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March 2023
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silent film festival
celebrating film with live music

THU 23 MARCH | 18:30

THE SILENT ENEMY

Dir. H.P. Carver | US | 1930 | N/C PG | 1h 22m

With: Chief Yellow Robe, Molly Spotted Elk, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, Chief Akawanush, Cheeka

Short: *Beaver People* | Dir. William J. Oliver | Canada | 1928 | 3m 30s

Screening material courtesy of Flicker Alley (Feature) and the National Film Board of Canada (Short)

Performing Live: Günter Buchwald (Violin, Piano) and Frank Bockius (Percussion)

Intended to capture the “fast vanishing life of the American Indian in its natural setting,” *The Silent Enemy* was released to considerable critical acclaim in 1930, only to be a commercial flop that rapidly disappeared from cinemas. Like its famous precursor, Robert J. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*, the film, both in its conception and its delivery, very much reflects writer and producer William Douglas Burden’s desire to capture a way of life, a people, before they were entirely devoured by the modern world. Burden’s starting point, of course, connotes a double misconception: that Native Americans were indeed vanishing; and that indigeneity is incommensurate with modernity—or to put it another way, that pre-Columbian cultures could not adapt and change, they could only be “lost”.

In keeping with its mission, then, the film went to some lengths to capture something authentic of pre-Columbian Ojibwe life—or at least the life of one branch of the Ojibwe, or Anishinaabe, whose territories eventually spanned a vast area of the US and Canada, from the Great Lakes to the eastern Plains. Some of its detail is exquisite, such as the portrayal of the partridge hunt—using snares that, like the majority of the tools and implements on display, were either loaned by museums or brought by cast members from family collections. That cast, too, of roughly 200, was

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Indigenous, and Burden's screenplay was based on study of the earliest European accounts of the Ojibwe as recorded in the seventeenth-century *Jesuit Relations*. Unlike later films which cast non-Natives in lead roles, all of the lead actors in *The Silent Enemy* were also Indigenous—well, with one controversy. Even during filming Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance (Baluk)'s claims to be fullblood Blackfoot were called into question; history has clarified that he was the son of a North Carolinian school janitor and was actually African American (although probably with mixed Cherokee and Lumbee heritage).

That controversy aside, it would be problematic to assert that casting was otherwise ideal. Chief Akawanush (Paul Benoit), who plays the dastardly medicine man, Dagwan, was a local man but, an Algonquin of Pikwakanagan First Nation, he was not Ojibwe. The object of his lust, Neewa, was played by Penobscot (Maine) actress Molly Spotted Elk. Her father, Chief Chetoga, was played by the great Lakota actor, Chauncey Yellow Robe. Ought such detail to matter? They were Indigenous, after all. It matters, I suppose, on two levels.

Firstly, the film aspired to—and was lauded for—its ethnographic authenticity. Hollywood has been blighted by its history of black- and redface, so at a documentary level, yes, it does matter. That “authenticity” is further challenged by Yellow Robe's spoken prologue, which is in Lakota, not Anishinaabemowin. Scholars have noted, of course, that his job here was to signify Indigenous language to an audience who would neither have understood nor questioned its validity. In fact, film scholar Michelle Raheja urges us to read it as an in-joke on Yellow Robe's part, since the Lakota had long been sworn enemies of the Ojibwe. Yet his language use raises other questions about the accuracy of the detail in the film. To the eye of someone who has spent more than twenty years researching and writing about Ojibwe literature and art, its broader aesthetic—the tipis, the Chief's warbonnet, and the “winter count” depicted on hide in the closing sequences—have much more of a High Plains (Lakota, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, and so on) feel about them than they do Ojibwe, especially in the 1500s when the Ojibwe had not yet been forced onto the Plains by white encroachment.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, those lead actors remind us that this is not an Ojibwe story. In 1928, the year that Burden was casting, Anishinaabe communities in northern Ontario were faced with the destruction of their trapping lines by EuroCanadian hunters. That same year, the Canadian Department of Lands and Forests outlawing the traditional moose hunt and the

falling of birch for canoes and other goods, while the existing Indian Acts had banned a range of ceremonial activities and hastened the assimilation of “Indians” via residential schooling. As was the case with Hiawatha pageants since the late 19th century, then, this staging of “pre-colonial” Ojibwe life presented an opportunity for cast members to engage in activities that were prohibited—that indeed a number of them had to be taught. In spite of this, such “behind the scenes” information reminds us of the way cinema has contributed to the fixing of Indigenous peoples in a sepia-toned past; one that long denied them agency in a modern setting and that fed a Rousseauesque Eurocentric appetite for the naturalistic and picturesque rather than giving the Indigenous people depicted any control over their own representation.

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David Stirrup is Professor of American Literature and Indigenous Studies at the University of Kent. He has written books and articles on Native North American literature and art, with a particular emphasis on 19th, 20th, and 21st century Ojibwe cultural production. He is lead investigator on ["Beyond the Spectacle: Native North American Presence in Britain"](#).