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THE ART OF BEING ABORIGINAL: FILMS AND ABORIGINAL  
CULTURES IN CANADA

por

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To Alexandre, Eduardo, Leonardo, Rivilso,  
Irene, and Mabiana.

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During all these years of hard work, I learned important lessons and one of them is about the “Sacred Tree”, which is one of the most relevant symbols for most of the indigenous cultures in the Americas. Trees symbolize shelters under which we may be protected. Trees nurture us with their fruits, which symbolize lessons to be learned along the path. Trees nurture us with their falling leaves, which symbolize the lessons many people leave behind as they pass away (Bopp et al, 2004). Thus, symbolically trees may be all the people that during our life provide us shelter, nurture us with teachings, and support us with love, friendship and compassion. We must be grateful to all these trees. Thanks to my parents because they ‘sheltered’ me under their branches for many years and nurtured me with important lessons. Although they are not here anymore, I will always remember them, especially in important moments like this. Thanks to my family for being patient during this long journey.

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**ABSTRACT****THE ART OF BEING ABORIGINAL: FILM AND ABORIGINAL  
CULTURES IN CANADA**

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UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA

2011

Advisor: Prof. PHD Anelise Reich Corseuil

This dissertation analyses four films produced by Aboriginal filmmakers in Canada: Alanis Obomsawin's *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2007); Neil Diamond's *Reel Injun* (2009); Igloolik Isuma Corporation's *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (2000) and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2007). These productions illustrate how cinema has become an important space for Aboriginal people to (re) imagine their histories and (re) create meanings of aboriginality from current perspectives. While the articulation of a discussion of identity and culture is at the core of Aboriginal films, this dissertation, through textual analysis, also takes into account how they may be moving, effective, beautiful works of art, which bring into light the 'art' of being Aboriginal in current times.

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**RESUMO****A ARTE DE SER ABORÍGENE: FILMES E  
CULTURAS ABORÍGENES NO CANADÁ**

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2011

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Esta tese analisa quatro filmes produzidos por cineastas aborígenes canadenses: *People from Where the Sun Rises* de Alanis Obomsawin's; *Reel Injun* de Neil Diamond; *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* produzidos pela Igloolik Isuma Productions. Esses quatro filmes ilustram como o cinema tornou-se um importante espaço para que cineastas aborígenes reimaginem suas histórias e recriem sentidos de aboriginalidade a partir de uma perspectiva atual. Enquanto as discussões sobre identidade e cultura são um elemento central nesses filmes, esta dissertação, com grande enfoque em análise textual, também os apresenta como emocionantes, efetivas e poderosas manifestações artísticas, que fazem emergir na tela a 'arte' de ser aborígene na atualidade.

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## INTRODUCTION

What exactly does it mean to be Mohawk? It is actually a hard question. I can't grasp on anything that makes me say that I'm a Native. I'm a Mohawk. I have no idea what it means to be Native.

*Club Native, 2008*

You know, it's about keeping that circle strong too. So be proud of your culture because it's part of your identity. It's part of who you are. And if you are proud of that and you acknowledge that, people will see it. You'll shine.

*Dallas Arcand, Aboriginality*

Above all, you have to know who you are.

*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises, 2007*

### **Statement of problem and goals**

Indigenous peoples worldwide have been historically prevented from exercising the right to develop in accordance with their own needs, interests and beliefs, being underrepresented, misrepresented or non-represented at all by mainstream scientific and cultural productions. However, Peter Kulchyski warns us “not to follow the media and dwell on so-called social pathologies, but to remind ourselves of the accomplishments” (xxiv).<sup>1</sup> Over the latest decades, indigenous peoples have organized themselves locally, regionally, nationally and

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most recent global achievements was the adoption of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. Through more than twenty years, the declaration was negotiated between indigenous peoples and nation-states, and it is expected to be an instrument to implement significant improvements in the global situation of indigenous peoples ([www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/declaration.html)).

transnationally, for political enhancement. Whereas political, economic and social concerns are at the core of indigenous struggles, one important aspect of what Ronald Niezen calls “Indigenism” (119) is its emphasis on culture.<sup>2</sup>

As quoted in the beginning of this chapter, culture and identity are issues of great importance for Aboriginal people in Canada. The quotations are from Aboriginal filmmakers or actors in Aboriginal films. Thus, within the context of current indigenous political assertion and cultural renaissance, Aboriginal Canadian cinema has become a very productive cultural field, being an important space for debates about indigenous culture and identity politics, and (re) creation of meanings of aboriginality for both Natives and non-Natives alike. In this respect, in *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004), George Melnyk remarks:

First Nations cultural self-consciousness and goal of political self-government are redefining Canada’s political and cultural landscape in a way that has brought a new affirmative Aboriginal identity to screen. (4)

Considering the importance of Aboriginal cinema in Canada, this dissertation aims to analyse some films produced by Aboriginal filmmakers throughout the latest decade. The selection of films includes Alanis Obomsawin’s *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2007), Neil Diamond’s *Reel Injun* (2009), Igloolik Isuma Corporation’s

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<sup>2</sup> In “Recognizing Indigenism: Canadian Unity and the International Movement of Indigenous Peoples”, Niezen describes “Indigenism” as grounded on international networks and organizations. Thus, according to him, it may be compared to the nationalist spread over the last two centuries. Although in Niezen’s view nationalist movements of the past were bigger in scale and more tumultuous than the contemporary “Indigenism”, the latter “has the potential to influence the way states manage their affairs and even to reconfigure the visual alignments of nationalism and state sovereignty” (119). As an example of this local potential power, Niezen points out some Canadian examples. One of them was the struggle between the Cree communities and the province of Quebec over the construction of a hydroelectric dam in James Bay. The other example was the uprising between the Mohawk people at Oka and the Canadian state over the construction of a golf course in indigenous sacred lands.

*Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (2001) and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2007). This dissertation particularly observes how these films articulate resistance to hegemonic discourses that have historically marginalized indigenous peoples.

This introductory chapter is designed as follows. Initially, it explains the design of this dissertation, describing the *corpora* that will be analysed. After that, this introduction focuses on the important concepts that foreground my discussion of Aboriginal films, beginning with a review of the complex definition of Aboriginal identity in current times. This discussion includes an overview of the problems of labelling as well as of the historical contingencies revolving around indigenous cultural identification. Another important concept that the chapter revisits is representation, which is at the core of contemporary debates about (Aboriginal) identity and Aboriginal cinema. This introductory chapter also offers an overview of the mainstream filmic representations of Natives, for the understanding of the context from which Aboriginal cinema emerged and has developed.

In the light of current debates about culture, identity and representation, this chapter corroborates a theoretical and methodological framework to indigenous film proposed by Houston Wood in his book *Native Features: Indigenous Films from around the World* (2008). Wood's approach allows for developing the argument that focusing only on identity politics is not enough for the appreciation of Aboriginal films. Therefore, this introduction also proposes a methodological approach that pays attention to films as 'films' first and foremost, which, thus, may be seen as moving, effective, powerful works of art that bring into view the 'art' of being Aboriginal in current times. Finally, yet important, the chapter also considers the debate about non-Aboriginal incursions into 'Aboriginal intellectual territories,' focusing on my own perspective and concerns as a Brazilian scholar.

Initially, my intention was to focus attention exclusively on a couple of fictional films. Nevertheless, a grant by Canadian Government through the Doctoral Student Research Award (DSRA) program allowed me to go to Canada, where I stayed for some months. The opportunity of 'going to the field' was important for my reflection and, thus, for the reviewing of initial concerns, assumptions and goals. Given that, I began to think about the possibility of including more films in this dissertation, highlighting some of the multiple arenas of Aboriginal film production. Another conclusion was that the main form

of expression for Aboriginal filmmakers has been the documentary genre.

In “Moving Through Shadows and Light: Sharing Thoughts and Stories” (2003), Jackie Bissley remarks that documentary is “still one of the only vehicles Native filmmakers have access to in terms of funding and having their work screened by peers” (86). Thus, many indigenous filmmakers prefer documentaries because they are often less expensive than fictional films. Whereas fictional films often require higher production values, documentary is suitable to lower budgets, inexpensive settings and equipment. One must also take into account the importance of the documentary genre in the context of Canadian cinema.

Documentary has been considered as the most distinguished expression in Canadian cinema, whose long tradition of producing documentaries may be traced back to the first cinematic shots of Canada taken by James Freer in the late nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In the end of the 1930s, following the advice of Scottish documentarian John Grierson, the Canadian government created the National Film Board (NFB), starting a work that would establish the documentary as a Canadian genre *par excellence*.<sup>4</sup> The Griersonian project invested in documentary as an essential mechanism for presenting the discourses of science, official reports and education, thus contributing to the creation of images of Canadian nationhood and national coherence (Melnyk 2004).

In “How Indians are Read: the Representation of Aboriginality in Films by Native and non-Native Directors,” Jean Paul Restoule poses, “the majority of high profile Native films are produced through the National Film Board of Canada” (93). For this reason, it is not surprising that most of the Aboriginal film production is in the

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<sup>3</sup> The first Canadian cinematographic ‘realist’ images were shot by Freer in 1897. Melnyk poses that Freer’s cinematographic shots presented the “basic metaphor for early Canadian cinema”, the landscape. The Canadian Government toured Freer’s shots in Britain as propaganda of the riches of Canada, aiming at attracting British immigrants, thus enhancing its relationship with Britain. Therefore, earlier shots by Freer inaugurated a tradition of Canadian film to be sponsored by corporate and state’s interests (15).

<sup>4</sup> Grierson is internationally acknowledged as the father of the documentary. Quoted in Melnyk, the Scott documentarian declared in an interview a few years before his death: “I suppose I coined the word [documentary], saying it was an ugly word that nobody would steal, and it always was one of our defences against commercialism” (58).



documentary format. Nonetheless, as I further discuss in Chapter I of this dissertation, it would be simplistic to assert that documentary is important for Aboriginal filmmakers solely based on the argument of financing and budgeting, and one may think about other motivations for this choice of genre.

Considering the relevance of Aboriginal documentary, two documentaries will be analysed in Chapter I, *Waban-aki People from Where the Sun Rises* (2007) by Alanis Obomsawin, and *Reel Injun* (2009) by Neil Diamond. Obomsawin's documentary focuses on cultural breaches as they intertwine with the economic, social and political ruptures in the life of Waban-aki peoples.<sup>5</sup> Through a careful treatment of filmic elements, namely, editing and sound, the filmmaker interweaves a number of elements, such as archival footage, stories, interviews, drawings, photographs and songs. As they are combined, these elements contribute to the creation of remarkable metaphors of community building and a documentary that is true poetry on the screen.

