Decentering Man's Place in the Universe: *Yakari* and Its Visual Representation of Native Americans

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Yakari is the young hero of a thirty-five-volume comic series of the same title, which was written and drawn by the Swiss francophone cartoonists André Jobin (Job) and Claude de Ribaupierre (Derib) in the early 1970s and appeared in France and Belgium between 1973 and 2009. Yakari is a Sioux boy who is able to understand and speak animal languages. His best friends are a Sioux girl, "Rainbow", and his horse, "Little Thunder." He also has a totem animal, "Great Eagle," which frequently gives him critical advice. All of his numerous adventures center around various kinds of animals (Yakari 2012: n. pag.; Yakari n.d.: n. pag.; Official Website n.d.: n. pag.).

The comic series was such a tremendous success in Belgium and France that its issues have been translated into at least seventeen languages including English, German, Finnish, Breton, Indonesian, Polish, Chinese, Turkish, Arabic, Inuktitut, and Catalan. In Germany, the comic series was readily accepted into the existing repertoire of representations of Native Americans, satisfying German 'Indianthusiasm,' "a yearning for all things Indian" (Lutz 2002: 168). Carlsen Comics published twenty-six issues between 1977 and 2001, and since July 2006, Salleck Publications has published the remaining nine issues as softcover. What is more, the Native American boy and his friends quickly made it on TV. From 1983 onwards, Graphoui produced *Yakari* on TV, and fifty-two episodes were broadcast by Antenne 2 in France. Seventy-eight additional *Yakari* episodes were produced and broadcast between 2005 and 2007 by France 3. The series then started conquering German TV, being aired by the children's channel KiKA between March and May 2008. By attracting more than 1.5 million viewers, *Yakari* won an incredible market share of 21.1%. In late 2008, ZDF tivi, the children and youth program of one of Germany's most prominent public channels, took up broadcasting *Yakari*. Needless to say, all episodes can be purchased on DVD (Yakari 2012: n. pag.; Indianer-Abenteuer in ZDF tivi 2008: n. pag.). Since then, there has been a *Yakari* hype, with new German editions of the comic books, coloring books, calendars, and jigsaw puzzles flooding the market. As a consequence, reviewers began to speak of a "true [Yakari] renaissance in Germany" (Yakari reitet durch den Supermarkt und an die Kioske 2011: n. pag., translation S.M.).

At the beginning of 2011, Yakari was "as fashionable as never before" and continued to spring up in additional places: Blue Ocean Entertainment began to produce activity booklets, with 80,000 copies appearing every two months, and Aldi-Süd, a large German discounter, announced it would offer selected *Yakari* comic books at a low price (Yakari reitet durch den Supermarkt und an die Kioske 2011: n. pag., translation S.M.). In 2012, the hype continued, with the production of a smart phone app, audiobooks, and the announcement of the production of a motion picture. A musical, "Yakari – Freunde fürs Leben" ('Yakari – Friends for Life') by Thomas Schwab, is currently set to tour throughout Germany from April to December 2013 (Yakari, der Sioux-Indianer 2012: 13; Yakari spielt mit den Tieren 2012: n. pag.; Yakari Live 2012: n. pag.).

Despite its long history of success and its popularity among German pre- school/first-school children and despite the growing body of work on the representation of Native Americans in comic books and film (cf. e.g. Kilpatrick 1999; Pewewardy 1999; Rollins/O'Connor 2003; Buscombe 2006; Sheyahshe 2008; King 2009; Royal 2010; Raheja 2011), scholars have so far not investigated the representation of Native Americans, more precisely the Sioux, in this comic and animated cartoon series. In my contribution, I therefore seek to decipher the representational strategies employed in the German version of the animated cartoon series. I will first briefly elaborate on the temporal and spatial setting of the series, as well as on its set of characters and visual specificities. In a next step, I will argue that *Yakari*'s major agendas are the criticism of anthropocentrism and the advocacy of animal rights. Finally, I will discuss *Yakari*'s political implications, in particular when read against the traditional filmic iconography of Native-settler relations prominent until the present day.

