



Laura Beadling

Native American Filmmakers Reclaiming Voices Innovative Voice-Overs in Chris Eyre's *Skins*

Most discussions of voice-over narration focus on either third-person “authorial” narrators or first-person “character” narrators. However, Sarah Kozloff argues that, in actuality, there are a “myriad of invisible storytellers” at work in all voice-over films (6). Kozloff, also, pointedly notes that “more than anything else, studying voice-over prompts one to pause over beginnings” (64). Appropriately, then, a critic examining *Skins*, a 2002 film by Chris Eyre, has much to linger over inasmuch as the film opens with not one, but several voice-over narrators. The film concerns Rudy Yellow Lodge, a Lakota tribal police officer who takes care of his alcoholic brother, Mogie, and who must also deal with poverty and Native-on-Native violence and despair every day. During a murder investigation that structures part of the plot of *Skins*, Rudy’s frustration with the justice system, and possibly his possession by the Lakota trickster spider called Iktomi, cause him to become a vigilante. He eventually realizes that this only hurts his own people. Rudy must atone for his misguided actions while learning how to appropriately express his anger, and honour his brother.

In the first four minutes of the film, Eyre uses no fewer than four off-screen voices, including, in order of appearance:

1. Then President Bill Clinton who is actually seen several times but whose voice is used in voice-over, while images of Pine Ridge dominate the visual track;
2. A “voice of God” narrator (voiced by Eyre himself) who provides factual information about Pine Ridge and Lakota history, especially the Wounded Knee massacre;

3. A female news reporter’s voice who also provides statistical information about contemporary life on Pine Ridge, including the shortened life expectancy of Pine Ridge residents and the high unemployment rate on the reservation;
4. The protagonist Rudy Yellow Lodge; a first-person homodiegetic narrator (one within the story world) who informs the viewer about the re-appearance of Iktomi, the Lakota trickster spider, in his life.

While each of these “invisible storytellers” will be discussed in more detail below, their sheer multiplicity ensures that none can occupy an unquestioned position of authority that most voice-over narrators are said to occupy by their very nature. By quickly switching narrators in the first few minutes of the film, Eyre implies that none are in possession of the only true story. As Kozloff maintains about different categories of third-person narrators, “in all cases, one finds that the voice-over highlights the source of the narrative. Instead of the discourse seeming like a translucent pane of glass, such narration makes us aware of the pane’s tint, thickness, and scratches” (74). Eyre is very concerned with making viewers aware of—and skeptical towards—the situatedness of the storyteller, not only in terms of fictional narratives but also the narrative of American history.

As a Native filmmaker, Eyre depicts the history of Pine Ridge and Wounded Knee in ways that contradict triumphalist American narratives of Manifest Destiny and the “winning of the West.” Instead of a white-washed version, Eyre revises American history commemorated in national monuments such as Mt. Rushmore, where he sets the climax of his film, to prioritize a Native perspective. Eyre also

decentres the Western genre, which often mythologizes the histories of the “Old West” and presents Native peoples to mainstream audiences as without history or culture. Beverly Singer notes, “Until very recently, Whites—to the exclusion of Native people—have been the only people given the necessary support and recognition by society to tell Native stories in the medium of film” (2). Eyre is among the first Native people to be able to create counter-images of Native lives in feature-length fictional films; *Smoke Signals*, released in 1998, was in fact the first all-Native made film to receive a wide release from a major American studio. Paul Chaat Smith puts Eyre’s achievement in perspective when he writes, “despite a rich history of Indians in Hollywood, in a real sense, the first Indian films are just now being made” (41). While it is possible to fetishize some sort of purity or complete authenticity in relation to Native-created representations, it is important to also remember that, as Sherman Alexie points out in an interview about Native cinema, the “influences are multicultural” (Capriccioso). Eyre, after all, is telling a Lakota story even though his own heritage is Cheyenne and Arapaho. Such an acknowledgement does not diminish the importance of Native directors creating their own images and narratives to work towards “cultural sovereignty,” a concept detailed by Beverly Singer throughout her groundbreaking book, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens*. Such films work to counter the objectification and distortions of countless texts made by non-Native directors. Thus, *Skins* rewrites both American history and film history from a Native point of view.