*Reel Injun* by Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond combines interviews, archival footage, and photographs to counter the Native stereotypes created and disseminated by mainstream films, mainly by Hollywood. Diamond intersperses the historical account of the 'reel Injun' with the presentation of his own journey from his hometown in Northern Canada to Hollywood. Given that, he uses some of the conventions of Western and the road movie to counter the images created by mainstream film genres. As a result, the filmmaker offers a witty Aboriginal view about the history of Hollywood's portrayal of indigenous people.

Chapter II concerns the analysis of two fictional films by Igloodik Isuma Production's, *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (2001) and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2007). In Inuktitut, the Inuit language, Isuma means 'to think', and, thus, from its own name the company suggests one of its important goals: to make people reflect about Inuit

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<sup>5</sup> Waban-aki is a label for a number of Algonquian tribes that originally lived by the Atlantic Ocean, having their traditional lands in New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont in the US and in Canada. Because of their location, the Waban-akis were considered as 'peoples of the dawn' because they were assumed the first to receive the light of the rising sun. The Waban-aki comprises a number of different peoples, namely the Penobscots, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Abenaki. Alanis Obomsawin is from an Abenaki community, which shares Waban-aki's etymology, also meaning 'people from where the sun rises' (Waldman 2006).

cultures in current times even when the stories are about the Inuit past.<sup>6</sup> To make us ‘think,’ the filmmakers create compelling works of art, including *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*, which is the company’s first fictional film. It garnered dozens of awards in a number of film circuits in 2001, including a Camera D’Or in Cannes, best Canadian feature at the Toronto International Film Festival, and best picture and best director at the Genies. Indeed, as Melnyk reminds us, it was the first time that a Canadian film was winner of a Camera D’Or (260). The irony is that the film sounds particularly ‘foreign’ even for the Canadian audiences, because it was entirely shot in Inuktitut.

*Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* brings to light the power of oral tradition, through the adaptation of a millenary legend to screen. Although it is about Inuit past before contact with Europeans, Isuma’s film is an enunciation from a current perspective. Therefore, *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* suggests a view about contemporary issues, namely, the concern with community and cultural survival. The film dismisses some of the common stereotypical views about life in the Arctic, namely the assumptions that Inuit peoples are mere victims struggling against the eternally frozen and harsh North. Through powerful cinematography, composition of *mise-en-scène*, editing, and acting, Isuma’s filmmakers ‘write with light’ the beauty of the Arctic landscapes, the people and their cultural elements.

Isuma’s second fictional film, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, offers an Inuit perspective on the history of colonialism in the Arctic in the early twentieth century, focusing on the changes at play in the region at that time. Trade, enforced settlement, and a new religion, forced Inuit peoples to shift from hunting and fishing lifestyle to a cash-based economy and new modes of cultural engagement. Although *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* is about Inuit past, the film as ‘art’ also suggests interesting meanings especially in relation to the authority over the creative process of Inuit cultural representation.

In Chapter III, I restate that the films analysed in this dissertation illustrate that ‘Aboriginal cinema’ is about film as ‘art,’ since through careful treatment of filmic elements, the filmmakers

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<sup>6</sup> Inuktitut is the Inuit language, used officially in Nunavut, the most recent established and largest territory in Canada. For a history of the creation of Nunavut, see Collins and McMahon’s article “Heritage and Regional Development: An Indigenous Perspective”.

highlight that Aboriginal cultures as represented in film are moving, powerful and rich. The chapter also focuses on important debates about the effectiveness of Aboriginal cinema to (re) make cultural sense, especially concerning the problems of film production and circulation, and offers some suggestions for further studies.

### **Aboriginal identity: a working (in) definition**

The definition of Aboriginal cinema also deserves attention. The apparently simple definition, ‘Aboriginal film is a film by an Aboriginal filmmaker,’ brings up questions about Aboriginal identity, which by no means have easy answers, beginning with the choice of labels. In *Canadian National Cinema* (2002), Christopher Gittings remarks that a ‘clear’ definition of indigenous identity might include “the very struggle to grasp terminology that effectively signifies Aboriginal identity” (197). In this respect, in the introduction to Thomson Highway’s *Comparing Mythologies* (2002), John Moss states:

What do you call these people in your language?  
Do you use adjectives, twisted into nouns?  
‘Natives.’ ‘Aboriginals.’ ‘Savages’ no longer  
applies. (Highway 13)

All these terms are problematic in a way or another. For instance, the label Native, which has currently been used as both a noun and an adjective in compounds, such as, Native American, Native Canadian, and so forth, has the following entry in the *Longman Advanced American Dictionary* (2007), “someone who was born in a particular place”, or country, especially as distinguished from foreigners. Thus, in a sense, any person born in North America could have the right to an identity as ‘native’ North American.

Another problematic label is ‘Indian’. In the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2005), Kenneth M. Roemer quotes Gerald Vizenor who speaks about the ambiguity of the term Indian. As Vizenor states, “unless one believes that *Indios* derives from Columbus’s positive response to the Taino people – *una genta in Dios*, a people in God” (9), the common belief is that the label Indian signals a remarkable geographical mistake. Also emphasising the ambiguity of the label ‘Indian’, Moss states, “Interspersed alphabetically are entries such as ‘Indian English’, ‘Indian Standard

Time, and ‘Indian Subcontinent.’” He continues, “This ‘Indian’ is ‘adjectival’, and refers to another hemisphere. It is as confusing as having two football teams called the Rough Riders” (13-14).

Quoted in Moss, Lakota scholar Lenore Keeshig-Tobias remarks, “How I loathe the term “Indian.” Emphatically, she states that people use the label Indian to “sell things - souvenirs, cigars, cigarettes, gasoline, cars”. She also states, “Indian is a figment of the white man's imagination” (13). Thus, alluding to *Journeying into the Imagination with Figment*, a Disney’s attraction at the Epcot Center, Keeshig-Tobias points towards the idea that the label ‘Indian’ is a mere product of mental invention for commodities in amusement parks.

Although some indigenous groups may consider the designation ‘Indian’ somewhat offensive, the Canadian Constitutional Act officially recognizes the label, which, thus, has legal force in Canada. Nevertheless, this label also points toward complex relationships between indigenous Canadians and the State, since the term ‘Indian’ encompasses two categories, status and non-status Indians. The former are those who are acknowledged by the Indian Act, which, as I further discuss in this chapter, is a policy established in the nineteenth century for the assimilation of indigenous peoples in Canada into the body politics. The other categories that are officially acknowledged through the *Canadian Constitutional Act* are the Métis, which are the descendents of the mixed offspring of earlier European colonizers and Natives, and the Inuit, which were once known as Eskimos. The three categories, Indian, Métis and Inuit are referred to as “Aboriginal Peoples of Canada” Each of the three categories encompasses a number of different groups and communities, and each of them has a particular relation within the nation-state (*Canadian Constitutional Act* 1982 Part II).

Another widely used label is ‘First Nations,’ which underscores the point that indigenous peoples were the ‘first’ inhabitants of the Americas. Nevertheless, it also poses some problems, since, according to the website of the Department of Justice of Canada, the term ‘First Nations’ has no legal definition (<http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/dept-min/pub/legis/n14.html>). For Native scholar Taiaiake Alfred, the terms ‘First Nations’ and ‘Aboriginal’ are politically problematic. Quoted in Gittings, Alfred observes that

such potentially empowering terms [First Nations and Aboriginal] [...] can work in the service of a colonial Canadian state apparatus that wishes to project a myth of postcolonial autonomy on to a people who continues to be granted the authority to govern through vestiges of a colonial power structure.” (qtd. in Gittings 197)

Alfred considers that the labels ‘First Nations’ and ‘Aboriginal Peoples’ cause the impression that indigenous people have the power of self-determination and governance. Yet, according to him, the power is illusory, because it emanates as a delegation of the state. Alfred’s concerns with current political implications of labels bring into view that they are non-indigenous creations, which have historically been used as tools for power relations. In other words, labels such as ‘Natives’, ‘Indigenous’, ‘Aboriginals’ are European creations used to define peoples that from a Eurocentric perspective were considered as ‘others’.

Currently, many indigenous peoples often use labels such as First Nations, Natives, Aboriginals, as expression of group solidarity. However, there is also an overwhelming preference for the use of labels that reflect tribal affiliations, namely Lakota, Mohawk, Abenaki, Inuit, and so forth. In “What We Want to Be Called,” Michael Yellow Bird explains that the use of tribal labels signifies “a powerful sense of ethnic (tribal) pride” (14), as they are derived from the people’s own language. Therefore, tribal labels counter the assumption that indigenous peoples are one homogeneous racial group. As Yellow Bird poses:

Such names are fundamental to understanding and respecting the diversity among Indigenous Peoples. Not only tribal identity represents a form of cultural identity empowerment, it can also be an expression of anticolonial discourse used to force colonizers to acknowledge the rich diversity among indigenous peoples. (14)

Throughout the dissertation, I use labels, namely Natives, Indigenous, Aboriginals, and so forth, interchangeably. Although I am aware of all the problems concerning labelling, I corroborate Yellow Bird’s statements.

in the end, perhaps what is most important in the struggle to define racial and ethnic labels that are representative of Indigenous Peoples is that these groups do not lose their identities as the ‘first’ Nations of these [the American] lands. (18 emphasis added)

Considering the problems of labelling, one may infer that questions about self-determination and sovereignty are at the core of the definitions of what to be indigenous is in current times. For instance, considering Stam and Shohat’s definition of indigenous people as the “the still-residing descendants of the original inhabitants of territories subsequently taken over or circumscribed by alien conquest or settlement” (*Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 32), one may understand that issues of ancestry, language, and traditional territories make it more difficult to strictly define people as indigenous. One may also problematize definitions that are solely based on the idea that indigenous people are powerless within the context of the nation-states. An example is the current political and cultural position of the Inuit people from Nunavut, the latest established territory in the Canadian Arctic, with a majority of Inuit population and an Inuit government.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, one must be cautious with strict categorizations. Each Aboriginal community has a different position within the context of the nation-state, because of the diverse historical circumstances revolving around colonial relationships. In this respect, in “Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who Really Has It?” Hilary Weaver tells a meaningful story about a basketball tournament, which I retell as follows.

Weaver tells us that the day had come to the final match between the Lakota and Navajo teams. Just before the game, one of the Lakota players watched the Navajo practice. He saw that his opponents were able players, but one of them could not be a ‘real’ Native, because of the colour of his beard and the dark skin. Therefore, the Lakota argued that the so-called Navajos were probably “a bunch of Mexicans” (241). The

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion about the power of Aboriginal people to influence on state affairs, see Niezen’s “Recognizing Indigenism: Canadian Unity and the International Movement of Indigenous Peoples”. Collins and MacMahon-Coleman’s “Heritage and Regional Development: An Indigenous Perspective” also discusses the influential role of indigenous cultures in the political and cultural affairs within nation-states.

same questioning about ‘real’ identity occurred when one of the Navajo players watched the Lakota training. The Navajo player also thought that one of his opponents was a fake Native because his skin was light, and the whole Lakota team probably was a “bunch of white guys” (241). The discussion began, and both teams made efforts to provide ‘evidences’ of their members’ ‘true’ Native identities.