Visual Stereotyping and Dehistoricizing in *Yakari*

"[F]ilm and visual culture," as Michelle H. Raheja has recently reminded us, "have provided the primary representational field in which Native American images have been displayed to dominant culture audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (2011: ix). Raheja even goes so far as to speak of "Hollywood's racial optics regime," thus hinting at the film medium's stereotyping of Native Americans not only on the level of the plot but also through its use of visual images (2011: x).

Despite its creation and production outside Hollywood and its prescribed set of "Hollywood Indians," as Jacquelyn Kilpatrick has termed them (1999: xv), *Yakari* engages in similar filmic practices. The series is set in the North American Great Plains and is thus in line with Hollywood's tendency to privilege Southwestern and Plains Indian cultural identities and to present them as an "indigenous norm" (Raheja 2011: xiii). Such a representational strategy also appeals to German audiences in whose "cultural imagination" the Plains stereotype looms large (Weber 2012: 170). *Yakari*'s protagonists are Sioux, as is explicitly mentioned by the characters, who pronounce the tribal name wrongly ([si:uks]). In order to appease ethnologists, the series' creators have attempted to visually approximate Sioux habitation styles (tepees) and clothing (fringed shirts, leather pants, impressively feathered war bonnets). Inaccuracies creep into both book and film version when it comes to everyday objects such as the clay pot, which is actually not a part of the Sioux art tradition (Fig. 3; Yakari und Kleiner Donner 2008: 00:02:04). Which Sioux division Yakari and his tribe belong to or where exactly the story takes place geographically we never learn. The same imprecision also persists when it comes to the series' temporal placement. *Yakari*, like most of its filmic predecessors, traps its Native American protagonists in the past but refrains from focusing on Native-settler relations. While the presence of horses, introduced by the Spanish in the early sixteenth century, suggests that *Yakari* is set in the post-contact era, in the whole series the presence of Euro-American settlers is not mentioned even once. Yakari lives in a secluded Sioux microcosm apparently (yet) unaffected by the effects of colonization. One could now surmise that Euro-American settlers have not yet entered the region of the Plains and that they therefore do not appear in the series. What is rather astonishing, however, is the fact that – with a few scattered exceptions, such as the two Pawnees in episode three – no other tribes or bands are present either (Kleiner Donner reißt aus 2008: 00:08:01). This absence suggests that the producers historically decontextualized *Yakari* as much as possible, placing the boy and his friends into an untouched, exotic paradise hermetically sealed from interhuman interferences. This paradisical atmosphere is enhanced through the series' audiovisual tracks. *Yakari*'s upbeat and rhythmical signature tune and the producers' predominant use of primary colors underline the carefree and historically decontextualized setting thus created.

Both through its plotlines and cinematographic techniques, *Yakari* constructs most of its characters as 'noble savages.' Both their words and actions reflect values such as community, courage, and mutual respect. Yakari, in particular, also gradually develops into the epitome of the 'ecological Indian,' who protects nature and treats the animals respectfully. However, there are distinctions made regarding the ecological Indian, which I will discuss later. Most of the tribe's hunters are portrayed as extremely muscular, agile, and endowed with the stereotypical beaked nose. They are friendly, display a sense of humor, and speak grammatically correct German. This appears particularly progressive if one compares this depiction to the earlier one in the *Yakari* comic books, in which stoic, ill-humored, and linguistically disadvantaged Native Americans abound (Fig. 1 and 2).

Figures 1 and 2: The friendly tribe and the 'stoic Indian' (Yakari und Kleiner Donner 2008: 00:10:57; Yakari und Großer Adler 2009: 7)

In Yakari's world – in both book and film version, most of the women carry out traditionally female chores, such as cooking, sewing, and fetching water. Many of the men, by contrast, are prominent for their inactivity, laziness, and absent-minded behavior (Fig. 3 and 4; Yakari und Kleiner Donner 2008: 00:02:00).