Many theorists of voice-over, especially in documentary film, express concerns about its seemingly unassailable transcendent position of power and authoritative knowledge. Laura Rascaroli, for example, asserts “voiceover has had an overwhelmingly negative reception in documentary film theory” (1). These concerns are also relevant to *Skins* because of the film’s semi-documentary aspects. As Joanna Hearne points out,

The film’s forays into this [opening] documentary montage, with its authoritative narrator (the director himself, at one point), borrowed footage, persuasive political agenda, and vérité techniques of location shooting on the reservation in actual homes (not dressed or built for the film), ask that viewers receive this drama differently than the historical fantasies of ‘Indian Westerns’ such as *Dances with Wolves* [1990], tapping instead into the conventions of social realism. (45)

This documentary-style opening lets viewers know that Eyre will not be parroting myths of American history. In her work on voice-over, Kaja Silverman delineates what she calls the “rule of synchronous sound,” which dictates that the match between the human body and the human voice must appear seamless and thus result in “the representation of a homogeneous thinking subject whose exteriority is congruent with its interiority” (132). Silverman goes on to argue that voice-over allows the (almost always) male subject to speak from a transcendent position associated with power and knowledge, and thus, “the disembodied voice-over can be seen as ‘exemplary’ for male subjectivity, attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience and discursive power while women are denied this position” (134). Typically, not only is it women who are denied this position, but also people of color. However, early in Eyre’s film, there is a clear reversal of this pattern.

Eyre’s first off-screen voice is then President Bill Clinton, whose voice-over authority is undercut—despite his status as white, authoritative male—before being replaced by several other off-screen narrators, including Eyre himself. We hear part of Clinton’s speech in voice-over while the image track shows shots of Pine Ridge’s landscape and housing; because Clinton is intermittently visible on the image track while his words play asynchronously on the sound track, he is denied the match between the body and voice, as well as the transcendent power of totally disembodied voice-over. Furthermore, Eyre chooses to highlight the part of the speech in which Clinton claims, “we’re not coming from Washington to tell you exactly what to do and how to do it, we’re coming from Washington to ask you what you want to do, and tell you we will give you the tools and the support to get done what you want to do for your children and their future.” While this plays on the audio track, Eyre moves from aerial shots of the area to a series of closer shots that introduce life on Pine Ridge. As Clinton talks about Pine Ridge’s children, two shots depict children playing in front of clearly dilapidated housing. By juxtaposing the official rhetoric of the president with the current realities of the reservation, Eyre critically comments

Eyre uses off-screen voices... to withhold Lakota cultural information from non-Native audiences.

on public officials who promise change and assistance, even as the reservation continues to be one of the poorest areas in the nation. Houston Wood asserts, “the mockery of such oft-repeated official promises then plays across the screen throughout *Skins* as Eyre’s camera travels the rough roads and visits the mostly rundown houses that act as a character in his story” (31).

In contrast to this ironic juxtaposition of Clinton’s voice with the image track, Eyre himself provides the second, and far more authoritative and factual, voice-over narration. *Skins* is the first feature film shot on Pine Ridge Reservation, foregrounding its very specific landscape and history that is not memorialized in national myths, but which has instead been too often erased. In the director’s DVD commentary track, Eyre says that although he scouted other locations, he decided it had to be Pine Ridge itself or the story could not be told. However, because he was worried that not all audiences would be familiar with Pine Ridge, the film opens with a voice-over introduction. After Clinton’s speech, the audio track switches to Eyre’s own voice in a documentary, “voice of God” narration that informs viewers that 60 miles south of one of America’s most popular tourist attractions—Mt. Rushmore—lies the country’s poorest county, Pine Ridge. In addition, while the image track shows the battered sign commemorating the Wounded Knee Massacre, Eyre’s voice-over explains the event by introducing the location as “the place where hundreds of men, women, and children were killed by the US Army in 1890. Today, it is known as the massacre at Wounded Knee.” During this voice-over, there are a number of shots of Wounded Knee that, unlike the ironic image track that ran under Clinton’s voice-over narration, complement Eyre’s audio track; the white flag still flying, the cemetery, the gravestones, and the battered sign commemorating where Chief Big Foot surrendered, among others.

