

Class 6: **Indigenous Cinema I**  
Thursday, September 30, 2021

Screening: *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, Jeff Barnaby (2013)

streaming link: <https://dc153.dawsoncollege.qc.ca:2744/htbin/wwform/006?T=AL524361>

---

This Thursday, September 30 is the first [National Day for Truth and Reconciliation](#), a day set aside to honour the lost children and the Survivors of the residential school system, their families, and communities. The day is also known as [Orange Shirt Day](#) an Indigenous-led grassroots commemorative day that honours the children who survived Indian Residential Schools and remembers those who did not. The name honors the experience of [Phyllis Webstad](#), a [Northern Secwepemc](#) (Shuswap) from the [Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation](#) as she entered the residential school system. On her first day of school the new orange shirt she had worn was taken away from her, replaced with an article of institutional clothing. The loss of the shirt is now a symbol of the stripping away of culture, freedom and self-esteem experienced by Indigenous children over generations (<https://www.orangeshirtday.org/>).

Kim Simard from the Cinema|Communication profile has initiated a project called The Orange Book Project, an online exhibition and e-book meant to provide a space for reflection by students and faculty in the College on the legacy of the residential school system. Contributors are welcome to add prose or poetry, photographs, drawings animation, or film. The project will be launched on Thursday, September 30, to be published online over the course of the term/year and completed as an e-book at the end.

Cinema + Culture students are encouraged to contribute one of the writing assignments for the class – a commentary or the scene analysis – or reflections in the form of a visual essay, as a complement to the final research project. The film screened today might provide starting points for these reflections. Following is a brief overview of Jeff Barnaby's *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* film, with links to follow to learn more about the residential schools and related government policies, followed by discussion questions/writing prompts and related readings.

[Rhymes for Young Ghouls](#), Jeff Barnaby (2013)

---

[T]here are the Indians that have made it their business to make sure that the culture and the languages have survived--the omega man Indians. Every beating they take recharges their fuel cells, and instead of tapping out they dust themselves off and knuckle up and just move forward. We are all of us survivors, descendants of this Indian. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here. In [Mi'gMaq](#) we call this person [matnaggewinu](#), a warrior. [Jeff Barnaby](#), Director's Statement

Set on the fictional Red Crow Indian Reserve, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* tells the story of Aila, played by [Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs](#), a young Mi'kmaq girl and her plot to avenge the injustices and abuse she has witnessed and borne at the hands of Popper (Mark Antony Krupa), the government-assigned [Indian Agent](#) who protects and enacts the violent policies dictated by the [Indian Act](#), while running roughshod over the

inhabitants of the Red Crow Reserve and the vulnerable young tenants of St. D's, the local [residential school](#).

It's a complex film, multilayered and remarkable for its cinematic range and storytelling skill. It is also timely, and crucially important for the story it tells. Liam Lacey describes it as a "supernatural teenage caper film, with a thread of dooper humour" and a "fable" (n.p.). The director himself calls it "film noir" (Patterson, 14:32). It's also been called a ghost story, a horror story, a revenge fantasy, and a thriller. Regardless of genre attribution, it can be extremely difficult to watch. [Chelsea Vowel](#) describes the film as "absolutely unrelenting in its brutality," but she also says that it is a film that "every adult living in Canada should watch this film" (n.p.).

Although a fiction, "'Rhymes' offers mainstream audiences a 'history lesson' concerning the reality of Canada's residential school system, and portrays the 'legacy of shame' these state-sponsored, church-run institutions left in their wake" (Patterson quoted in Toll). The film was released two years before the conclusion of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (2009-2015) "revealed what Indigenous peoples had known all along: that 'the central goals of [Canada's Aboriginal policy](#) were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the [Treaties](#); and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada' (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 1)" (Toll n.p.). Barnaby certainly knew the conclusions that were drawn well in advance of the report's publication: he had lived it. Barnaby grew up a Mi'kmaq reserve in [Listuguj, Quebec](#) where he witnessed many of the injustices of Canada's Aboriginal policy first hand.

As direct and unflinching as the film is in its depiction of colonial violence, it is also surprisingly beautiful and extremely touching in many of its parts. The mise-en-scène is lush, the artwork featured in the film is stunning, the dream sequences are magical, the storytelling witty and smart, and the main protagonist is spirited and resourceful: the loyalty and admiration she inspires within her community and with her audience is strong and true and remarkably moving. The film is richly layered, and complex, not only in tone, but in its approach to the subject it depicts.

Our discussion will address the complexity of the issues the film addresses, specifically the legacies of colonization, the Indian Act, residential schools, and the methods the filmmaker has used to tell this story.

---

## DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS

*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* confronts the brutality of colonialism and its tragic legacies as it impacts successive generations of the Indigenous Peoples subjected to its policies. It challenges us to reflect upon what an awareness of this history requires from us. The film asks that of its main character, and its viewers as well. How does this history resonate for survivors and for witnesses? What are each of us called upon to do? How do we respond appropriately?

[Sean Carleton](#) acknowledges that *Rhymes for Young Girls* may be unsettling, but argues that it should be. Referring to political theorist Pauline Regan's argument in [Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling and Reconciliation in Canada](#), Carleton explains that strategies of unsettling contribute to a larger project of decolonization. "Confronting the hidden and horrific history of Indian Residential Schools [is] a starting point to build a greater awareness of, and meaningful relations with

Indigenous people's today" (n.p.). *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* unsettles "not just with the violence of the schools" that it depicts but for what it shows of "the ability for Indigenous peoples to violently resist and fight back" (n.p.). If the film is to prove a productive pedagogical tool, educating Canadians about the history of residential schools, its viewers need to look beyond the actions wrecked by individuals like Popper, and to emphasize the violence of the Residential school system itself. How might we "develop a historical consciousness about the ways in which residential schools in Canada were but one part of Canada's larger strategy of dispossessing Indigenous peoples from their lands to create a capitalist settler society"? (n.p.).