Figures 3 and 4: Gendered division of labor and the 'lazy Indian' (Yakari und Großer Adler 2009: 24; Kleiner Donner reißt aus

2008: 00:03:58)

Considering the focus of most European Indian fantasies on Native-settler interaction and the dying of a race, the series' degree of historical decontextualization is unusual, but in terms of stereotypization *Yakari* corresponds to many of its American and European filmic and literary predecessors, such as travel literature, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Karl May's oeuvre, the DEFA 'Indianerfilme,' and a plethora of Hollywood productions. The animated cartoon series, in particular, abounds with mostly positive images of noble savages, interspersed with occasional "homages" to the 'lazy' and 'stoic Indian.' However, "[c]liché busting," as H. Glenn Penny dubs the efforts of German scholars and hobbyists to replace such stereotypes by "authentic Indians," will not bring us new insights here, as *Yakari* obviously does not aim at teaching children about Native American culture (2006: 799). Instead of conducting a litmus test concerning representational correctness, I would like to investigate how the series appropriates Native Americans. Besides seeking to entertain its young viewers, I argue, *Yakari* functions as a projection surface for discourses on animal rights.

Yakari's Critique of Anthropocentrism and Its Advocacy of Animal Rights

> *„If the Eiffel Tower were now representing the world's age, the skin of paint on the pinnacle-knob at its summit would represent man's share of that age; and anybody would perceive that that skin was what the tower was built for. I reckon they would. I dunno." (Twain 2004: 226)*

In his short story, "Was the World Made for Man?," Mark Twain satirizes British anthropologist Alfred Russel Wallace's anthropocentric theory that the universe was created specifically for the evolution of mankind, espoused in his 1903 monograph *Man's Place in the Universe* (Pratt 2005: 81). While *Yakari* does not employ satire to criticize humans for their belief in their own superiority, it takes an equally emphatic and firm stance against anthropocentrism and positions itself in favor of animal rights.

Anthropocentrism can be found at the heart of many traditional Western ethical approaches, which consider only human beings to have an intrinsic value, or at least claim that human beings have a greater amount of intrinsic value than non-human beings. Environmental ethics, which was formed in the 1970s as a new sub-discipline of philosophy, countered such anthropocentric conceptualizations. Studying "the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its nonhuman contents," environmental ethicists have questioned "the assumed moral superiority of human beings to members of other species on earth" and investigated "the possibility of rational arguments for assigning intrinsic value" to them, as well as the environment (Brennan and Lo

2008: n. pag.; cf. Joseph 2009: 228). Environmental ethics has ever since underpinned political and legal debates about animal rights and environmentalism and has given rise to a variety of social and political movements. Roughly, one can distinguish between a "shallow ecology movement," fighting against resource depletion and pollution, and a "deep ecology movement," endorsing "biospheric egalitarianism," that is, the view that all living organisms have an equal right to live in their own way (Brennan and Lo 2008: n. pag.).

Yakari's animal rights approach can be best traced back to the animal liberation movement, which came into existence in the 1970s. Peter Singer, the movement's first theorist, argued in his 1975 monograph *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* that the interests of animals need to be considered because of their ability to suffer and to feel pain. He advocated such "equal consideration of interests" in opposition to the prevalent speciesism, "an attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species." While Singer argues that we must bring non-human animals "within our sphere of moral concern," he does not claim all lives to be of equal worth (1975: 7-8, 23). Singer's position is considered preference utilitarianism as, for him, the best solution to a moral problem is the one which will best satisfy the preferences of the greatest possible number of living things (Regan 1983: 206-08).[1]