Eyre’s voice is thus allowed to occupy the privileged position of disembodied voice-over that represents Silverman’s idealized form of knowledge and authority, while Clinton is denied that same position (132). This type of “voice of God” narration has been often vilified in documentary film because of its easy assumption of authority and a singular yet seemingly invisible point of view. Bonitzer notes that this third-person, heterodiegetic (outside the story world of the characters) narrator represents the



“voice of knowledge *par excellence* in all films, since it resounds from off-screen, in other words from the field of the Other” (322). However, Bonitzer does not evaluate the relevance of this point for specific films, especially when the voice-over narrator is himself in the position of the Other as a Native filmmaker whose concern is to decentre appropriate images of Natives in Hollywood films. Stella Bruzzi notes that while many critics of the voice-over claim that the fact that “this dubious power is so often invested in a white, male, middle-class and anonymous voice necessarily cements the voice-over forms as repressive and anti-radical,” this view, Bruzzi goes on to argue, is itself reductionist as it refuses to acknowledge any differences between voices (57-8). Eyre’s occupation of the position of disembodied authority regarding Pine Ridge and the Wounded Knee massacre seems appropriate in the context of a history of fictional films that have refused to accord Native peoples a voice in the countless films that purport to represent the American frontier.

Cinema has a special relationship to the dissemination of triumphalist histories in the form of the many Westerns and other films that gave viewers a distorted yet convenient (from the view of the dominant culture) version of the American past. Yet, film may also have a special ability to begin to correct some of these distortions. While revisionist Westerns like *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Dances with Wolves* depict a different view of the past, they were both made largely by non-Natives, and neither treated contemporary

Native realities, thus further encouraging a belief that Native peoples and issues are firmly, though perhaps regrettably, in the past. As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn puts it, “the stereotypes still abound, and the same stories are still being told only in a more sympathetic tenor” (59). However, while Eyre could have simply claimed this authoritative position for himself as the right of a marginalized filmmaker speaking back to a long history of Hollywood films, he also undercuts the authority of his own voice-over narration. He is not simply interested in replacing one authoritative version of events with another; he wants to interrogate *any* singular account of American history.

Skin’s positioning of Native subjectivity at its centre...is a politically radical act.

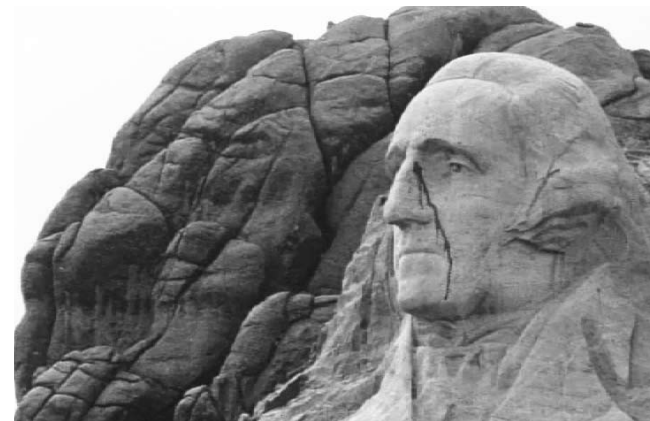
The first way that Eyre undercuts the authority of the second voice-over is by immediately following up his narration with a third off-screen voice; that of a news reporter who provides statistics about unemployment and mortality rates from alcoholism on the reservation, while archival footage of Native men being arrested and imprisoned plays on the image track. Furthermore, Bonitzer “believes that we can compromise the voice’s inherent authority if we multiply or divide it, make it relate to the image-track obliquely or ironically, and/or if we give the podium to the sex heretofore virtually shut out from these roles – women” (qtd. in Kozloff 82). Indeed, Eyre uses *all* of these techniques to question the reliability of the voice-over narrator: he includes multiple off-screen voices, he ironically juxtaposes Clinton’s voice against the image track, and he includes a female voice-over narrator. In addition, Eyre’s inclusion of the reporter’s voice sets up another semi-documentary intertext, which he then returns to in the middle of the film when the reporter is shown interviewing Rudy’s brother for a story on the thriving liquor business in the nearby town of White Clay, Nebraska.

