

They All Look Alike to Me: Misrepresentations of Indigenous Identity in  
American Cinema

Joe Weinberg

I came up with this idea while looking for imagery for the conference. Where could I find misrepresentations of indigenous identity? Almost as soon as I started looking, the answer started staring me in the face. I could find it at the movie theater. I could find it all through American cinema. In our movies, we are constantly confronted with the idea that if someone is a foreigner, that's virtually a catch-all. It doesn't matter where they're from, so long as they're not from here. While there are a few clarifications, like that they have to at least be vaguely European or must be visibly Asian, the bottom line is that if they have a foreign accent, then they could be from anywhere.

The most glaring example to jump out at me was from The Thirteenth Warrior. Here we see Antonio Banderas, a man who is as Spanish as can be, playing an Arab. Banderas has played members of different cultures in his career. In the El Mariachi trilogy, he was Mexican. In Evita, he is Argentinean. Neither of these is difficult to accept. All of them share the common ancestry of Spanish colonization. It's absolutely acceptable for Banderas to play any kind of Spanish-descended character. But an Arab? It

amazes me that we are expected to accept him as Arabic when he is so clearly not a middle-easterner. It amazes me, and yet it happens. It happens because as an American audience, we have been trained through the whole history of cinema to accept anyone with an accent as being the member of any non-American nationality.

Did Banderas have to play the Arab? Certainly not. There are many talented actors of Arabian descent that could have filled the role. But was Tony Shaloub, who is at least of Lebanese ancestry, called for the part? Of course not. Because the film needed a star, and since Banderas has an accent, American's won't know the difference.

We've been trained to accept this. In 1986, we accepted Sean Connery as an Egyptian and a Spaniard, while we accepted Christopher Lambert as a Scotsman in Highlander. This is perhaps the most amazing case of misrepresentation. After all, they had a Scottish actor in Connery, and yet the title role still went to Lambert, complete with his French accent. Luckily, as the franchise grew, they found someone at least a little closer to home to take up the role of the Scottish immortal: Adrian Paul, a Londoner of Italian and English descent. Not an ounce of Scottish there, but at least he grew up on the same island.

We accepted Mel Gibson, an Australian, as a Scottish hero in Braveheart. Along with him we have David O'Hara from Glasgow, Scotland playing Stephen of Ireland. We've accepted Gary Oldman (British) as everything from German to Russian to French. Alan Rickman (British) can be a German terrorist in Die Hard just as easily as he can be Rasputin.

This is not to say that some actors, such as Oldman, are not competent enough in their craft to play different nationalities. Certainly, Anthony Hopkins can play virtually anything, as can Willem Dafoe. The point is that they don't need to be such great actors; all they need is an accent.

Sometimes, we just can't tell, and the 'they all look alike to me' syndrome comes into even stronger play. How many viewers thought it was strange to have so many Chinese actors in Memoirs of a Geisha, a very Japanese story? Or that Thai actors played the Vietnamese in Good Morning, Vietnam? With any movie starring or about Asians, nationality becomes even less important. We can't tell them apart, so we dismiss it, we don't think about it. We blindly accept every instance of it.

The problem worsens as time goes by. Where once we had Claude Rains to play Capt. Renault, now we have Jude Law playing Vassili Zaitsef

in Enemy at the Gates. It's all right though. Law is British, so of course can be Russian, German, or any other European nationality.

In Leon, The Professional, we see Gary Oldman lose his accent and play an American. He does this opposite Jean Reno, a French actor complete with the thick accent. But since Reno has an accent, he can play anything. Including, as the movie requires, an Italian.

All others look alike. So long as an actor is some 'other,' he or she can be any 'other.' Sophie Marceau is French, and hence can be Spanish when the role requires.

But there is more than just the interchangeability of the 'other' in American cinema. There is also the way those others are presented. If you are an 'other,' there are certain roles you are relegated to. For the longest time, no one with a British accent could be considered a hero. The rebels in Star Wars were all American. The Evil Imperial Empire, on the other hand, was populated almost entirely by the British. Let's not even get into all those times the British have been used to play Romans, Nazi's, or Communist Russians. More recently, the British are becoming more and more acceptable as heroes. Now, it's anyone of Arabic descent that automatically becomes evil. We know the villain in True Lies not by any musical cue, but because of the color of his skin.

For a while, a foreign accent was an impediment, but not enough to stop you from having a career as a hero. Arnold Shwartzenegger struggled with his accent even as he played hero after hero in a seemingly endless parade of mindless action films. (which, incidentally, almost always had a foreign villain). Jean-Claude Van Damme had a similar run of movies, though he focused most of his miniscule acting talent trying to eliminate his accent. Heroes at that time could have accents, so long as they either weren't foreigners at all or the villain, at least, was equally foreign.

Things have changed, though. Now, heroes must be as American as Keannu Reeves, Tom Cruise, or Bruce Willis. Even Josh Hartnett or Robert Downey Jr. can be heroes, because they're American.