The ‘proofs’ included racial features, ability to speak Native language, and knowledge of traditions. Some of the players rejected the arguments of skin colour and absence of beards. These arguments were mere replications of racist assumptions that no longer apply. Many of the players could not speak their Native languages anymore. For this reason, many of the contenders rejected the ability of speaking Native language as an assertion of identity. Some of them had also forgotten many traditions, invalidating the argument of knowledge of tradition as identity proof.

Meaningfully, one of the players presented a membership card, proving his ‘affiliation’ to a Native community. However, other players rejected the card, because they considered it as a non-Native invention. The membership card was an iteration of non-Native legislations that have historically undermined indigenous rights to self-determination. As I further discuss in this chapter, one of such legislations is the *Indian Act*, established right after the birth of the Canadian Confederation to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples into the body politics.

The discussion began in the morning, and went on through the afternoon. However, the arguments continued, and the players could not come to an agreement about their ‘real’ Native identities. Being Native was a requirement for playing in the tournament. It was already night and the stadium was poorly lightened. The very patient referee finally decided to finish the match, which, indeed, had never started. The tournament was over without winners (Weaver 240-42).

Weaver’s story is useful to this discussion for many reasons. First, the narrative highlights a significant aspect of ‘Native’ cultures, their strong ‘tradition’ of storytelling, thus corroborating Thomas King’s statements, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (qtd. in Valaskakis 2005 3). Second, through the dynamics of storytelling, Weaver makes us reflect about the dynamics of cultures as well. The important point the story brings to light is that it is not possible to provide a rigid definition of the concept of (Aboriginal) cultural identity. Third, Weaver is a Lakota scholar. Therefore, it is significant

that, like Yellow Bird, she offers a ‘Native’ opinion, which warns us against essentialist assumptions about Aboriginal identity.

In short, Weaver’s story is about current problems of indigenous identity, and the right of indigenous peoples to determine membership in their communities. Self-determination is a complex issue in current times. Both the Lakota and Navajo players claim their ‘Nativity’ by associating it with different cultural traits, namely, language, skin color, absence of beards, and so forth. In this sense, the story illustrates how, in Azade Seyhan’s words, “the self (*Ich*) represents itself by positing a not-self (*Nicht-Ich*)”. There is always an undecidable alternation between a structure and its opposites. Given that, Seyhan maintains, “it is only by ‘embodying difference’ that [cultural] identity fulfills its destiny” (9 emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

The conflicts between the players in Weaver’s story show that competing claims for identity are the core of indigenous self-determination. The Lakota and Navajo players did not exchange values in a collaborative and dialogical way. Indeed, their claims of Native identity were antagonistic and even incommensurable, so that the tournament ended without winners. The players’ behaviour suggests their totalizing view of identity. Within this perspective, they considered identity as a product, a result of pre-given traits.

Within this context of theoretical investigation and filmic analysis, this dissertation corroborates current cultural theories, according to which identities are actually “identifications” (Hall 1993 226) or “cultural engagements” (Bhabha 3). Therefore, ‘identity’ is less a product than a process, which is never complete due to continuous transformation of societies. In other words, contacts and conflicts between different peoples have caused discontinuities in the ‘uniqueness’ of any cultural identity. In this sense, Aboriginal cultural engagements also undergo continuous transformation because of the

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<sup>8</sup> Seyhan corroborates Jacques Derrida’s concept of “différance”, a neologism he proposes in relation to the undecidability between two different meanings, “to differ” and “to defer”, which accounts for the complex relationship between a structure and its opposites. From this perspective, no longer is identity to be understood as a mere opposition between binaries, self/other, native/non native, and so forth. Given that, there is ‘suture’, the ‘a’ in Derrida’s concept of “différance”, which highlights that earlier conceptions of identity are cancelled. At the same time, the ‘suture’ allows for the continuity of the use of the concept, but from a detotalizing and deconstructive perspective (Seyhan 1999).



institutional and structural changes in Aboriginal societies, as I further discuss as follows.

### **Aboriginal cultural engagements: the historical contingency**

-We didn't talk about traditions in the past. There were no other cultures here with us and we didn't think about preserving anything because we were living it. It was all we had. We were living it.

(An Inuk elder qtd. in Wachowich 122)

How do we handle this 'legacy', which blends 'tradition' with the 'gifts' from White people?

(Elisapee Isaac *If the Weather Permits* emphasis added)

In fact, when I was young I used to think the whole world was Indian just like us.

(Christine Sioui Wawanoloath in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*)

The above statements by Aboriginal people remind us of the complex history of interactions between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. These interactions are at the core of current claims for identity. Thus, as Homi Bhabha states, cultural engagements is “a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation”. Tradition provides only a “partial form of identification” in this process. Indeed, identification defies any notions of “an originary identity or a ‘received’ tradition” (*The Location of Culture* 3).

The above quotations from Aboriginal people also illustrate that claims of cultural difference and tradition often occur in moments of uncertainty (Bhabha 1997; Hall 1993). Concerning “Aboriginal Peoples of Canada”, claims for cultural identity revolve around a history of colonialism, which this dissertation does not aim to discuss extensively. The history is very complex. It involves a relationship between at least two of the European colonial powers, France and Britain, which were the major colonizing forces in Canada, and hundreds of Aboriginal communities, each with a particular relationship with the colonizers.

Therefore, each community, and each of their members experienced colonialism in different ways.

However, the attempt by the Canadian state to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples into the body politics is one aspect of the colonial history that figures as a central issue in the debates about indigenous identity. Therefore, assimilation deserves some attention in this chapter. According to Peter Kulchyski, the absorption of Natives into mainstream Canadian societies revolved around meanings of ‘civilization’. Assimilation of Aboriginal Peoples was a goal even before the establishment of the Canadian Confederation, since, as soon as 1815, legislations by the Crown already aimed at “teaching Native peoples to cope with and live peacefully beside non-Natives” (179). As by the mid nineteenth century new ‘scientific’ paradigms emerged, namely Social Darwinism and eugenics, civilization was equated with race. Within this perspective, Europeans were at the top of the racial hierarchy. Therefore, assuming the undesirability of being of an ‘inferior’ race, policies changed to forced assimilation, i.e., “forcing and teaching Natives *to be* non-Natives (179).

In Canada, the major legislation for assimilation was the *Indian Act*, which demanded the establishment of criteria to determine whom the Aboriginal, “without the right of other citizens” (179), was.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, one of the most oppressive aspects of the legislations for assimilation, including the *Indian Act*, was that they attacked the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination. In addition to the *Indian Act*, in the late nineteenth century another official practice would deeply

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<sup>9</sup> The *Indian Act* was established in 1876. In later amendments, from 1884 to 1895, the *Indian Act* would attack Aboriginal cultural practices. It criminalized traditional practices, such as the Potlatch and the Sundance. The amendments also deleted the right to land claims that the Royal Proclamation of 1763 had assured to indigenous peoples. As Kulchyski remarks, these later amendments illustrate the conflation between culture and politics to create strategies for assimilation (Kulchyski 181). Until the late 1950s, many Aboriginal people lost their status as native through enfranchisement process. This process was even more damaging for women who lost their status as Aboriginals because of marriages to white men (Kulchyski 180). In 1985, Bill C-31 delegated to indigenous Band Councils the right to determine membership to their communities. However, membership in Native communities is still problematic, particularly for women, as legislations for assimilation still influence on Aboriginal identity politics. This is a central issue of Alanis Obomsawin’s *Waban-aki people from Where the Sun Rises*, which I discuss in Chapter I of this dissertation.

affect the lives of “Aboriginal Peoples of Canada”, the residential schools system.<sup>10</sup>

The disciplinary regime of the *Indian Act* and the residential schools system aimed not only to regulate Aboriginals’ bodies, but also to regulate their minds, forcing them to renounce to their languages, systems of governance, philosophies, cultural practices, and histories. Both the *Indian Act* and the residential schools became a source of trauma for many Aboriginal people, who, Ted Palys states, “were taught to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves” (“Histories of Convenience: Images of Aboriginal Peoples in Film, Policy, and Research” 19). The *Indian Act* and the residential schools system caused severe familial and social disruptions that still affect many Aboriginals (Kulchyski 1995).

Considering the historical contingencies as presented above, one important concept that deserves further explanation is ‘aboriginality’ itself, which, as Marcia Langton defines it, “[ ] is a colonial field of power relations within which Aborigines struggle with the dominant settler culture over the representation of things such as ‘identity,’ ‘history,’ ‘land,’ and ‘culture’” (qtd. in Ginsburg 1994 367). Therefore, at the core of the definition proposed by Langton is the concept of representation, as her statements emphasise:

Aboriginality’ arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book. (qtd. in Ginsburg 1994:367)

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<sup>10</sup>Through partnership with the Church, the Canadian government created industrial boarding and residential schools. Gittings describes the attempt at assimilation as a “schizophrenic tendency”, (46) which Duncan Campbell Scott encapsulated in his work as Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. Scott argued, “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic.” Thus, in 1931, he made mandatory the attendance to residential schools (qtd. in Jessup 1999 12). An in depth perspective about the residential schools in Canada is the documentary *Where are the Children? Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools*, produced through a partnership between Aboriginal Healing Foundation and the Legacy of Hope Foundation.

## Representation

Being a sub-arctic Cree, I couldn't believe how naive they [southerners] were, until I realized their ideas of Natives came mostly from the films they'd watched of Indians on horseback, who lived in tepees, on the plains. Then I understood: for there was a time, as a boy, when I thought that was how my ancestors had lived, too.

(Neil Diamond)

Wahsonthiosta. I have to perform in a play. A dramatic experience.

Tracey Deer. What's it called?

Wahsonthiosta. "Sometimes when I dream".

Tracey DEER. And who are you?

Wahsonthiosta. I'm a Native.

(Club Native 2008)

Quoted above, Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond underscores the point that conceptions of aboriginality have been powerfully created through filmic representations, i.e. through 'images' of aboriginal culture and identity constructed especially in mainstream films. Considering the assumed *indexicality* of filmic images, many people may also assume that these representations are imbued in indigenous 'reality'. Given that, the problem is not the accuracy of the film representation, i.e., it is not important to question whether Indians should be represented with feathers or headbands. The problem is that many people may assume that films provide access to 'information' about Natives, thus, creating meanings of aboriginality, which may have effects in 'real' indigenous lives. As I further discuss in a later section of this chapter, meanings of backwardness, savagery, childishness, which have at certain historical points circulated through visual media, have ideologically interspersed with attitudes and policies towards indigenous peoples.