This attenuation of the voice’s authority is appropriate, for it soon becomes clear that Rudy himself, the final voice-over narrator of the opening, is the most unreliable of narrators inasmuch as the film strongly suggests that he has been possessed by Iktomi. Iktomi is a trickster figure in Lakota culture; both a cultural hero and an amoral clown. Comical stories about him are often used to teach youth about proper Lakota behaviour, typically through negative example. After Rudy’s first vigilante escapade, he sees a spider and he asserts in voice-over narration that Iktomi has reappeared in his life. Through voice-over we learn Rudy’s

first meeting with Iktomi came when he was ten years old and bitten by a spider while in the outhouse. His brother, Mogie, carried him home, all the while telling him Iktomi stories. Interestingly, despite the multiple voices throughout the film, the viewer is denied Mogie’s voice here; young Mogie’s stories are almost entirely covered by Rudy’s narration. Eyre’s refusal to include Mogie’s stories provides an interesting counterpoint to a later moment in which Eyre chooses to black out the image track while still including voices and sound effects on the audio track. After he hears that Mogie will survive the burns inadvertently inflicted by Rudy during one of his vigilante episodes, Rudy asks a holy man to help him free himself of Iktomi and they undergo a sweat lodge purification ritual. We see Rudy and some other men gathered outside a sweat lodge in a very long shot as, in voice-over, the older man tells Rudy that they are going to pray for him. Once the men enter the sweat lodge, the image track goes black while the audio track carries the sound of splashing and steaming water, singing in Lakota, and voices talking for almost thirty seconds; meanwhile, Eyre firmly denies the audience any sight of the sweat lodge’s interior.

Eyre uses off-screen voices—in the sweat lodge with no image track at all, and in another case with Rudy’s narration drowning out Mogie’s voice telling Iktomi stories—to withhold Lakota cultural information from non-Native audiences. Eyre’s discretion makes sense given that decontextualized Native practices are often commoditized and sometimes performed incorrectly, as when James A. Ray, a “New Age guru,” improperly conducted a sweat lodge ritual that resulted in deaths of three people (Lacey). Eyre’s implicit critique of Hollywood films that lure non-Native audiences with buckskin-wearing, leathers-and-feathers romanticized images of “Hollywood Indians” would be weakened if he too commoditized Lakota sacred culture. Furthermore, by keeping his camera outside and at a distance, Eyre preserves the space of the sweat lodge for Native viewers and participants. Eyre also uses off-screen voices in interesting ways to call attention to social issues facing residents of Pine Ridge Reservation. Specifically, Geraldine, the unseen dispatcher whose voice accompanies Rudy in his travels through the reservation, provides important information to the viewer about the calls Rudy responds to, including when Rudy goes to the initial murder scene that will drive the first part of the plot. Additionally, her voice drives home the name of White Clay, which is initially unremarked upon but is pervasively repeated on the audio track. While many Westerns lack tribal, historical, or cultural specificity about the Native peoples they represent, Eyre carefully roots his film in a very specific place and context. One of the realities of Pine Ridge life that Eyre documents is the presence of White

Clay, an unincorporated town of fewer than 20 people just across the border in Nebraska. Despite its low population, White Clay’s four liquor stores “sell an estimated 4 million cans of beer almost exclusively to residents of the reservation” (Humphrey).



