

Life Lessons on the 'Res': War Pony (2022)

A movie review (Spoiler alert!)

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War pony is an extraordinary new film based around two young Lakota boys living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The film shows the difficulties faced by Native Americans surrounded by poverty and drugs and their attempts to rise above the many social problems of their families.

Bill is a guy in his twenties with two children by two different mothers. One of them is in prison while the other is cynical of his attempts to try and make his, and by extension, her life better. He finds a poodle in his garden and subsequently decides to buy the dog so that he can make money from its puppies. Later he stops his car on the road to assist a breakdown. It turns out to be a white turkey farmer with one of many native girls he has been having affairs with. After helping the turkey farmer, Bill asks for a job and is soon shown around the facilities.

Watch trailer below.

His boss has a Halloween fancy dress party which is attended by a white guy dressed up in native American costume and war paint. This transfixes Bill as he stares at the representation of his own culture, seemingly disturbed by it and yet attracted to its meaning at the same time, like a memory deep in his subconsciousness that is soon recalled before the end of the film. Another symbol from his past heritage, a buffalo, appears and disappears somewhat mysteriously throughout the film. The language issue is also marked as a significant part of his alienation from his own native culture and when he says to his relatives and friends: "I dont speak Lakota".

In the meantime Matho, who is a 12-year-old boy who hangs out with his smoking and drinking friends, gets involved in selling some of his father's drugs which ultimately has dire consequences for his father. He is kicked out of his father's house and ends up moving from relatives to staying with drug-pushers as he tries to seek some basic stability in his life.

In one scene, Matho falls asleep with a figurine that is holding a tiny American flag, a scene symbolic of Matho's desire to be part of the American Dream yet the size of the flag signifying the practical realities of the poverty and desperation in his young life and his growing distance from the benefits of American society.

Bill's life is also affected by a growing distance from general society as his money-making scheme to breed poodles backfires when his white boss shoots the dog for worrying his flock of turkeys. Furthermore, he is sacked and his boss refuses to pay him for work done.

At this low point for Bill, he decides to get his revenge on the turkey farmer. He gathers up his friends and organises a raid of the turkey farm in the middle of the night. They steal turkey products and live turkeys which are then redistributed among the local people the next day.

This makes for an extraordinary 'tableau vivant' (living picture) scene with turkeys wandering slowly around in the snow along with a buffalo with a 'res' (reservation) house and its inhabitants in the background. The peace and purity of the snow contrasts with the film's hectic, hot life of the two main protagonists, and combined with the turkeys and the buffalo, it has a timeless feel. A symbolic projection of nature back to an earlier pre-colonial time? Or to a post-revolutionary future with redistribution of wealth combined with nature respected and free from centuries of colonial oppression?

That timelessness is reflected in the [quote](#) attributed to Crazy Horse: "Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children."

War Pony was directed and produced by Riley Keough and Gina Gammell with a screenplay by Keough, Gammell, Franklin Sioux Bob and Bill Reddy. Keough met Sioux Bob and Bill Reddy, while filming in South Dakota in 2015 and introduced them to Gina Gammell.

The film then [took](#) shape "through writing workshops, improvisation sessions, and meeting hundreds of locals in the community, to make the story authentic. The group began discussing an idea for a film revolving around two indigenous locals growing up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. They began writing the script based upon Bob and Reddy's life experiences and stories they had heard, ending up with too much material, and decided to split the story between two characters, and collaborated with local producer Willi White."

While the style is realistic, even naturalistic in places, the close-up photography of many scenes gives the film an intimate feel. The mood is always hopeful despite the many difficulties and setbacks that both Bill and Matho face in their lives.

War Pony is a combination of two progressive aspects of culture (that I have [written](#) about before): resistance to slavery, and respect for nature. The raid on the turkey farm forms a type of symbolic resistance to capitalism and exploitation of nature as Bill engages in the 'redistribution' of the factory goods while at the same time letting the turkeys roam free.

Bill learns slowly that he is living in a system where the odds are stacked against him, but eventually takes an activist stance, not to get personal revenge, but to avenge his community for the expropriation of the practical and symbolic aspects of his people that left him and his friends constantly scrabbling around in the dirt to make a living. It is possible, too, that the 'Red Indian' costume and war paint from the party, triggered an ancient 'memory' in Bill of the dignity of his ancestors who fought desperate odds to try and retain their independence.

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