"Fourth Eye" Cinema:
Indigenizing the Zombie Film

Author: Sasza Hinton

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Abstract:

Indigenous representation in horror cinema is often rooted in harmful stereotypes, with films from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Scalps (1983), depicting Indigenous figures as vengeful and monstrous. These portrayals lack cultural specificity and historical context, reinforcing colonial narratives that position Indigenous peoples as threats while ignoring the trauma caused by colonial violence. In contrast, contemporary films like Blood Quantum (2019) use the horror genre to critique colonialism, integrating Indigenous history, aesthetics, and storytelling traditions to offer a more authentic and nuanced perspective. By incorporating oral traditions and cultural practices, these films empower Indigenous filmmakers to reclaim the genre, shifting away from dehumanizing depictions and highlighting the ongoing struggle of Indigenous communities against colonial oppression.

Horror films continually draw on collective anxieties to spark fear from the audience's subconscious. While blood, guts, and other forms of gore can create discomfort or disgust within the viewer, it is the relation to ongoing concerns that truly shakes them to their core. *The Fly* (1986), for example, became horrific to many audience members as the metaphysical transformation of Seth Brundle seemed to graphically depict the effects of the AIDS virus. While this association was not intentional according to the film's director David Cronenberg, it has become a popular understanding of what made the Brundlefly transformation so horrifying as the AIDS epidemic swept through the United States. Much like vampires and aliens, zombies have represented various societal concerns over the last few decades—disease, capitalist consumerism, and government control being just a few examples. However, one particularly interesting association is that of the racialized Other, specifically those of Indigenous

descent. While there have been contemporary efforts to use the zombie film as a "form for interrogating and denouncing colonialism" (Truscello and Watchman 2), it is important to investigate earlier zombie films, such as Frank Olen Ray's *Scalps* (1983), which "focused on the elimination of [the Indigenous] Other" (Truscello and Watchman 2), to fully understand why there is such a need for "Fourth Eye" Cinema.

In Michael Truscello and Renae Watchman's article "Blood Quantum and Fourth Cinema: Post- and Paracolonial Zombies," it is noted that the post-apocalyptic settings in films like *Blood Quantum* (2019) allow directors to incorporate elements of Indigenous history and the long-lasting effects of colonialism (3). The horror thus becomes "indigenized" as the director makes specific references to settler colonial violence. In Jeff Barnaby's *Blood Quantum*, there are continual references to the violence that the Mi'kmaq have endured at the hands of white settlers, as well as to the broader violence that Indigenous tribes worldwide have undergone for centuries. The 1981 raid of the Restigouche Reserve, for instance, becomes a direct reference in the film not only through the narrative timeline but also through the removal of fish—a source of food and income for Indigenous tribes—which has become tainted with the same disease that zombifies the white settlers. By making these links, Barnaby not only criticizes the past actions of white settlers but also offers "a political commentary on ongoing colonialism" (Truscello and Watchman 4).

By contrast, earlier films did not position the Indigenous Other within a colonial context, likely for fear it would create sympathy for this Other. One of the most overt references to a specific tribe comes from the 1989 adaptation of *Pet Sematary*, which mentions that the evil ancient burial ground once belonged to the Mi'kmaq people. However, any violence that occurred against this tribe is removed, with the claim that they left on their own accord. Similarly, Fred Olen Ray's incredibly low-budget film *Scalps* (1983) features an ancient burial ground filled with angry, vengeful Indigenous souls. The film attempts to promote a violent image of Indigenous people to evoke Westernized fear that the Other would rise against them. It refuses to bring any specificity to the tribe or the land, so that all Indigenous people are portrayed as a threat. While we know the film takes place in California generally, the exact coordinates of the map are hidden from the audience. Most land directions are given as visual cues, such as black trees marking the burial ground, but without naming the land, viewers cannot pinpoint which tribe this massive graveyard belongs to. While one might argue that this generalization is done in hopes of avoiding villainizing one specific tribe, I contest that generalizing the threat to all Indigenous people ensures audiences do not make real-life connections to the trauma this tribe underwent due to colonial rule, thus making the violence against the white teenagers feel less unjustifiable. Without addressing what caused this massive burial ground or why these spirits died with so much anger, the film allows the white protagonists to be the victims of misplaced vengeance. Instead of creating an open dialogue about the suffering and pain this unnamed tribe experienced, the film suggests that the violence is not the fault of the colonizer—whether old or new—but rather stems from something inherently violent within the spirit.