Director Jeff Barnaby suggests that the film aims to depict a "different kind of Indian" than one has traditionally seen in cinema (Patterson). [Taylor Sanchez Guzman](#) describes one version of the stereotype: "From the Western genre to docudramas, depictions of Native people as 'broken' or constantly immersed in violent affairs have appeared and re-appeared without the context of the violence's origins" (n.p.). Barnaby proposes a different "Indian" type, one that shares some similarities with these stereotypes insofar as his characters are often violent, but his films provide the context missing from these traditional depictions and his characters are not necessarily broken. His 'different kind of Indian' deals with the struggles of everyday life. The violence in his films has its place in his characters' ongoing battles to survive. In his interview with [Jamaias DaCosta](#), the director explains that that he often gets "static from Native people" who claim he is "depicting negative stereotypes" (n.p.). "I don't cater to the idea of the drum and feather Indian, I put all that expression into the language of Mi'kmaq. I am more interested in the Indian after the ceremony, not during. Ceremonies are meant to be sacred, and take place in a specific space and time, but I am interested in what those guys do when they go home. When the pomp and presentation of ceremony is not there. I am more interested in humanizing Native people rather than perpetuating this idea that we're doing ok" (n.p.). DISCUSS.

Barnaby claims that he was aiming for entertainment. "We set up to make a '[roadhouse](#)'. We set out to make a [Conan the Barbarian](#). We knew the politics were in there so we weren't going to have any '[once were warriors](#)' speeches'...I didn't want to put any of those preachy politics in there. I just wanted it to be a ridiculous road house movie with my [Patrick Swayze](#), my [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) being this five-foot, young Native girl" (Barnaby in Patterson, 00:25:30 - 00:26:50). If not preachy, what kind of politics are 'in there'? What kind of agency does his female Schwarzenegger enact?

In his [interview with Jamaias DaCosta](#), Barnaby notes that the character of Aila is inspired by the women in his life - his mother, stepmother, sisters and his wife - all of whom he says have kept him grounded. "First Nations women are the language and cultural keepers, they are the epicenter of our matriarchal society. I've mostly only known strength to come from the women in my life. Which isn't to say that the men haven't been influential, but the rock steady power that doesn't waiver seems to come from women" (n.p.). DaCosta mentions that Barnaby has called himself a masculinized writer. Indeed, many of his films and their humour seem to borrow language and tropes found in genres traditionally written for males. Has Barnaby been able to write a female protagonist that honors women and that women relate to? Has his creation of a female Schwarzenegger shifted genre expectations for the 'roadhouse' film?

In many different interviews, Barnaby has said that his filmmaking style is influenced by a range of sources: everything from comic books to Shakespeare to 'roadhouse' and [film noir](#). *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* draws on a richly layered cultural repertoire; it also conjures an exceptionally complex emotional landscape. Moving from comedy to tragedy to horror, sometimes in the course of one scene, the film takes its

audience on an emotional rollercoaster ride. How do these different influences and dynamic energies serve the story? How can we laugh and be horrified at the same time? To what end?

#### References/Resources:

---

- Carleton, S. (2014) On Violence and Vengeance: *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* and the Horrific History of Canada's Indian Residential Schools. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* (October 24, 2014).  
<https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/10/24/on-violence-and-vengeance-rhymes-for-young-ghouls-and-the-horrific-history-of-canadas-indian-residential-schools/>
- DaCosta, Jamaia. "Interview with Filmmaker Jeff Barnaby on *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*." *Muskrat Magazine*. 1 February, 2014.  
<http://muskratmagazine.com/interview-with-filmmaker-jeff-barnaby-on-rhymes-for-young-ghouls/>
- Lacey, Liam. "*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is a grim story of survival." *Globe and Mail*. 31 January, 2014.
- Patterson, Adam. "Interview: Director Jeff Barnaby Talks *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*" *Film Pulse*, 14 Apr. 2014,  
<https://filmpulse.net/podcast-episode-112-director-jeff-barnaby-nothing-bad-can-happen-raid-2/>
- Sanchez Guzman, Taylor. "Moving with the Dead" in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*." *cleo: a journal of film and feminism*. vol. 6, no. 2: #CanCon (Winter 2018)  
<http://cleojournal.com/2018/12/14/moving-wih-dead-rhymes-young-ghouls/>
- Toll, S. C. Disordering Enactments and (Re)mapping the Reserve in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*. *Canadian Literature*, [s. l.], n. 242, p. 37, 2020. Disponível em:  
<https://dc153.dawsoncollege.qc.ca:2070/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.657385196&site=eds-live&scope=site>. Acesso em: 25 set. 2021.
- Vowel, Chelsea. "Why Every Canadian should watch *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*." *CBC News/CBCnews, CBC/Radio Canada*, 24 July, 2014.  
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/why-every-canadian-should-watch-rhymes-for-young-ghouls-1.2687357>

[Rhymes for Young Ghouls: Director Jeff Barnaby and Kawennahere Devery Jacobs talk about their film, Rhymes for Young Ghouls.](#)