Yakari was conceived of and produced at exactly the time when philosophical, legal, and political discourses of environmental ethics and animal rights emerged in the United States, Europe, and many other countries. Critiquing anthropocentrism, *Yakari* also strongly adopts Peter Singer's utilitarian position on animals, emphasizing the equal consideration of interests between humans and non-humans through its audiovisual tracks. A few minutes into the first episode, we realize that in *Yakari* animals are able to speak with each other as well as with humans and engage in the same thought processes as the latter. In fact, they are more intelligent and far-sighted than their human counterparts. When Yakari rescues his future horse, Little Thunder, whose hoof has become stuck in-between rocks, the horse indicates that he understands the boy, nodding at his orders (Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:06:28). Moreover, by far the wisest and morally most superior character in the series is an animal: Great Eagle, Yakari's totem, who is able to speak, is omniscient and omnipresent. His wisdom and superiority become evident through an employment of specific cinematic techniques. Thus, he always enters the scene from above, his towering shadow announcing his majestic appearance. Due to his sheer size, the boy and we, the viewers, always look up to him, which instills us with a sense of awe. To heighten the impression of superiority, power, and magnificence thus created, Great Eagle is often surrounded by an aura of gleaming light and accompanied by mystic music and flying leaves, stirred up by the power of his wings. His diction and speech reflect wisdom and foresight (Fig. 5; Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:07:31-00:08:30).

Figures 5 and 6: Animal above human: Yakari and the Great Eagle (Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:08:02; 00:07:54)

It is just such capability of reflection, "the reflective mind," as opposed to merely "perception and desire," that scholars, in a Kantian fashion, cite when emphasizing the difference between humans and animals (Korsgaard n.d.: 93). Thus, by endowing animals with a reflective mind, *Yakari*'s producers undermine arguments in favor of hierarchizing between humans and animals.

Yakari is initiated into this highly moral animal kingdom by receiving the gift to communicate with the animals, which turns him into an exceptional Sioux. For, while living in sync with the environment, the Sioux are portrayed as anthropocentrists – most tribe members believe in taming horses or engage in revenge plots against animals and attempt to kill them, such as Restless Wolf in the fourth episode. They thus consider their own rather than the animals' interests and deem themselves the superior species. According to Great Eagle's plan, Yakari is to enlighten the Sioux about the animals' rational and intellectual capabilities in order to facilitate a better understanding between the species. However, before he can fulfill this mediatory function, the boy has much to learn. At the beginning of the series, Yakari espouses the same anthropocentric paradigms as his adult role models. Intent on taming his horse, Little Thunder, he tries to trick him into a friendship, offering him a cob of corn and jumping on his back. After Little Thunder unsaddles him, Yakari's anger and frustration lead to the following dialog between horse and human (Fig. 7):

LT: It will certainly not work this way, ridiculous. Y: You can talk?

LT: Sure, and I can even understand you. Y: I can also understand you.

LT: Hm, I'm not too sure about that.

(Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:09:20-00:10:04; all translations from the series are by the author)

Figure 7: Yakari and Little Thunder (Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:09:45)

Little Thunder's witty, tongue-in-cheek remarks – which cannot be found in the comic book version – exemplify the animals' intellectual and moral superiority and emphasize their insistence on free will and self-determination. The horse's pun on the German word *verstehen*, which simultaneously means "to comprehend" and "to understand," encapsulates the animals' belief that – even if humans can comprehend animals – they are certainly not able to understand them. Great Eagle similarly emphasizes that

Yakari needs to adopt a new attitude toward the animals: "[You are able to communicate with the animals], because I trust you, for you are a friend of the animals and I know that you will understand them and protect them from evil humans" (Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:10:15-00:10:34). Great Eagle emphasizes that Yakari has not earned the ability to converse with the animals himself but that it was the animals that have empowered him. Besides lacking agency, Yakari is not yet able to understand them – but he will in the future. The expression "evil humans" suggests that the boy will have much conversion work to do, as most human beings are – based on their anthropocentric mindset – inevitably evil.

