the meaning is stressed by music.

In *Powwow Highway*, the most important example is the scene in which Philbert gets to the top of the sacred mountain; in *Medicine River*, there are two moments in which the sacred mountain is shown this way: one at the beginning when Harlen points towards it and tells its name to Will and one at the end, when it reappears in the picnic, near the river.

In *Powwow Highway*, there is a circular take in the top of the mountain. This take has a particularly Native form because the 360 degrees the camera moves around show the four sacred directions –North, East, South, West – in one unique movement and the center of the circle is the fifth ceremonial point in many of these world views: the place where the person who looks around is standing, a symbol of this person's harmony and balance, when he or she is communicated with his or her land and community.⁵ In *Medicine River*, when Harlen presents the sacred mountain to Will, he says: "if you see it, you know you are home," and the take of the mountain is accompanied by a different, more serious, more magical music. This take is repeated at the end but this last

time, the one who says that seeing the mountain is being at home is Will. Both scenes show how far he has got in the trip home.

The characters who make this trip must recover their geographical place and also their "place" in the community. In *Medicine River*, community is represented by the two *tricksters*, the players of the basketball Warriors team and some other secondary characters such as the politicians and the elders. In *Powwow Highway*, the community appears in political meetings in which the problem of the mining company is discussed, in ritual moments such as the one where Philbert tells the *trickster* story, in the Pine Ridge Powwow and also in the figure of the Council member, an elder, who saves the whole group at the end. The meeting between lost individuals and the tribe from which they should not have separated includes, in both cases, a knowledge and understanding of the community's historical past, always represented and taught by the elders.

In *Medicine River*, the tribe asks Will to take the elders' portraits. Each portrait is a test Will has to pass in his way back to the tribe and each conversation with each of the elders gives him back a part of his own past, remembrances he had forgotten, community past he never took interest in. These pasts he needs to recover. To take the last portrait, Martha Old Crow's, the oldest and wisest of the *elders*, Will crosses the *Medicine River* and gets to her house in a small valley. He has to abandon the car in the process. The valley where Martha lives is under a cliff, as if the house was buried deep in the land and the guide in this short trip is Harlen, the *trickster*. Harlen (who says "Nobody, but nobody knows the Reservation like me" in some moment of the film) takes Will to see Martha at the end, only when the photographer is ready for that last encounter.

On the other side of the river Martha teaches Will a song and tells him to sing it to his daughter. Will says "I don't have a daughter". Yet, he will find out he has in the following scenes, when he accepts being a father to Louise Horseman's new baby, South Wing. Then, he will sing Martha's song to the baby in the hospital. What Martha is giving

him back (as *tricksters* do it: through joke and humiliation) is his right to name another human being, to give this human being an identity. Will can choose the perfect name for Louise Horseman's daughter only when he knows who *he* is. His comical election of the name, *South Wing*, will prove others and himself that he is back home and that, maybe, he is also a *trickster*.

There are other symbolic marks of his coming back. One of them is what he wears. During the whole film, Will has no good clothes to wear either in the Reservation or the basketball games: he uses borrowed clothes and they are always too big for him (which at the level of symbols tells the spectator that Will, the famous photographer, is too small for this small town). When, at the end, Harlen hands him a sports coat with the *Warriors* logo, this time the correct size, this is a symbol of his having completed the journey home.

In *Powwow Highway*, the knowledge and importance of the community's past is more complex and more strictly historical. It is shown in four scenes. Three of them are solved through montage and slow motion:

1- the scene passes from the image of the car who will become *Protector* to images of free horses, galloping in slow motion;

2- the image goes from Philbert to the Cheyenne mythic warrior in the sacred mountain;

3- Philbert's image becomes that of the dead Cheyenne men in Fort Robinson.

The fourth scene expresses the same through dialogue and a special treatment of light:

4- the scene shows a dialogue between Philbert and an unknown truck driver who tells him through the radio in the car that he must go to the sacred mountain.

The three first scenes try to use montage and slow motion to show the deep relationship between Cheyenne past and present. The characters feel this relationship more in specific geographical places which were important in Cheyenne history: the Reservation, the sacred mountain, Fort Robinson. Montage also tries to show the idea of non linear time, common to many world views in Native America. Though they live in different times, when Philbert is in the mountain, he and the warrior are one person.

The fourth scene – Philbert gets the call from a Native truck driver who talks to him through the car radio — tells the same message through dialogue (a dialogue full of historical events) and a use of light which turns a realistic scene into a magic moment. The conversation with the truck driver (who is clearly a messenger of some kind) is a signal to Philbert in his *vision quest* and Philbert accepts this as such. While Red Bow sleeps, he drives to the sacred mountain. The fact that Red Bow sleeps while Philbert listens to the message is symbolic: only Philbert, the guide, can listen to the signal because only he will obey it. Red Bow, if awake, would have prevented him from making the necessary detour in the trip. Red Bow feels he should go to Santa Fe immediately.

Thoughts

Medicine River and *Powwow Highway* retell a ceremony of reintegration to a communal society in a Reservation. The reintegration is not easy and it needs preparation. The characters have to abandon rules and individualistic behavior dictated by western society, which in both films, is represented by a city: Toronto in *Medicine River* and Santa Fe in *Powwow Highway*. In this sense, in the beginning of *Medicine River*, Will is similar to the Native agent of the mining company in *Powwow Highway*, a Native who does not care if woods and land are destroyed: both live within a western world view, they have left community behind.