Another important point that Diamond's statements bring to view is that mainstream film representation has deeply affected many Aboriginal people themselves as they may also create meanings of aboriginality from the images that circulate through media. In this sense, Diamond's words corroborate Jean Paul Restoule as he states:

Native people seeing themselves depicted as lazy or stupid may become resentful or hostile toward the people of the culture producing such images. Some Native people lose self-esteem knowing that there are others who believe these images to be true. (“How Indians are Read: The Representation of Aboriginality in Films by Native and Non-Native Directors” 3)

The second quotation in the beginning of this section suggests another important interplay between the concepts of identity and representation. The quotation is from *Club Native* (2008), a documentary by Mohawk filmmaker Tracey Deer. Beginning with the dialogue between the filmmaker and her sister Wahsonthiioosta Deer, the documentary develops the argument that current Aboriginal identification relies upon vestigial colonialist discourses, namely, assumptions of race, blood quantum and gender. As the documentary proposes, a tacit rule for joining the ‘Club Native’ is that Aboriginal women must not have children with white men. Given that, a possible interpretation is that in the context of the documentary, the dialogue is an ironic commentary about membership in some Native communities. As *Club Native* discusses, Native women have to ‘perform’ their Nativeness to an ‘audience’, in order to get official acknowledgement by their Band Councils.

The dialogue between the Deer sisters reminds us of Homi Bhabha’s statements that claims for identity “[...] whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced ‘performatively’” (*The Location of Culture* 3 emphasis added). In short, as Bhabha poses, identifications do not result from pre-given traits or traditions, but are “(...) the production of an ‘image of identity and the transformation of the subject in ‘assuming that image’” (64 emphasis added). Bhabha’s statements make clear the interplay between identity and representations, in that they are both ‘images’ and ‘performances.’ This is an important point especially concerning the re-presentation of Aboriginal people in mainstream films, in which the aesthetic meaning of representation, as ‘image’ and ‘performance’, intersperses with a second, the meaning of speaking for someone else in political and legal arenas.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the intrinsic relationship between the two meanings of representation, the aesthetic and the political. According to her, both

meanings conflate as they imply that someone is given the authority to 'be in the place or to speak for someone else.' Spivak theorizes about representation in the complex context of India, in particular about the subaltern women. She answers her own question "can the subaltern speak", by concluding, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 308).

In her Preface to the Brazilian translation of "Can the Subaltern Speak", Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida reminds us that one must not make a literal meaning from Spivak as she states that the subaltern cannot speak. As Almeida maintains, one must understand that Spivak "goes beyond a mere objective answer to the question" 'can the subaltern speak?' (14).<sup>11</sup> For Almeida, Spivak refers to the fact that the subaltern speech act is always mediated by another voice, and, thus, does not achieve the legal level of utterance. In other words, when the subaltern speaks, he/she is not heard.

As Almeida explains, one must be cautious with the word subaltern, which, from Spivak's perspective, must be considered in relation to the concept of 'proletariat,' proposed by Antonio Gramsci. As Almeida maintains, Spivak uses the term subaltern to describe the lower strata of societies, which are excluded from the political and legal representation, thus being denied the possibility to reach the higher strata in dominant societies. Given that, not all marginalized groups must be considered as subaltern ("Prefácio-Apresentando Spivak" 12).

In this sense, I do not use the term 'subaltern' in relation to Aborigines, because I would run the risk of homogenizing them and their experiences within the political and cultural context of Canadian state. Furthermore, not all Aboriginal people would be subalterns. My reference to Spivak is to highlight the conflation of aesthetic and political acts in the process of representation. For a long time, mainstream film have 'spoken for' indigenous peoples, thus ideologically supporting mainstream scientific and legal 'appropriations' or exclusions of indigenous voices, as discussed in the following section.

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<sup>11</sup> Translation from Almeida's preface to the Brazilian translation of *Can the Subaltern Speak*. Almeida states, "Ao concluir que o subalterno não pode falar, Spivak vai além de uma mera resposta objetiva a essa pergunta" (14).

### **Aboriginal people in mainstream films**

If we are to understand the accomplishment of Aboriginal cinema in Canada, it is important to understand and to know its evolution. Therefore, in the following sections, I integrate a review about current Aboriginal cinema with some key developments in a broader context of indigenous representation by mainstream scientific and cultural production.

Cinema emerged in the late nineteenth century when, as discussed above, assumptions of race and blood quantum were still at the core of the policies towards Aboriginal Peoples. Not surprisingly, films became tools that disseminated conflicting images of Aboriginal people, often portrayed as noble victims of an inexorable destiny, doomed to extinction, or as savages in the way of non-Native's progress. In both cases, as Restoule reminds us, as non-Native creations these images "were historically motivated, revealing less about indigenous populations than about non-natives" (18). In short, images of Aboriginal people in mainstream films have often reflected European values and beliefs, as they interplay with trends in science and policy. In this respect, Palys's "Histories of Convenience: Images of Aboriginal Peoples in Film, Policy, and Research" is particularly useful to this dissertation as he examines the interplay of science, policy and film in the creation of images of indigenous people.

According to Palys, the history of representation of Natives in film may be divided into four distinct periods. The first one corresponds to the late nineteenth century up to 1925, a time when Aboriginal people were thought to disappear because of diseases and the politics of assimilation into dominant societies. This period coincides with the rise of cinema as well as of Anthropology as a scientific discipline. Many Anthropologists soon discovered in film a tool 'to document' indigenous worlds before their 'disappearance.' Filmmakers such as Edward Curtiss and Robert Flaherty joined anthropologists, aiming at recording primitive cultures before their disappearance (Palys 23).

Aboriginals were object not only of the discourses of science and ethnographic films, but also of the discourses of fictional films. According to Palys's categorization, in the first period of film, Hollywood also began to present narratives about indigenous peoples. Their images as created in fictional films would define indigenous peoples for decades. As Palys enumerates, early Hollywood films constructed the following stereotypes of Natives:

(a)an emphasis on Plains Indians, and especially the Sioux; (b)living in tepees (c) wearing feathered headdresses; (d) riding on horseback; (e) always stoic or stealthy; and (e) locked into the 1850-1890 period. (Palys 24)

Palys states that in the second period, around 1920 to 1945, demographics dismissed the earlier assumptions that Natives were vanishing peoples. Thus, he observes, “if the nature would not do the job, then we would have to do it ourselves” (25). The attendance to residential schools was made mandatory in this period. The state also criminalized cultural practices and deleted the indigenous right to land claims. The film industry contributed for the articulation of a settler perspective, constructing myths such as the following:

homogeneity, savagery, and inferiority of ‘Indians’ and Indian cultures; (b) the bravery and honour of settler populations; and (c) the myth that all North American Indians were conquered peoples. The myth of the bloodthirsty Indian legitimated and rationalized the idea that Indians deserved to disappear. (Palys 25)

Similarly, Gittings states that in early films, “Canadian landscapes and resources were commodified to sell the images of ‘an empty land’”, to which the presence of Native peoples was incompatible. Gittings poses that in the first cinematic national narratives, First Nations peoples were frequently portrayed as “inert figures of another time in the margins of the nation.[. . .] figure[ing] as part of that environment whites have attained mastery over [. . .] as a part of a disappearing wilderness” (10). In this respect, Melnyk observes that the dominant discursive practice was the erasure of Aboriginal peoples from the screen, and their replacement by “a purely Euro-Canadian [presence] of boundless prosperity” (23).

According to Palys, in the third period of mainstream representation of Natives, from around 1945 up to 1970, there was some “change of heart” (26), since many Aboriginal soldiers voluntarily fought in World War II. As a result, indigenous unfavourable economic and social conditions began to attract increasing concern. More



oppressive elements of the *Indian Act* were erased, namely the banishment of cultural practices and prohibition of enquiries for land claims. Films of this period appeared more sympathetic to Aboriginals. Nevertheless, as Palys observes, vestigial hegemonic discourses were still present in those revisionist films.

More heinous actions (land grabs, treaty violations, specific massacres) were dismissed as the regrettable actions of isolated misguided individuals, rather than broadly and systematically pursued objectives; (b) 'Indianness' continued to be treated as a relic that is left behind when one no longer hunts buffalo or uses tepees; and (c) the 'inevitable' passing of the 'noble and red man' is affirmed and accepted. (28)

In the fourth period, which begins around the 1965 up to the present, minorities increasingly began to participate in the academy. First Nations Studies emerged. Formal recognition of Aboriginal and treaty rights were some of the reviews made to the policies towards indigenous peoples. In addition, they increasingly engaged in political movements as well as in international organizations, such as the United Nations. With the purpose to present perspectives that were 'more indigenous', mainstream film representations of this period included more indigenous themes, writers, authors, and actors (Palys 29).

Palys warns us that sharp categorizations like his run the risk of becoming a generalization. Nevertheless, he provides "an overall characterization" with the purpose of understanding that "film imagery regarding Aboriginal Peoples has changed in a parallel manner to research and policy as outlined above" (29). Therefore, Palys's categorization is also useful to understand the ambiguity of indigenous imagery, which changes according to very specific historical conditions and interests.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, in *Indios, Monstros e Canibais* (2000), Sergio Luiz Bellei approaches the issue of representation as it interplays with the changing interests in the relationship between Natives and colonizers. Bellei examines the myth of Pocahontas, pointing towards the ambiguities of the stories about the indigenous woman that is now part of the national imaginary in the United States of America. Comparing two different versions of John Smith's reports about the exploration of the new land, Bellei examines the factual motivation that lies

Furthermore, his approach also suggests that there are two main logics in the mainstream representations of Aboriginal peoples in film. The first dominant logic was that of exclusion, which predominated especially in the first half of the twentieth century. By the 1960s up to the 1990s, the logic of exclusion shifted to another dominant logic, appropriation. Social and cultural movements emerged, namely the Hippy movement and the New Age, with ecological concerns and the desire to return to a more spiritualized and natural world.

Therefore, because of the persistent image of Natives as confined in the realm of 'spirituality' and 'nature', indigenous people became an obvious model for those that wanted to return to nature and flee from the materiality and uncertainty of the modern world. While portraying indigenous peoples, non-indigenous films delivered messages about the need to change their own societies. Given that, many films that seem more sympathetic towards indigenous people have been criticized for presenting them not for themselves, but as a means to speak about the frailties of non-indigenous societies.

Thus, Kulchyski defines the logic of "appropriation" as "the practice on the part of the dominant social groups of deploying cultural texts produced by dominated social groups for their own (elite) interests" (1997 614). Relying on the notion of postmodernism as a rupture in relation to modernism, Kulchyski considers that appropriation has become the dominant – not total, he emphasizes -- tendency in the postmodern era. Currently, he explains, "those who once had difficulty being heard now get called, ordered, to live under the injunction of constantly speaking, speaking to the point of exhaustion" (616).