In the course of the next episodes, we follow Yakari's initiation into the morally elevated animal kingdom and into the values ascribed to the animals by the producers: tolerance, mutual respect, understanding, freedom, and self-determination. The boy time and again falls back into his old – human – habits, for instance, when he tries to impose his will onto Little Thunder in order to excel among his tribe members. The animals oppose such vain, human ambition. When Yakari tries to coerce Little Thunder into a race against his friend's horse, Little Thunder leaves him. Great Eagle explains to the Native American boy that the Sioux have to take good care of their horses: "Don't force your will onto Little Thunder. He wants to be free; as free as all human beings on this earth." This highly didactic lesson, equating animal and human desires, culminates in Yakari's insight: "I always thought I was the greatest, but as a matter of fact I only won through him [Little Thunder]." From now on, the boy always makes sure that Little Thunder agrees to his plans and complies with the horse's demand never to put reins on him, as he loves his freedom too dearly (Kleiner Donner reißt aus 2008: 00:04:20-00:06:43; Yakari und Großer Adler 2008: 00:10:08). Such an equal consideration of interests lies at the heart of Singer's animal liberation approach. Living according to the principles of ecological egalitarianism and symbiosis, Yakari has reached what deep ecologist Arne Naess has termed "self-realization," that is, the reconnection of the human individual with his wider natural environment (1973: 96).

‚Going Animal,' Dualistic Thinking, and the Logic of Domination in *Yakari*

Considering the traditional iconography of cultural products representing Native Americans, the character constellation in *Yakari* is very striking. Popular representations such as James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Karl May's *Winnetou*, and Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* focus on the conflict between good Native and evil Euro Americans and feature a White protagonist "going Native." This, usually male, individual then combines the best of both ethnic cultures, fusing into a super-Native, superior to the rest of his tribe, therefore assuming leadership roles. "By adopting Indian ways," Shari Huhndorf argues, "the socially alienated character uncovers his own 'true' identity and redeems European-American society." "[F]orms of going native," she further claims, "also support European-American hegemony" (2001: 5).

Yakari presents us with a parallel yet significantly different constellation: a Native American boy "going animal", finding his true identity in turn and redeeming his tribe members from their speciesism. Through Yakari's taking over the superior morality and insights of the animals, he considerably enhances his standing among his tribe members and the animals, occasionally even outdoing the animals. When Little Thunder gallops away and hides himself due to his fear of the wolves, Yakari courageously decides to undertake his journey to the pack alone and is thus enlightened about the true nature of the wolves (Im Land der Wölfe 2008: 00:01:57, 00:05:00). *Yakari*'s animated version merely shifts the focus from ethnic group to species, with the Native Americans taking over the traditional role of the Whites (the morally inferior colonizer) and the animals adopting the position usually assigned to Native Americans (the morally superior colonized victim). This parallel construction of the plot culminates in the scene in which Little Thunder declares his eternal connection to and friendship with Yakari, an intermedial reference to Winnetou's and Old Shatterhand's vows of blood brotherhood: "First, you saved my life. Now, I save your life. Now we belong together forever" (Yakari und Kleiner Donner 2008: 00:09:33-00:09:54).

That the animals in *Yakari* are merely stand-ins for minorities all over the world becomes particularly obvious in the fourth episode, when Yakari mediates between tribe member Restless Wolf and the wolves. Some years ago, Restless Wolf was attacked by a wolf, Three Leg, while hunting and killing wolves. Since then he has sought revenge, his heart having been full of hatred and fear. The whole tribe is also afraid of the wolves, shuddering at their howling in the dark, reading it as a threat and warning

against humans. Yakari has fully bought into his tribe members' fears and commonly held beliefs about wolves. Consequently, when running into Three Leg, Yakari is terrified. Immediately, Great Eagle intervenes from above explaining to the boy that it is just such unjustified fears of the Other, lack of knowledge about each other, as well as faulty allegations that lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between the species:

GE: Why were you afraid, Yakari?