Indigenous aesthetics, such as language and practices, allow Indigenous filmmakers to distinguish themselves from their Western counterparts (Truscello and Watchman, 9). Many rely on their upbringing to influence what cultural aspects are brought into their films, creating a more authentic look into Indigenous experiences. Returning to Barnaby, *Blood Quantum* features traditional art forms that connect to Indigenous literary arts, including oral and visual storytelling (Truscello and Watchman, 3). One will notice certain parts of the film are animated. These sections represent aspects of stories that the characters may not have seen firsthand but recount as part of their oral tradition. Reminiscent of art depicted on totem poles and Woodland paintings, these animations rely on visual storytelling to fully convey their meaning. The film's soundtrack is also deeply rooted in Indigenous culture. Mi'kmaq drummers, as well as Cree and Salish singers, were hired to bring native tongues to the screen, even when no dialogue was being

spoken (Truscello and Watchman, 10). When combined with an Indigenous director, these elements allow the perspective of the colonized to be the central focus of the film, without being watered down for the colonizer.

While these aesthetics have allowed numerous Indigenous filmmakers to represent themselves and their cultures more authentically, *Scalps* uses Indigenous aesthetics to make the spirits more monstrous. Drumming is reserved for when the vengeful spirit is near the white teenagers who occupy the burial grounds. The drumming is played when the group is chased, attacked, or, in one of the earliest scenes, when DJ listens to the ground and claims the sound is coming from hell. Instead of being a beautiful storytelling art form, the rhythmic beat becomes a threat. However, this is not the only danger. The spirit also uses traditional hunting and gathering tools, such as arrows and hatchets, to incite violence against the group. Furthermore, the film features little to no representation of Indigenous actors, directors, or producers. As a result, the film loses any connection to Indigenous authenticity, instead making a mockery of the Other by casting several white actors to represent the Native spirits. The makeup used to transform these actors into Indigenous spirits includes exaggerated features like large noses and prominent bumps, turning the Indigenous Other into a monstrous figure. In summary, *Scalps* creates disingenuous representations of Native practices, art, and even physical traits to make Indigeneity frightening to white audiences.

Horror films throughout the 1980s depicted Indigenous characters, lands, and practices as sources of evil, forces that would ruin the lives of white settlers. These films villainized Indigenous people for being upset about the colonization their nations had undergone and suggested that white audiences should fear these groups revolting against their oppression. "Fourth Eye" Cinema has provided Indigenous creators with a chance to show audiences the true effects that colonial rule has had on their people, presenting these experiences through the familiar horror form as a way of conveying what it feels like to be a continual victim of violence. These narratives are more sincere, drawing on historical events and Indigenous aesthetics to provide a post and paracolonial world where colonialism no longer places blame on Natives for things they did not do or subjects them to violence they do not deserve.


Illustration by Hillary Vuong

Work Cited

Blood Quantum. Directed by Jeff Barnaby, Prospector Films, 2019.

Michael Truscello & Renae Watchman. "Blood Quantum and Fourth Cinema: Post- and Paracolonial Zombies", Quarterly Review of Film and Video, vol. 40, no.4, 2022.

Pet Semetary. Directed by Mary Lambert, Paramount Productions, 1989.

Scalps. Directed by Fred Olen Ray, American Panther Productions, 1983.