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beneath the different texts. In the first version written in 1608, Smith does not mention his encounter with Pocahontas. In the second version, of 1624, Smith records the episode of the Indian princess. Bellei maintains that it is not the case to find the 'truth' or 'lie' in the myth, but to pay attention to the significant "textual silence" and its motivations (100 my translation). Relying on Peter Hulme's *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean* (1986), Bellei states that the massacre of the settlers village in 1622 is an "organizational principle" (116 my translation), which allows for a rational explanation for the change of perception and the different versions of Smith's narrative. However, the massacre itself was only a 'convenient' explanation for the two different versions. Underlying the textual silence was the shift of the colonizers' interests. The dependency on indigenous support for survival in 1608 turned into the wish to settle on the new lands. Given that, it was necessary to believe in the indigenous cruelty as a means to justify the settlers' rights to possess the lands. This is the reason for Smith's second version of the story.

Kulchyski concludes that the logic of “appropriation is as destructive and dangerous to Aboriginal culture as the logic of exclusion” (616).

Similarly, Native scholar Lenore Keeshig-Tobias is critical about appropriation as she compares current cultural appropriations to earlier political practices for cultural assimilation.

It seems a host non-Native professionals (publishers, editors, producers, directors, and the like) have taken over the work of the missionary and the Indian agent. Like their predecessors they now know best how to present the Native image, the Native perspective, never dreaming, of course, that it is really their own perspective” (qtd in Gittings 215).

### **The development of Aboriginal Cinema**

The concern with exclusion and appropriation and their effects on identity formation led Aboriginal Peoples to enter the production of their own films. Whereas in comparison to the whole history of cinema, Aboriginal filmmaking is a more recent phenomenon, its history may be traced back to the early twentieth century. As Beverly Singer tells us in *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens* (2001), Hollywood used to hire actual Pawnees, Arapaho, Sioux and Cheyenne as extras to re-enact battles in early fiction films. James Young Deer and Edwin Carewe were two Native directors in Hollywood in the early 1900s. Nevertheless, their work did not influence the representations about indigenous peoples in the early history of cinema. As Singer states, Hollywood’s conceptions informed Young Deer’s practice, resulting on his simplistic views of Natives (14).

In “Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies: Resignifying Indigenous Lives,” Faye Ginsburg also remarks that the contemporary increasing presence and circulation of indigenous media have roots in earlier times. She cites as example the production of Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922). Flaherty’s journals describe the engagement of Inuit people in the cinematic production. Ginsburg highlights the cinematic expertise of Allakarialak, the actor who performed Nanook. Unfortunately, as Ginsburg reports, he could not pass his knowledge of camera and filmmaking to other Inuit. While Flaherty’s film became a public and critic success, Allakarialak was dying of starvation in the Arctic (81).

Indigenous peoples had to wait until the second half of the twentieth century to hold the camera again. In 1966, ethnographers Sol Worth and John Adair began a collaborative work with some Navajos, to which the ethnographers taught some basics of film technique. The purpose of the experiment was to analyse whether the Navajos would use a different film 'grammar' based on their worldview. One of the Navajo leaders made a question to Worth and Adair: "Can film do the sheep any good?" (Ginsburg 7). In other words, the Navajo leader enquired the ethnographers about the possibility of using film for purposes that were more practical and could contribute to the improvement of the social conditions of the community.

Concerning Canada specifically, one may trace back the history of indigenous film to the late 1960s, when the NFB created a project called *Challenge for Change* with the active participation of First Nations peoples. In 1968, Micmac filmmaker Willie Dunn was the first Aboriginal director at the National Film Board (NFB). His documentary *The Ballad of Crowfoot* mixes photographs and a song composed by Dunn to narrate the history of the genocide of First Nations in North America. This documentary is a marker in the history of direct participation of Aboriginal peoples in film. In the 1990s, the NFB started developing an Aboriginal film community, working with First Peoples across Canada. In 1991, the NFB established *Studio One* in Edmonton. In 1996, the Aboriginal Filmmaking Programme replaced *Studio One* (Gittings 2002).

Although the NFB has been one of the major sponsors of Aboriginal films in Canada, other organizations have also created spaces for Aboriginal self-representations. One of them is the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). In the late 1970s, the launching of the satellite Anik over Canada, allowed mainstream TV programming to reach remote Northern Aboriginal communities, whose leaders became concerned with the influence of non-indigenous media on Inuit cultural integrity. Therefore, the leaders voted twice against television, deciding to wait until programs in Inuktitut were also available. Inuit peoples became even more interested in film as a possibility for recording cultural practices and educating especially the young generations. In

1981, with the purpose of using media from an Inuit perspective, the Inuit Tapirisat created the IBC (Baltruschat 2002).<sup>13</sup>

Besides the IBC, Aboriginal Peoples created other important organizations, namely the Television Northern Canada (TVNC), launched in 1991. In 1999, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) was created with the purpose to serve the diverse needs of the various Aboriginal communities in Canada. The launching of important tools for broadcasting Aboriginal programs is a marker in the history of Aboriginal struggle for the creation of spaces for cultural critique and political affirmation (Baltruschat 2002).

The production of Aboriginal film and other media corresponds to the later period of Paly's historical categorization, which begins around 1965 up to the present. Engaging in the production of their own images, Aboriginal media makers highlight that no longer are the lenses of non-Aboriginal filmmakers the only tools to capture the images of indigenous peoples. In this sense, some scholars, namely Kerstin Knopf, quoting Himani Banerji, believe that Aboriginal filmmakers now "return the gaze" (*Decolonizing the Lens of Power* 20) to the ideological force of mainstream films.

Quoted in Katarina Soukup's "Travelling Through Layers: Inuit Artists Appropriate New Technologies," Inuk filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk raises important questions concerning the possibilities that may emerge from Aboriginal filmic production.<sup>14</sup> He points out that film is a tool for cultural survival and for the empowerment of Aboriginal communities within the broader political and cultural context in Canada.

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<sup>13</sup> Directed by David Posey and William Hansen, with narration by Inuk filmmaker Ann Meekitjuk Hansen, the IBC's documentary *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* (1991) chronicles the process of creation of the IBC, its goals, and important role in the revival of Inuit cultural practices. Significantly, from its title the documentary states that current sense of Inuitness also depends on adaptation to modern technologies. A social character in the film uses gunpowder to set fire on the traditional Inuit oil lamp, the *qullip*. Therefore, the documentary's title metaphorically conveys the idea that visual media, such as film, is a powerful tool to rebuild the past and construct a present and future.

<sup>14</sup> Inuk is the singular form for Inuit. Currently, this is a label for peoples once known as Eskimos. In "Nanook and His Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimos in American Culture, 1897-1922" Shari Huhndorf explains that some communities still use the label Eskimo. In 1977 *Inuit Circum-polar Conference* officially adopted the Native term Inuit (122). Bernard Saladin D'Anglure explains that in Inuktitut the designation Inuit means "the humans" (203).

Can Inuit bring storytelling into the new millennium? Can we listen to our elders before they all pass away? Can producing community TV in Igloolik make our community, region and country stronger? Is there room in Canadian filmmaking for our way of seeing ourselves? (25)

Similarly, Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin praises the film medium. Conveying Aboriginal histories from Aboriginal perspectives, film may promote changes of perception in both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal audiences<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, as the following statements by Obomsawin suggest, film is an important instrument for promoting changes, especially because of its potentiality to reach broader audiences:

It's a very powerful place to be, in film, for many, many reasons. You can influence the world. And your work gets disseminated and travels out into the larger world without you and lives its own life, influencing and creating change all over the place. It's really incredible. When I was touring and singing, I had to be there, obviously. That was the most amazing thing to me when I started to make films. I don't have to be there, but the work is being done.  
([http://stillinmotion.typepad.com/still\\_in\\_motion/2009/05/interview-alanis-0bomsawin-recipient-of-the-hotdocs-outstanding-achievement-award.html](http://stillinmotion.typepad.com/still_in_motion/2009/05/interview-alanis-0bomsawin-recipient-of-the-hotdocs-outstanding-achievement-award.html))

Kunuk and Obomsawin's words are suggestive of Steven Leuthold's view of Aboriginal documentaries as rhetorical tools. For Leuthold, they are discursive formations, which are "often associated with the creation of arguments for social change; creation of collective identities; and recording of changes in identity based upon contemporary realities" ("Rhetorical Dimensions of Native American Documentary" 58). One may apply Leuthold's statements to describe

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<sup>15</sup>Abenaki is a designation for one of the various Waban-aki tribes that have their traditional lands by the Atlantic Ocean in the northeast of the US and towards Quebec and the Maritimes in Canada. For a history of the Waban-aki, see Kenneth Brett Mello's "Cultural and Spiritual Survival in Indian Maine: Adaptations and Transformation Among the Wabanaki Tribes."

most of the indigenous film production, including fictional films. To put it simply, Aboriginal film is often related to the political speech and action, which aims to persuade the audience about the historical world.

As part of this broad process of affirmation, the goal of Aboriginal cinema is to be a tool to rewrite Aboriginal Peoples in history, from their own perspectives and, thus, answering to a long history of restricted participation of indigenous peoples in the production and circulation of their own images. Nevertheless, as discussed so far, aboriginal identification is a complex interplay of aboriginal and non-aboriginal cultures, and this interaction revolves around a number of historical contingencies and the circulation of images of aboriginality through media.

Thus, since like all identities, Aboriginal identity is always relational and provisory, it is pointless to establish rigid criteria to classify a film as Aboriginal solely based on the ethnicity of its producer. One must consider that a category called 'Aboriginal' cinema is also in contrast to or even in dialogue with mainstream media in various ways. For this reason, in this dissertation, I corroborate Houston Wood's approach to indigenous films, which I discuss as follows.

### **Aboriginal films: an approach**

Wood defines "Indigenous film and non-Indigenous films as labels at the extreme ends of a *continuum*" (66-7). As he proposes, for a (provisional) definition of a film as indigenous, it has to combine at least two or more of the following criteria:

- 1) Indigenous people who make films generally belong to groups that lack self-governance. They commonly have limited participation and influence over the territorial, economic, and cultural decisions that affect them. (...) Indigenous films frequently reflect these asymmetries of power.
- 2) Indigenous films are made by groups that identify themselves as Indigenous and are accepted as Indigenous by others.
- 3) Indigenous films are based in cultures that differ to a recognizable degree from the cultures in close proximity to them. These differences may be immense. They may include different

languages, economies and daily activities (...) On the other hand the differences may be small, as, for example, with some Native American peoples that have lived for generations in U.S cities.

