

Communications 1160 Final Essay
“*Indian Horse*” By Richard Wagamese

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In Richard Wagamese's 2017 film *Indian Horse*, we feel many emotions as we follow the story of Saul, a young boy living with his family outside of the mainland. Throughout the film, we watch Saul transform and develop from childhood to adulthood. Not only that, we watch the development of Saul's time at the residential school. A shocking and horrifying experience for any child to have gone through. However, viewing the film has many connections to many of the theories learned in *Communications 1160*. This essay presents three approaches concerning the movie: Developmental Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism.

Developmental theory tells us about the many likes and dislikes someone has; it informs us about their life choices, religious beliefs, and everything down to their innermost selves. This is also noted in the Social Penetration Theory model. It starts very basic and then leans into more personal beliefs and feelings. When we think about the film, we begin to make connections on how these ideas connect to the storyline, like when we watch the film's beginning scenes. We see Saul, aged 6, a young boy living off the land with his two parents, grandmother, and older brother. One of the first turning points we see is when Saul's parents and brother leave the land to heal their ill son, the grandmother is hesitant to let them go as they want help from a catholic priest. However, we see them leave on a boat heading back to the mainland, and we do not see Saul's brother again. We quickly change gears to watch Saul and his grandmother fight for their lives through winter. They struggle to capture any food or water as the weather turns colder. At this time, two members from the nearby residential school are looking for indigenous children to bring back to the school; then, Saul gets picked up by the two men on the side of the road as he and his grandmother are searching for help. He gets transported back to the school, and his grandmother is left grieving the loss of both of her grandchildren, and she, unfortunately, doesn't make it. We see these pivotal moments in this young boy's life at the beginning of the film. Grieving the losses of his family members, Saul goes to residential school.

Social Exchange theory is used to build and maintain relationships, not necessarily romantic ones. It states that people look to maximize benefits by minimizing costs in relationships. We see this very briefly in *Indian Horse* between two sisters that Saul befriends, Catherine and Rebecca. Viewers see the relationship between the two sisters very briefly; however, their relationship is also one of the turning points for Saul. The sisters become separated at the residential school, and in that time, they are tortured by all of the priests in very vulgar and damaging ways. At this time, both sisters commit suicide on two different occasions. We also see the relationship Saul creates with his billet family and hockey teammates and how that is maintained. The relationship with the hockey team would be minimized as Saul is seen as an underdog and many people see him as indigenous, not giving him any relief. Although he is seen as a superstar hockey player, Saul still faces racial discrimination from news outlets, team members, and the general public. Viewers also see the breakdown of the relationship between Saul, and his billet family, as his "father" (Fred Kelly) is also the team's coach. This causes tension, and eventually, Saul moves out.

Symbolic Interactionism displays the symbols with which we engage in our personal lives. Many signs may appear from family heritage, religion, or even friends. Symbolic Interactionism keeps you in tune with your inner self and how you can differ from the "I" and "Me." The theory also states the looking-glass self and how you see yourself in different situations. *Indian Horse* has many symbols and particular others in the film, his parents and grandmother, Rebecca and Catherine, and Father Gaston are all examples of this. Although many figures in Saul's life are symbols, there are also physical symbols attributed to Saul's upbringing. First is Saul's hair; having his hair in a long braid is very significant to his family's heritage. When his hair is cut at the residential school, he feels like he has lost a part of his culture. The second would be a hockey stick, Saul's love for the game of hockey started very early, and he continued playing into his early twenties. Last, it would have to be non-physical, but Saul's family. At eight years of age, he was ripped away from everything he'd known, he was then set into a routine of non-traditional ways of living, stripped from his Ojibway culture.

The three theories expressed are attributed to the film *Indian Horse* and how they connect us to the teachings in *Communications 1160*. As we know, many young children like Saul were torn away from their parents, grandparents, and siblings and assimilated into an unknown world, they were stripped of their family's heritage and culture. We recognize today the horror and awful teachings of these children. On a personal note, the film was very upsetting to watch, having a lens into what the children suffered through for many years was eye-opening and unsettling. I had to pause, fast-forward and rewind many times and yet, it was still heartbreaking. I understood the effect and message of what this film was trying to reach and like many others, it too affected me greatly.