Then there are the actors who want to play heroes in today's culture, but are cursed with the stigma of being born on foreign soil. Russell Crowe, Hugh Jackman, Jason Statham, and Christian Bale are all making a case for being considered action heroes. And what is the common denominator between these actors? The ability to eliminate their accents. Christian Bale has made a career out of playing mentally unstable characters, always without his natural Welsh accent. He frequently even goes so far as to use an American accent during interviews and television appearances. Most people believe he is American. Russell Crowe eliminated his accent for LA

Confidential, The Quick and The Dead, and Cinderella Man, though this Aussie did play a Spaniard in Gladiator, which no one said a word about.

Jason Statham plays in such high action films as The Transporter, Crank and The One, all without his London accent. Even Gary Oldman, Anthony Hopkins, and Sean Connery have been known to toss out their accents in order to be better accepted as heroes by American audiences.

Foreigners must work hard to be accepted in American cinema. They have to eliminate all trace of accent, or else they are nearly always relegated to the role of villain or sidekick. But for an American to play a foreigner, no such work is needed. Remember Kevin Costner's accent in Robinhood: Prince of Thieves? Neither does anyone else, hence Carry Elwes's joke in Men in Tights. What about Keannu Reeves doing Shakespeare? When an American plays a foreigner, he doesn't have to learn the accent, or at least he doesn't have to learn it well. We ignore it when they mess up. But let one line come out of Batman's mouth with a Welsh accent, and we'd be up in arms.

Of course, there are dissenting examples. We can point out movies like Zorro, where the hero is Mexican and the villain a white man with blonde hair and blue eyes. Never mind that Anthony Hopkins plays a Spaniard. Concentrate on the villain. A man who gives off the strong vibe

of being a Nazi. The same way Dolph Lundgren and his trainers do in Rocky IV, even though they are supposed to be Russians, oddly enough with blonde hair and blue eyes. But in Zorro, when the hero is a Mexican, he is still an outlaw. He is the anti-hero, not truly a hero.

We can also cite examples such as Hugh Grant, a Brit who is always the good guy. The goofy, silly good guy who doesn't deserve much respect and certainly isn't as strong and manly as an American would be.

Surely, there must be some strong counter example. Could we look at Sir Alec Guinness, Obi-Wan Kenobi, in the Star Wars movies? He was British, and a hero even though the other Brits were all villains. But what happens to Kenobi? First, he needs the help of a strong American (Mark Hamill) to get anything done. Second, he is relegated to the role of advisor and mentor. Not hero. Third, he dies in the first movie. And finally, we reveal in the third movie that he has been lying to and manipulating his pupil since day one.

And the character of Kenobi cannot be our winning counterexample even when he is the hero in the prequel trilogy. Ewan McGregor is a hero in those movies, no doubt about it. But McGregor is also Scottish, playing a role as an Englishman. So again, any other is every other.

Bond. In James Bond, at least, we can see a hero who is not American. Forget that Timothy Dalton was Welsh or that Connery was Scottish. The role did not specify where in the United Kingdom Bond comes from, only that he serves the British crown. So we have Dalton, Moore, Connery, Brosnan, and soon Craig (Lazenby as well, though he is Australian) as foreigners who do not hide their nationality, but rather embrace it. And they are allowed by American audiences to remain the hero. (though they are never allowed to outsmart an American spy).

So we have one example. Just one. One dissenting example against a sea of points in favor of our 'all look alike' policy. Is this enough to prove that there is not, in fact, a trend to lump all foreigners into a single group, thus allowing them to cross nationalities with impunity and without our notice or care? Certainly not. Even though there are twenty Bond films, there are hundreds of other films where the villains are British, where the French play the Scottish, or where the Chinese play the Japanese. Hundreds of films where Americans don't really need accents, or at least not good ones, and where foreigners can be from anywhere.

This leaves me with a pair of final questions. What is to be done with this? And Why is this important? The first, I'm not sure I have an answer for. But the second I do. Why does it matter that we are lumping all

foreigners together and not allowing any foreigners to be heroes and still have accents? It matters because it is an egocentric and racist point of view, a bigoted view that presents everyone who isn't American as being inferior to us. We have enough trouble already in the world with this attitude. If we allow it to grow worse and worse, what will the next generation be like? I spent some time working in a video store, and I saw what the next generation might be like. They'll be a bunch of kids who don't want to watch Coach Carter because it's a "Nigger movie." They won't want to watch anything foreign because "It's stupid to have to read at a movie." Besides, "If it was good, they'd dub it." They won't like people different from them, just because they're different. They laugh at all the "funny accents." And, more importantly, they don't bother to differentiate. To these kids, different is different; they all look alike.

We are misrepresenting identity to the point that there isn't even an attempt to hide it anymore. No one is concerned with realism. And yes, I know, it's a movie; it's not supposed to be real. But we're suspending our disbelief about aliens, psychopaths, monsters, and super secret agents, not about nationalities and accents. It's getting to the point where we just don't care any more. I don't know where this leads. But I have a pretty strong

feeling that it's not leading towards a happy, tolerant world. Maybe to a  
Brave New World, but not a Tolerant one.