4) Indigenous films are made by people that currently have or had a homeland (...) Still, the memory, if not the current occupation of a homeland is a characteristic of most indigenous people, and homeland often figure prominently in indigenous films. (84-85)

Therefore, in this dissertation, the label 'Aboriginal film' is used provisionally, within the terms proposed by Wood's *continuum* approach. From such a perspective, films like Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* combines all the criteria Wood enumerates. Kunuk is an indigenous person, and is acknowledged as indigenous by other people. The screenplay focuses on a millenary legend. To adapt the legend to screen, Paul Apak Angilirk, who is indigenous, listened to a number of versions told by the community's elders. Kunuk's films suggest that his view differs from non-indigenous views in many ways, especially about the issue of community and the importance of elders. Throughout the narrative, there are obvious memories of a homeland, which has changed because of the contact between Inuit peoples and Europeans. Therefore, *Atanarjuat* is obviously closer to the indigenous pole of the *continuum*.

While Wood points towards a number of Aboriginal elements that may help to place films closer to the indigenous pole, he also reminds us that Aboriginal films articulate a relationship with the non-Aboriginal pole in various ways. For instance, *Atanarjuat* transposed local boundaries, reaching different audiences that also include non-Inuit people. Not only did the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) sponsor the film production, but also *Atanarjuat*'s cinematographer is the New Yorker Norman Cohn and, probably, this interaction has important implications regarding cinematographic styles. Moreover, as I further discuss in Chapter II of this dissertation, while Kunuk's main concern is with his Inuit audience, Cohn clearly states that Isuma also intends to reach broader audiences. This is to enumerate a few possibilities of interaction between the non-indigenous and the indigenous categories of the *continuum* in relation to *Atanarjuat*.



*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* is also an interesting example of interactions between the indigenous and non-indigenous poles of Wood's *continuum* approach. The second fiction film by Igloodik Isuma Films focuses not only on oral accounts by Inuit people, but also on recollections of Inuit stories by Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen. As a result, the film explores, and even contrasts, the interaction between Inuit oral tradition and the written reports by the Arctic explorers. For instance, from its title, the film suggests the interplay between the accounts of the historical figure of Rasmussen and the oral tradition that is at the core of Inuit culture. Moreover, Rasmussen as a character in the film is suggestive of the blurring boundaries between cultures, since he was the son of a Danish missionary and an Inuk mother.

The films by Obomsawin also illustrate the interactions between cultures, as, an indigenous director, she belongs to a group that lacks self-governance, differing to a certain degree of neighbouring cultures. She strongly presents memories of traditional homeland in her documentaries, focusing on how colonialism dispossessed indigenous tribes, including her own, from their lands. Thus, her films are obviously closer to the indigenous pole of Wood's *continuum*. However, one may also consider that along her career, she has produced dozens of documentaries not only about Waban-aki, but also about other indigenous peoples. Therefore, her works suggest that interactions occur in various levels, not only among indigenous and non-indigenous poles, but also within a single pole of the *continuum*.

The criteria Wood proposes are useful not because they allow for a definition of Aboriginal cinema. Indeed, the criteria are relevant exactly because they suggest the impossibility of rigidly categorizing a film as Aboriginal, solely because of the 'indigenous' identity of a filmmaker. The criteria put forth that there are many economic, social, political and cultural issues revolving around the definition of a film as indigenous. Wood himself asserts, "It is best to avoid strict rules for defining what an indigenous film is" (83). Therefore, by proposing a categorization, Wood actually points toward the importance of avoiding the vagaries of essentialist categorizations of indigenous cultures and their media production.

One may say that rigid categorizations obscure the power of Aboriginal filmmakers to focus on issues that are important not only to Aboriginals, but also may be relevant to non-Aboriginals as well. In this sense, an interesting example comes from Alanis Obomsawin's

work. Her recent production *Professor Norman Cornett* illustrates the problems of strictly categorizing films. The documentary that screened in the *ImagineNative Film and Media Festival* in 2009 does not focus on an indigenous character. It is about Norman Cornett. After working for many years at McGill University in Montreal, he lost his job without explanations. Therefore, a question might emerge in relation to the position of the documentary in Wood's categorization.

Obomsawin's documentary is not about an indigenous culture. Nevertheless, *Professor Norman Cornett* may be an indigenous film, because the filmmaker fits criteria 1 and 2 of Wood's *continuum*. As she comes from a group that lacks self-governance, she cares for other people who do not have political power to overcome inequalities. Moreover, although *Professor Norman Cornett* is not about indigenous cultures, there are significant moments in the narrative in which the filmmaker presents memories of indigenous homeland, which are visually powerful in the documentary.

Neil Diamond's *Reel Injun* displays conventions of the road movie and the Western genre. This interplay of two of the most 'American' genres and aboriginal accounts of the history of Hollywood's portrayal of Natives is enough to counter assumptions that the Cree filmmaker presents 'pure' Aboriginality in his documentary.

Wood's *continuum* approach discloses another important point. Aboriginal peoples may share concerns especially in relation to the effects of colonial history and mainstream cultural representations in indigenous life. Hence, Aboriginal films may reflect common concerns among Aboriginal peoples, distinguishing their struggle for self-determination and sovereignty within the context of the nation-state. The interplay between Aboriginal and state's interests suggests the impossibility of thinking about an 'essential' aboriginality and, by extension, an 'essential' aboriginal film.

As discussed so far, the assertion of a distinctive identity is an issue that reflects on many Aboriginal cultural productions. Nonetheless, as also discussed earlier, Aboriginal Peoples do not consist of a homogeneous group. In short, in a virtually hybrid world, the definition of identity and culture is very transitory. For this reason, one should be careful with the essentialism imbued in the idea that 'as long I can represent myself it is true'. Indigenous films are filtered by the very

particular perspectives of indigenous filmmakers.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the result is not the portrayal of pure and untouched indigenous life and experience. In other words, this dissertation is not concerned with accuracy of indigenous representations, but with their power to affect the life of Aboriginal people.

It is important to pay attention to the third criterion Wood proposes because it is about levels of difference between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures. A critical approach to Aboriginal films requires the attention to Wood's "dimensions of difference" (85). While asserting differences especially in relation to mainstream societies, Aboriginal films also attest that there are particular ways of stating differences. There is a great variation of personnel, contexts of production, cinematographic styles, intended audiences, choices of content, working approaches, and so forth.

Wood's approach corroborates Ginsburg's statements that "Aboriginal media productions are as varied as Aboriginal life itself" (366). As she remarks, while for some producers their sense of community is local, others have bicultural settings, and acquaintance with Western theoretical discourses, and frameworks of multiculturalism. Moreover, as she reminds us, Aboriginal productions range from low budget local films and videos to films that premiered in mainstream film circuits, such as Cannes, Toronto or New York. Thus, not only are indigenous film productions diverse, but they also have multiple audiences, which may be Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Thus, the analysis of Aboriginal media has to take into account a number of circumstances that emerge as these productions circulate locally, regionally, nationally and transnationally, as discussed above.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In *Isuma: Inuit Video Artist* (2008), Michael Robert Evans gives a very interesting example of the struggles over representation as accuracy. He focuses on the divergent agendas and interests of Isuma and the IBC, two of the film companies in Igloodik. The different views, way of working and interests of the two Inuit film companies suggest that there is not an uncompromised and single perspective of Inuit 'reality'. It is filtered through the lens of both Isuma and IBC's filmmakers.

<sup>17</sup> Wood reiterates some concepts that were proposed by Faye Ginsburg in the early 90s, namely the notion of "embedded aesthetics". She uses this term to describe the work of Aboriginal producers to whom there is a tendency to evaluate their own work not only from a perspective of narrative or visual form, but also in relation to the work's "capacity to embody, sustain, and even revive or create certain social relations." As Ginsburg explains, "embedded

By focusing on films from different arenas of Aboriginal film production in Canada, it is expected that this thesis highlight that Aboriginal cinema is as varied as Aboriginal Peoples. The films analysed in this dissertation show different agendas and interests, being produced in distinct locations and under particular circumstances, as the filmmakers have different relationships within state and corporate contexts of film production and circulation.

As mentioned above, an important point disclosed by Wood's approach is that one should avoid focusing exclusively on differences especially between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal films. Too much focus on differences risks the danger of regarding Aboriginal films as mere curiosities and exotic objects for enquiry. Therefore, taking into account the problems of rigid categorization as discussed so far, I began to consider other possibilities. In this dissertation, I agree with David Treuer as he defines the 'Native American' literature:

A Native American novel is not a Native American novel simply or only because an Indian wrote it, or because someone who is Indian claims that the product of his/her imagination (always a messy thing) is fundamentally and essentially Indian. (...) ultimately, the study of Native American fiction, should be the study of style. (3)

Applied to the study of film, Treuer's statements allow for further thought. Like other scholars, such as Wood and Weaver, Treuer also takes into account the problems of defining an 'essential' aboriginal identity. As he points out, the discussion of cultural identity often accompanies the discussion of authenticity. He defines identity and authenticity as the "the terrible twins" (4), an idea that this chapter also discussed extensively. In this sense, he corroborates current cultural theories, according to which, no longer one must consider identity and culture as stable, homogeneous, and teleological, but as engagements, affiliations or identifications that are historically motivated.

This does not mean that it is pointless to discuss identity politics in Aboriginal films. Indeed, completely ignoring this important issue is

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aesthetics" is a term used "to draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations" (368).

to deny a significant dimension of most Aboriginal films. They emphasise indigenous worldviews, and focus on the importance to construct a present and future in face of the historical contingency that have deeply affected indigenous lives. For this reason, this analysis does not neglect the cultural-ideological dimension of Aboriginal films. Denying it is to deny the dynamics of Aboriginal cultures as represented in films.

However, one important point is that there is a significant difference in interpreting films ‘as’ culture and interpreting them as ‘representations’ of culture. Therefore, I also consider that Aboriginal films are ‘films’ primarily. In this sense, this dissertation combines formal-aesthetic and cultural-ideological approaches to film. A formal-aesthetic approach very often brings to light important cultural-ideological elements. Conversely, a cultural-ideological approach very frequently refers to structural and formal elements of a film, namely, shots, cuts, and other building blocks of formalist analysis. Thus, the study of Aboriginal films may be the study of culture and ideology, but should also be the study of ‘films,’ their structures, images, and sounds. Within this perspective, Aboriginal films may engage us in the pleasure of watching beautiful, effective, and powerful works of art, which also incite serious reflections about Aboriginals’ reclaiming of voice and their resistance to hegemonic discourses.

