Analysis of *Reel Injun*

As you are watching this documentary please make note of the following:

**Persuasive Techniques:**

**Elements/ Stylistic Formats:**

*Below, are the main points from each “Chapter” of the documentary, for your reference:*

**Native Representation**

**Reel Injun – Chapter 1**

Main points: Over 4,000 films shaped the image of the Native American in the last century, some offering stereotypical images, such as They Died with Their Boots On, others providing a more accurate focus, like Little Big Man, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Dances with Wolves, and some that are free of stereotypes, like Smoke Signals and Atanarjuat. When Native peoples watch Indians on television and

cheer for the cowboys, there is a major problem of representation. Distorted images have caused a great deal of damage.

**Native Americans from Hollywood to Wounded Knee**

**Birth of the Hollywood Injun – Chapter 2**

Main points: Early movie images depicted the “Injun” as spiritual, noble and free. In the late 19th century, Thomas Edison filmed Laguna Pueblo dances that were shown for a penny in the peep shows in Times Square in New York City. But while the “savages” in the reels were dancing, some 300 women, men and children were being killed in the Wounded Knee Massacre on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

**The Good Indian**

**The Noble Injun – Chapter 3**

Main points: During the silent-film era, Indians became stars. The Native American perspective was seen for the first time. Native filmmakers directed their own movies and brought their own people to play the characters. The Silent Enemy (H. P. Carver) explores starvation and the idea of the Native vanishing. In those days, it was cool to be portrayed as Native.

**Tonto Speech and Stereotypes**

**The Savage Injun – Chapter 4**

Main points: In the 1930s, Native people were portrayed as savages. Americans needed heroes, and John Ford’s Stagecoach delivered the goods while also damaging the reputation of Native people and establishing a trend that lasted for decades: showing the savages constantly attacking the Whites. Instead of using actual Native languages, Hollywood developed the Tonto speech—or the art of speaking English backwards—and all the big stars played Native roles (Anthony Quinn, Charles Bronson, Boris Karloff and even Elvis Presley). After the film industry saddled Pocahontas with all the stereotypical notions that a mythical princess deserves, she became the embodiment of American society, not of Native society, just as Hollywood dressed Native characters like Plains Indians in buckskin and headbands, even though they do not use them in their culture.

**A Violent and Racist Icon**

**The Cowboy – Chapter 5**

Main points: A great icon of American cinema, John Wayne used violence with no mercy. But his actions seemed excusable, and they set the standard for how Indians should be regarded. “The kind of hunky white guy representing the moral standards of America, that is not real smart and that will do the right thing, chasing the Indians away, marrying the school woman and disappearing in the sunset.” (Jim Jarmusch)

**Indians or Human Beings?**

**A Good Injun . . is it a Dead Injun? – Chapter 6**

Main points: As a kid, Neil Diamond did not realize that Bugs Bunny was killing Indians, and Graham Greene was doing the same thing when he would pretend to be Gary Cooper. On the other hand, Russell Means’ brother refused to look at the Indians being slaughtered and fought white kids outside the movie theatre. “To erase the memory of being a human being, predatory mentality uses the word ‘Indians’ so Natives will lose track of the notion of being a human.” (John Trudell)

**The American Indian Movement (AIM)**

**The Groovy Injun – Chapter 7**

Main points: In the 1960s, the hippies became Indians, trying to imitate them but at the same time trying to remember who they were and where they came from. The hostility of the media towards Native people subdued their spirit somewhat, but films like Billy Jack heralded a new fight against injustice, not just in the movies, but in real life as well, with First Nations people politically asserting themselves by seizing Alcatraz Island and Wounded Knee to recapture their land and freedom. Hollywood would in turn come to the rescue: Marlon Brando refusing to show up at the Academy Awards to protest against “the poor treatment of Native Americans in the film industry” and the FBI’s actions at Wounded Knee. Sacheen

Cruz Littlefeather would be Brando’s messenger, asking the government to change its treatment of North American Indians. After that turning point, productions like One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and many others would forever change the way “Injuns” are depicted on screen.

**No More Stereotypes and Stoic Indians**

**The Renaissance – Chapter 8**

Main points: Even though the government had wiped out the Native political movement by the 1980s, a cultural artistic voice emerged, composed of Native filmmakers, songwriters and visual artists. Smoke Signals, directed by and starring Native people, ushered in the golden age of Aboriginal cinema. The story was not about what occurred one hundred years ago but about current-day “nativeness,” where there are no stereotypes and no stoic Indians.

After travelling the United States in search of the truth, filmmaker Neil Diamond found the answers he was looking for in the Far North of Turtle Island (a.k.a. North America), in Igloolik. Atanarjuat, by Zacharias Kunuk, paved the way for a new generation of storytelling. A new age of cinema was born!