Y: Wwwwwhy? But wolves are dangerous…

GE: Has this wolf ever threatened or attacked you? If Restless Wolf has reason to be afraid of wolves, does the same also apply to you? Think about it…

(Im Land der Wölfe 2008: 00:06:07-00:06:28)

Three Leg himself later explains to Yakari that the wolves only attack if they are attacked, that they otherwise respect humans and that their howling at night is not a threat – as humans believe – but a chant that derives from ancient traditions expressing joy and group spirit. A look at the cinematic style reveals that the encounter between Three Leg and Yakari is a meeting of equals, who converse with each other at eye level. The shot/reverse shot technique employed throughout the scene underlines the episode's message that we must look at each other in order to understand each other. Moreover, the choice of lighting, in combination with the falling snow, endows the scene with a mystic and romantic quality and thus emphasizes the significance of such encounters between the species (Fig. 8; Im Land der Wölfe 2008: 00:07:27-00:08:20). After digesting this lesson, Yakari soon gets the opportunity to function as the mediator between humans and wolves. When Restless Wolf is about to be killed by the wolves, Three Leg explains to Yakari that his friend can only escape "if he swears to respect his [Three Leg's] kin as much as we [the wolves] respect his kin. He needs to express his respect credibly and forever" (Im Land der Wölfe 2008: 00:09:29-00:09:30). Respect for, as well as openness and tolerance toward, other species are the prerequisites for a peaceful and unprejudiced coexistence or even interaction – thus the message of the episode.

Figure 8: Yakari and Three Leg (Im Land der Wölfe 2008: 00:07:29)

The example of the wolves shows that *Yakari*'s animated version, even more explicitly than its printed predecessor, argues that all human beings, including the Native Americans, have prejudices toward and a tendency to think in hierarchies and to dominate, subjugate, and tame/civilize the (non)human Other. Feminist and postcolonial ecocritical scholarship has, over the past decade, insisted on the mutual enforcement of diverse forms of oppression, linking the suppression of the environment with the suppression of the female and colonized Other. Val Plumwood has further emphasized that "deep structures of dualism" lie at the heart of the logic of domination and colonization, fostering all these forms of oppression. The ideological rift thus created between the master and the "dualised other" allows for colonization to progress. In *Yakari*, we see the phase of appropriation in the dualizing process acted out, the "exploitation of 'use' in nature, in which the rational ego is conceived as standing apart from the alien other, as the self-contained user of the item for consumption or resources of knowledge it now becomes" (Plumwood 1993: 192, 194). While the Native Americans in *Yakari* are overall depicted rather positively, as noble savages, they inhere in the very same logic of domination that – in real life – was responsible for their own colonization. Yakari, however, through the help of Great Eagle, breaks this vicious circle and thus allows for a remaking of the story. Through openly approaching the animals and considering them and their interests as equal to those of human beings, the boy creates what Plumwood has called "a democratic culture beyond dualism, ending colonising relationships and finding a mutual, ethical basis for enriching coexistence with earth others." "Democracy, co-operation and mutuality" are at the heart of *Yakari*'s didactic message (1993: 196).

Conclusion

Considering its target audience, preschool and first-school children, *Yakari*'s visual endorsement of humans and animals as equal "knots in the biospherical net" (Naess 1973: 95) is didactically feasible. Moreover, the emphasis on environmental issues – particularly played to the fore in the animated cartoon series – guaranteed that the series would elicit the approval and endorsement of a generation of parents that had grown up during the emergence of the environmental movement in Germany from the 1970s onward and would strike a chord with their children. The series thus tunes in with and fosters the Green sentiment prevalent in Germany. In this sociopolitical context, Yakari is a role model for the children on how to protect the environment. He acts as a *tabula rasa* on which German ecological fantasies can be inscribed (cf. Feilitzsch 1993: 183).

Besides its strong didacticism and its unequivocal messages, *Yakari*, through its exciting plotlines and its captivating cinematography, allows its young viewers to escape their everyday lives and to become actors in a comparably peaceful and adventure-laden universe. Seen from this point of view, the producers' decision to present the children a historically decontextualized Sioux microcosm devoid of interhuman warfare is feasible, as it spares them violent histories of colonization and exploitation. In the educated adult viewer, however, the insinuations deriving from the series' visual employment of traditional iconographies and its consequent universalization of ideological structures create a profound unease, as it could potentially be read as a relativization of Euro-American colonial guilt.

Note

[1] Regan is the advocate of an animal rights position, condemning any practice failing to respect the rights of animals, irrespective of human need and competing claims and thus arguing anti-utilitarian.

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