So far, I have discussed identity as a process of engagement, a position taken by the subject because of historical contingencies. Therefore, it is particularly important to acknowledge my own discursive position. I am from Guarapuava, a city in the interior of Parana, in southern Brazil. Like many other cities in the Americas, Guarapuava, which was founded by Portuguese colonizers, is also an indigenous name, meaning ‘Brave Wolf’ in Guarani language.<sup>18</sup> Place names very frequently remind us of the historical interaction between the ‘original’ inhabitants of these lands and Europeans.

I am sure that many of the city’s inhabitants do not remember that in Guarapuava and neighbour towns there are some indigenous reservations. Occasionally, some ‘Indians’ knock on my door. Very

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<sup>18</sup> Tupi Guarani was one of the major indigenous linguistic groups in Brazil. For a history about it, see: Soares, Andre Luis R. *Guarani Organizacao Social e Arqueologia*, Porto Alegre: EDIPUCRS, 1997.

often, they are women selling crafts and asking for food or clothes. I have already heard some arguments that there is governmental support to the ‘Indians,’ who beg because they are not used to work. Nevertheless, the problem is the ‘attention’ to indigenous people that historically have become ‘wards’ of the nation-state. Guarapuava’s history shows how the ‘wards’ have paid a high price. According to some estimates, currently, there are around 600 indigenous people, which are confined at the Marrecas Reservation ([http://www.portalkaingang.org/populacao\\_por\\_estado.htm](http://www.portalkaingang.org/populacao_por_estado.htm)).<sup>19</sup> Material poverty is an obvious result of the erasure of indigenous cultures, which are now almost invisible in the context of the city.

Despite some acquaintance with indigenous cultures in Guarapuava and region, I am not an indigenous person. Thus, as soon as I started the project for this dissertation, I realized that my subjectivity itself might be questioned, especially because this study focuses on Canadian and not Brazilian films. Indeed, this is another point that deserves further consideration. In my Master’s thesis, I focused on Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. Although, my work was not exactly about Aboriginal issues, I was concerned with Canadian Studies, focusing especially on the issues of culture and identity. Therefore, I consider this dissertation as a natural extension of my previous work.

I am not the only ‘outsider’ that begins a project about indigenous issues with the uncomfortable feeling of being intrusive. In “Trespassing Native Ground: American Indian Studies and Problems of non-Native Work,” Deirdre Keenan, a non-Native researcher, reflects about non-Natives’ rights to trespass the indigenous “intellectual territory” (180). The crossing of intellectual boundaries sounds like a replication of colonialist assumptions that have for a long time constructed Western epistemology. Keenan observes that the whole discussion is about “intellectual sovereignty” (180), which, in the case

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<sup>19</sup> For a history about the Kaingang in Parana see: MOTA, Lúcio Tadeu. *As guerras dos índios Kaingang. A História épica dos índios Kaingang no Paraná (1769-1924)*. 2ª ed .revisada e ampliada. Maringá: EDUEM, 2009. 301. Another good historical source is Fabio Pontarolo’s thesis “Degredo Interno e Incorporação no Brasil Meridional: Trajetórias de Degredados em Guarapuava, Século XIX.” <[http://dspace.c3sl.ufpr.br/dspace/bitstream/handle/1884/10686/DEGREDO%20INTERNO%20E%20INCORPORACAO%20C3%87%C3%83O%20NO%20BRASIL%20MERIDIONAL\\_%20FABIO%20PONTAROLO.pdf?sequence=1](http://dspace.c3sl.ufpr.br/dspace/bitstream/handle/1884/10686/DEGREDO%20INTERNO%20E%20INCORPORACAO%20C3%87%C3%83O%20NO%20BRASIL%20MERIDIONAL_%20FABIO%20PONTAROLO.pdf?sequence=1)>.

of Aboriginal peoples, also revolve around cultural survival and property rights. Foregrounded in Keenan's discussion is the notion that there is a parallel between the threat of "neo-imperialism in American Indian Studies" (180), and the historical appropriation of Natives' lands by colonial powers.

Besides the problem of "intellectual appropriation" as discussed above, another question emerged. Inevitably, this research would require some knowledge about contextual issues, namely Aboriginal identity and culture. In this respect, Karen Swisher quoted in Keenan asks, "How can an outsider really understand life on reservations, the struggle for recognition, sovereignty, economic development, preservation of language and culture?" (86). Thus, Swisher concludes that "non-Native mentors must nurture from afar and in a secondary position" (88).

Agreeing with Swisher, I also understand that "intellectual sovereignty" is a legitimate claim, justified by the need to respond to centuries of colonial domination and discursive practices that have marginalized Aboriginal Peoples. Furthermore, outsiders have to face the limitation of knowledge when researching indigenous issues. However, after a long time of reflection, my current conviction is that one must avoid essentialist assumptions that would only reverse binary structures, namely white/native, object/ subject, insider/outsider, and so forth. Indeed, one must take into account that many Aboriginal filmmakers, such as Obomsawin quoted in this chapter, also seek non-Aboriginal audiences. By reaching wide audiences, which include non-Aboriginal viewers, Aboriginal film may contribute to change their perceptions about indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, as it is made of written 'signs', this dissertation is a "signifying practice" (1997, 28), in Hall's terms. Therefore, it is a 'representation'. Quoted in Seyhan, W.J. Mitchell poses, "every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth" (21). Thus, this dissertation is obviously incomplete, a fragment that is subject to gains and losses, as any other representations are. It is not the intention here to provide a window to Aboriginal 'reality', but to bring to view the richness of Aboriginal cinema, showing its importance to the 'imagination' of new and affirmative Aboriginal cultures.

## CHAPTER I

### ABORIGINAL DOCUMENTARIES AND THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE

This chapter concerns the analysis of the documentaries *Wabanaki People from Where the Sun Rises* by Alanis Obomsawin and *Reel Injun* by Neil Diamond. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the documentary genre has been the main form of expression by Aboriginal filmmakers, especially because it is one of the most accessible forms in terms of funding and budgeting. However, this is not the only motivation, as the following statements by Obomsawin suggest:

Documentary is very important because it is the 'direct' voice of the people. And our people have been denied their history for a very long time, so... and each nation has to have their history there, so that children, young people can learn about it... know who they are, what is their nation, their culture, what is their tradition, their history. This is like the ABC. To feel right about whom we are. That is for all nations. That is why documentary is so important. (My personal recordings of an interview with the filmmaker 2009 emphasis added)

In their documentaries, many Aboriginal filmmakers, including Obomsawin and Diamond, often let the social characters speak freely, as much as they will, without interference. Describing the Abenaki filmmaker's style of work, Lewis tells us that she uses to head alone into the field with a tape recorder to simply record people talking. Then, Lewis poses, "when she returns with a camera crew to capture the same person on film Obomsawin still honours the spoken word, refusing to cut off the storyteller – as much as the high cost of film will allow" (65).

As quoted above, Obomsawin points out that documentary is important because of its interplay with history. Her statements reminds us of Steven Leuthold's view, according to which "telling histories



through media may be a necessary, cathartic stage in the process of building new native communities” (1998, 731). Therefore, one must also take into account that the emphasis on the assumed indexicality of the documentary genre, as well as on historical accuracy, goes beyond the will to present ‘real’ versions of the historical past. The emphasis on historical ‘objectiveness’ is part of the processes that aim at healing the many disruptions resultant from the denial of giving voice and historical presence to Aboriginal Peoples. Therefore, one significant aspect of the indigenous documentaries is that they are not mere recollections of the historical past. They aim at rewriting indigenous histories, making them politically, socially and culturally meaningful in the present.

Furthermore, Obomsawin’s concern with the presentation of the ‘direct’ voice of the people, also suggests a view that documentary is suitable to convey indigenous traditions of oral storytelling. An important aspect of this tradition is that it does not consider stories as mere inventions, but as valid tools for interpretation of the past, and (re)imagining important symbols and cultural practices, as Obomsawin’s documentary highlights. In this sense, Aboriginal documentary asserts that Native traditions of storytelling have the same weight of other forms of recording history, namely official and academic discourses (Lewis, 2005).

The convergence of history and oral traditions suggests the highly subjective quality of the two documentaries analysed in this dissertation. In this respect, reading Stella Bruzzi’s *New Documentary: a Critical Introduction*, Anelise Reich Corseuil defines “the narrative used in contemporary documentaries as self-reflexive as they allow for a questioning of their own forms of representation and the alleged realism associated with documentary” (140). Within this perspective, this chapter focuses on both documentaries as they engage in a “poetics of resistance” to mainstream discourses. In this sense, I corroborate Maria Lucia Milleo Martins as she defines poetics as “artistic and political devices used to articulate difference and resistance” to hegemonic discourses and nationalist aesthetic that “either ignores or appropriates difference” (“Dionne Brand and Alanis Obomsawin: Polyphony in the Poetics of Resistance” 151). Within this perspective, in the first part of this chapter, I focus on Obomsawin’s poetic tone, which is also a powerful tool to convey the memories of the people and their artistry.

## 1. The Art of ‘Weaving’ Culture: Alanis Obomsawin’s *Waban-aki People from Where the Sun Rises* (2007)

The artist is the voice of the country  
 For a long time, it seems there was a war  
 Everything was afraid  
 Many of our people were sleeping  
 The land, waters, the air, and animals were  
 troubled.  
 The artist kept on working.  
 The prophecies are now coming true  
 Our young are the seventh generation  
 Making a difference as they prepare the grounds  
 for the next seven generations to come.  
 The artist is inspired and stronger than ever  
 The children have a place in the world again.  
 Honor the artist.  
 (Alanis Obomsawin “Honor the Artist”)

Since the late sixties, she has worked at the NFB, whose founding father, Grierson, is internationally acknowledged also as the father of the documentary genre.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, it is interesting a brief comparison between the two filmmakers. According to Jerry White, “cinematically, Obomsawin is a child of [Griersonian] revolution (...)” (365). White reminds us that, like Grierson, the Abenaki filmmaker is devoted to films that are socially concerned. Therefore, like the father of the NFB, Obomsawin also emphasises non-commercial cinema, redefining its role in the viewer’s lives. In short, as White puts it, Obomsawin is as idealist as Grierson was.

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<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Melnyk (2005), Grierson states, “I suppose I coined the word [documentary], saying it was an ugly word that nobody would steal, and it always was one of our defences against commercialism” (58). In the late thirties, Grierson was invited by the Canadian government to analyse the conditions of the film industry in Canada. Following his advices, Mackenzie King, then the Prime Minister, passed the “National Film Act” in 1939, and a few months later, the NFB was born. Grierson was its first commissioner (Gittings 2002), and started a revolutionary work that made the NFB one of the most important producers and distributors of documentaries and animation worldwide.