As in all initiation ceremony, Will's and also Philbert's and the Red Bow's trips could be read as a series of tests. To become Whirlwind,

the mythic warrior, Philbert has to climb to the top of the sacred mountain (he is a very fat person and it is quite difficult for him); to really become his tribe's leader, Buddy Red Bow has to dance in the Pine Ridge Powwow, sing in the river with Philbert and stop in the historically important places of the road to Santa Fe to become himself and be a father; Will has to play basketball (he is a very bad player), tolerate the *tricksters'* jokes and humiliating little games, cross the Medicine River with Harlen, take photographs of the elders and sing in the hospital after South Wing's birth.

Medicine River ends with a group photograph. Will takes a photo of the whole tribe and they keep a place for him to sit in the middle of them, near his woman and his new child. The image of the photographer running to get into the photo is, of course, symbolic. At the beginning, Will cannot get to the chair on time and has to repeat the photo four times until he is sitting in his place when the camera takes the shot. This final sequence closes the circle opened in the first scene, when he has to take a portrait of a war leader in Malawi: it tells the whole trip again in a few minutes. Will's image, in the chair, near Louise, at the end, represents his arrival home, his place in the midst of his community.

In *Powwow Highway*, after *Protector's* death (the car gets burnt in an accident), the last sequence shows Philbert, Buddy, Bonnie and the kids getting on the truck driven by the president of the Tribal Council, who, as an elder, will take them back to the reservation, and is accepting them again in the community.

These endings have a certain comical tone related to the genre of the *trickster* story. It is important to stress that they are positive endings, "happy" endings, most common in short stories and novels by Native authors. These happy endings have a political tone completely opposite to the one of happy endings in commercial Hollywood films. In the commercial films, the happy ending is intended to mean that the state of things in the present is mainly good. In this state of things, the good win and the bad loose. On the contrary, in these films, the happy ending states the possibility of survival in a very bad state of things, survival not only

of the tribe in the physical sense (in both films there is a baby or a small kid in the community, which symbolizes the existence of a future in a community *not* in danger of extinction) but also in the sense of culture.⁶ Happy endings are necessary because these films, as most books by Native authors, are part of the struggle for survival and hope is politically important for the struggle: there is no struggle without hope.⁷

Each in its way, these films fulfill the function Native cultures give to stories and to *storytelling* (therefore to any narrative form of art): they are weapons to fight for the conservation of community, culture and a different way of seeing the world and the place of humanity on Earth.

Notes

1. *Atarnajuat, the Fast Runner*, directed by Zacharias Kunuk. Cast: Natar Ungalaaq, Sylvia Ivalli, Peter Henry Arnatsiaq, Lucy Tulugarjuk.
2. Sherman Alexie wrote *Smoke Signals*, and then directed and wrote *The Business of Fancy Dancing*.
3. See Radin, Paul. *The Trickster*. New York: Schocken, 1972 and Smith, Jeanne Rosier. *Writing Tricksters*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1997. Ammons, Elizabeth y White Park, Annette. *Tricksterism in Turn of the Century American Literature*. Tufts: New England, 1994, among many other books.
4. Native literature genres are very different from European ones. To see a good description of all the genres, see Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.
5. For this concept, which is central to many of the world views of the tribes in North America, see: Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, and also, among others: Deloria, Vine Jr. *God is Red*. New York: Laurel, 1973; Murray, David. *Forked Tongues, Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991; Owens, Louis. *Other Destinies, Understanding the American Indian Novel*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
6. See my "Dos significados polıticos para el final feliz: Hollywood contra cine de minorıas". In: *Taller*, n. 12, Vol. 4, Nov. 1999, p. 113 to 123.

7. See Howard Zinn. *Por qué tener esperanzas en tiempos difíciles*. In: TALLER, n.º 3, Vol. 2, Buenos Aires: April, 1997, pp. 13-32.

Filmography

- *Medicine River*, dir. Stuart Margolin. Produced by Barbara Allison, John Danylkiw, A. Liimatainen. Production Designer: Richard Roberts. Editing: Ron Wisman y Ralph Brunjes. Script: Thomas King y Ann Mac Naughton sobre la novela *Medicine River* de Thomas King. Music: Glenn Morley, Marvin Dolgay. Photography: Frank Tidy, BSC. Cast: Graham Greene, Byron Chief Moon, Tom Jackson, Sheila Towsey, Tina Louise Bombary. 1992.
- *Powwow Highway*, dir. Jonathan Wacks. Executive Production: George Harrison y Dennis O'Brian. Production: Jan Wieringa. Production Designer: Cynthia Sowder. Edición: James Austin Stewart. Script: Janet Heaney and Jean Stawarz on the novel by David Seals. Music: Barry Goldberg. Photography: Toyomichi Kurita. Casting: Junie Lowry. Costume Designer: Issis Mussenden. Cast: Gary Farmer, A. Martínez, Amanda Wyss. Joanelle Nadine Romero. Wayne Waterman, Roscoe Born y Graham Greene. 1988.

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