Similar to the opening segment, in which the visual and audio tracks complicate one another, there is a montage sequence very early in the film of Rudy driving through the reservation as Geraldine informs him of various calls he must respond to: a man has fallen out of his wheelchair and needs assistance; a group of drunken teenagers are partying in White Clay; Nebraska State troopers need assistance in White Clay. As these calls, most of which originated in White Clay, come in, the visuals show a montage of decrepit, miserable housing. By juxtaposing these visuals with the name of White Clay, Eyre exposes the relationship between the illegal sale of alcohol just over the border by white store owners and the conditions on Pine Ridge, where death from alcohol-related causes is nine times the national average. Indeed, Mogie eventually dies, not from his burns, but from cirrhosis of the liver.

By making the act of storytelling visible and including multiple voice-over narrators, Eyre encourages viewers to question who, for whom, and from what vantage point is speaking. While many theorists are suspicious of voice-over narration, some, like Bill Nichols, feel that contemporary filmmakers have not only failed to explore the many uses of voice in film, but have “disavow[ed] the complexities of voice” (qtd. in Kozloff 81). Eyre revels in the voice—as shown through his use of multiple off-screen narrators—for its ability to call attention to the act of narrating and storytelling. This enables him to call into question the whole of film history and American history. The final minutes of the film, as silent as the first few minutes are filled with voices, nevertheless are also a critical engagement with Native politics and representations in both film and history. Rather than continuing with his vigilantism, Rudy decides

to honour Mogie by throwing a can of red paint down the face of George Washington on Mt. Rushmore, which has been the site of countless film and television moments from Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959) to *The Simpsons*. Rudy’s silent act of resistance and homage to his brother seems to be confirmed when, driving away from Rushmore, he sees what appears to be a younger Mogie. Even though these moments are quiet, the feeling is unmistakably triumphant as Rudy thrusts his arms into the air joyously after hurling the paint and smiles to himself after seeing “Mogie” again. Furthermore, similar to Rudy’s defiant vandalism of Mt. Rushmore at the end of the film, *Skins*’ positioning of Native subjectivity at its centre, especially after decades of films representing Native peoples as vilified or exotic Other, is a politically radical act.

Note: *This essay generally follows Chris Eyre’s own customary usage of the term Native rather than other terms such as Indigenous (USA) or Aboriginal (Canada).*

Works Cited

- Bonitzer, Pascal. “The Silences of the Voice.” *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. Ed. Philip Rosen. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 319-34. Print.
- Capriccioso, Rob. “Sherman Alexie Interview.” *Identity Theory: Literature, Conversations, Miscellany*. 23 Mar. 2003. Web.
- Hearne, Joanna. “Indians Watching Indians on TV”: Native Spectatorship and the Politics of Recognition in *Skins* and *Smoke Signals*.” *Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*. Ed. Denise K. Cummings. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2011. 41-72. Print.
- Humphrey, Kay. “White Clay Panel Debates Alcohol Problems.” *Indian Country Today*. 18 Apr. 2001. Web.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley: University of California, 1988. Print.
- Lacey, Marc. “New Age Guru Guilty in Sweat Lodge Deaths.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 22 June 2011. Web.
- Rascaroli, Laura. “Sonic Interstices: Essayistic Voiceover and Spectatorial Space in Robert Cambrinus’s *Commentary* (2009).” *Media Fields Journal: Critical Explorations in Media and Space*. Issue 4. Web.
- Silverman, Kaja. “Dis-embodiment the Female Voice.” *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Melencamp, and Linda Williams. Frederick: University Publications of America, 1984. 131-149. Print.
- Singer, Beverly R. *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001. Print.
- Smith, Paul Chaat. “Land of a Thousand Dances.” *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009. 37-42. Print.
- Wood, Houston. *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World*. New York: Continuum, 2008. Print.