Like Grierson, Obomsawin too is engaged in the discussion about nationhood. However, it is in this aspect that her work largely differs from his work. As White remarks,

Following Grierson, it seems reasonable to say that Obomsawin makes films about the life of the nation. His belief that films should illustrate ‘what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do best by Canada and by themselves’ is a fair summary of her project; ‘she just has a different idea of what Canada is.’ (372 emphasis added)

Obomsawin herself states, “I’ve certainly learned much from the Film Board, but I have my ways” (Lewis 60). While Grierson wanted to create images of national coherence, the Abenaki filmmaker’s works have exposed the very shortcomings and incoherencies of the nation-state, especially in relation to Aboriginal communities. Since the early seventies, she has produced dozens of documentaries about different Aboriginal communities in Canada, showing their struggles against the systems of oppression. She has underscored the power of creative work to present Aboriginals as socially and politically significant. In *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* she devotes her creative power to the history of her own people, the Waban-aki.

For the making of the film, Obomsawin, who was born in New Hampshire, US, not only went back to Odanak, an Abenaki reservation in Southern Quebec, Canada, where she was raised<sup>21</sup>, but also visited other Waban-Aki communities across the American border, in Maine. Throughout the documentary, she talks to the people. All of them and herself unveil memories that come in various ways, through their life stories, photographs, and songs. Waban-aki interviewees also present traditional activities, namely, basketry and canoe building, which have historically contributed to build the sense of community. Therefore, the documentary is a lyric account about Waban-aki people and their artistry.

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<sup>21</sup> In *Alanis Obomsawin: the Vision of a Native Filmmaker* (2005), Randolph Lewis tells us that the filmmaker was born somewhere in New Hampshire, US.

*Wabanaki: People from Where the Sun Rises* is also a discussion on how the State and cash-based economy caused transformations in the production and trade of the traditional craft, thus calling attention to the Waban-aki social drama. Thus, the documentary focuses on the breaches in community life caused by historical contingencies, namely the colonialist and official practices for assimilation of Natives in the dominant societies. In sum, as represented in Obomsawin's documentary, cultural breaches are strongly related to the ruptures in political, economic and social life of Wabana-aki people.<sup>22</sup> It presents a story that highlights the importance of giving the people a sense of historical presence, providing continuity for the Waban-aki nations, by the recreation of meanings to their past and cultural symbols.

### **Rebuilding the past: making new meanings**

A tree fills almost the entire space of the frame (fig.1). The image, in this initial sequence of the film, is almost like a photograph. The leaves move softly, almost imperceptibly, as they are touched by the breeze. Behind the tree, the sun shines. Then, the camera cuts to the image of water that shimmers with the sunlight. The watery image fills completely the onscreen space (fig.2). In the background, sounds of running water and birds singing. Another cut, and the camera focuses on a drum, framing it from a close and high angle (fig.3). White pine tree's needles are scattered upon the drum. One may hear the drum beating until a third cut introduces black and white footage of young Obomsawin, singing a folk song in Abenaki language (fig. 4).

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<sup>22</sup> I use the term 'breach' corroborating anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of "breach", which he describes as a

(...) disruption, of regular norm-governed social relations made publicly visible by the infraction of a rule ordinarily held to be binding, and which is itself a symbol of maintenance of some major relationship between persons, statuses, or subgroups held to be a key link in the integrality of the widest community recognised to be a cultural envelope of solidarity sentiments...(25).



Fig.1: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening sequence: the Sacred Tree.



Fig.2: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening sequence: shimmering water.



Fig.3: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening sequence: the sound of the drum.



Fig. 4: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening sequence: Obomsawin sings.

The above still with Obomsawin singing to her audience provides one important hint about the documentary. It is an act of storytelling. Telling stories has been a means of entertaining and passing on knowledge to future generations. This is particularly significant to Aboriginal peoples. However, stories aim not only at entertaining and at transmitting knowledge.

Storytelling has also been required for emotional and psychological reasons, thus, having healing functions. In a personal conversation with the Cayuga storyteller Delores Hahkonen at the SAGE Symposium 2009 in Toronto, she told me how storytelling was important for her family to overcome painful memories of residential schools and keep the family's connections with their traditions (personal conversation with Hahkonen). She also explained to me that stories are often related to specific occasions. There are stories about how to cope with grief or to celebrate gatherings of a positive nature. There are seasonal stories, some of them are told only in winter, or spring, and so forth.

Oral storytelling into film has been subject of debates in respect to the losses and gains of the transposition to a recording medium. There are many questions revolving around the authority of the oral storyteller, the implications of removing stories from their cultural and social contexts, the impossibility of conveying certain elements of oral traditions, the possibilities of film to contribute to keep oral tradition alive.<sup>23</sup> However, considering the relevance of oral storytelling for Aboriginal cultures, it is also important not to lose sight of Obomsawin's ability to convey some aspects of oral tradition on the screen, through a compelling manipulation of images and sounds.

After the black and white footage in the initial sequence of the documentary, a cut introduces a series of colourful long shots of birds flying over Saint Francis River (fig.5). In its green banks, there are trees of all colours. Panning, the camera shows the blue river and the birds that fly above it with Obomsawin's voice still heard in the background. When the filmmaker stops singing, flutes and harps play energetically. The instrumental music announces a change in the pace and rhythm of

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<sup>23</sup> For a very good resource about the relationship between oral tradition and film see Kerstin Knopf's *Decolonizing the Lens of Power* (2008) in which she interviews a number of North American indigenous filmmakers that discuss the importance and implications of the transposition of oral tradition to film.

the documentary. A long shot shows the Saint Francis River and, on its left bank, Odanak. The slow zoom seems to invite us to follow the river and then cross the bridge that is at the background of the frame (fig.6). The image dissolves to two men with axes, beating on a trunk in front of a cabin. An elder man and some children are in front of the house (fig.7).



Fig.5: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening sequence: Birds that return for a new season are suggestive of new beginnings.



Fig.6: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening sequence: Odanak on the banks of Saint Francis River.



Fig.7: *Wabanaki People* from *Where the Sun Rises* opening credits sequence: the tree as raw material for baskets.

For analytical purposes, it is useful to divide the opening credits sequence into two parts. The first part is the black and white footage, which contrasts with the colourful second part of the sequence. Having no clues about Waban-aki history, one may create meanings by focusing on the ways that the two parts of the sequence relate to one another. Very often, the interplay of black and white and colourful shots suggests a relation between different temporalities, past and present. Thus, one may assume that the black and white shots show Waban-aki, and, particularly, Obomsawin's past. The colourful shots are located in the diegetic present. This conflation of temporalities emphasises that the documentary brings the past not for the past's sake, i.e., it is not a mere recollection of the past, but a construction that has to be meaningful in the present. The whole sequence brings to view elements that were important in the past, but with new meanings in the present, especially concerning the construction of cultural sense.

## **Metaphors of community building**

### **The Sacred Tree**

As mentioned above, the opening credits sequence introduces many elements that in the context of *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* suggest meanings of belonging to the Waban-aki nations. One of these elements is the tree. In order to analyse its role in Obomsawin's documentary, it is important to understand the relevance of the symbol for Aboriginal cultures. In this respect, a very good resource is *The Sacred Tree* (1984) by Bopp, Lane, and Brown, which provides an indigenous view about the importance of the tree in the context of indigenous cultures. In the preface for the book, speaking about the relevance of the philosophy presented by Bopp et al, Anthropologist Jane Goodall also comments about her 'Sacred Tree'

For several years now, I have been working with Indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. Their ancient philosophy of respect for Mother Earth, respect for all life forms on the planet, is my philosophy too. I grew up in England, and I used to spend a lot of time up in a very special tree. He was known, simply, as Beech – and I am looking out at his spreading branches as I write.



For hours, I stayed up there, feeling close to the birds and clouds and wind. I climbed up with my homework, with a book, or simply with my thoughts and dreams. There I learned my respect and love for nature. There I dreamed that one day I would go to Africa. (*The Sacred Tree* introduction)

As Goodall points out, her tree was so special that she used to treat it as a human being. Hence, the tree had a personal name, Beech. Like a father, Beech used to embrace Goodall with his branches, thus sheltering and protecting not only the girl, but also her dreams of Africa. Thus, Goodall's personal account advances some of the arguments that Bopp et al develop in *The Sacred Tree*, especially regarding the symbolisms of the tree. According to the authors, the "Sacred Tree" (7), which is one of the most common symbols to many indigenous cultures in the Americas, has the following symbolic functions.

For all the people of the earth, the creator has planted a Sacred Tree under which they may gather, and there find healing, power, wisdom and security. The roots of this tree spread deep into the body of Mother Earth. Its branches reach upward like hands praying to Father Sky. The fruits of this tree are the good things the Creator has given to the people: teachings that show the path to love, compassion, generosity, patience, wisdom, justice, courage, respect, humility and many other wonderful gifts. (7)

The symbolic dimension of trees for Aboriginal cultures is beautifully conveyed in a meaningful painting of a winter landscape by visual artist Catherine Meyers (fig.8). Two leafless trees are at the foreground of the frame. Behind them, a forest of colourful trees resembles tepees, the traditional Native dwellings. One may create meanings from the interplay of the images of trees and tepees, as it suggests one of the symbolic functions of the 'Sacred Tree', which, as Bopp et al pose, is to be shelter under which people may gather for protection or listening to stories that both entertain and teach.



Fig.8: Painting by Catherine Meyers, emphasising the symbolic dimensions of trees for Abenaki people. One of the multiple meanings it creates is of the tree as symbols of shelters ([www.catherinemeyersartist.com/2009/01/honouring-trees.html](http://www.catherinemeyersartist.com/2009/01/honouring-trees.html)).

Quoted in Kenneth Brett Mello, Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac narrates the following Abenaki creation story, which highlights the relevance of the tree for the Abenakis in particular:<sup>24</sup>

Then Tabaldak looked around, trying to decide the best way to make the people. He saw the ash trees, standing tall and straight. Those trees looked very beautiful indeed. So he carved the shapes of men and women into the trunks of the trees. Then he took his great bow and fired arrows into the trunks of the ash trees. Each time an arrow struck a tree a human being stepped forth. These people could dance like the ash trees in the wind (...) they were the first Abenaki peoples. (qtd. in Mello 150)

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<sup>24</sup>Bruchac is a best-selling Abenaki writer. In *Alanis Obomsawin: In The Vision of a Native Filmmaker* (2005), Randolph Lewis tells us that Bruchac and Obomsawin are distant relatives (13).

Considering the importance of the tree in the overall context of Aboriginal cultures, and for the Abenaki people in particular, it is not surprising that an image of a tree is presented in such a privileged position in *Wabanaki: People from Where the Sun Rises*. Therefore, one may create meanings from the way the tree is portrayed in Obomsawin's documentary, beginning with the allusion that the image makes to the filmmaker's own past. In 1966, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) produced and aired *Alanis*, a documentary about the young Abenaki woman. In that time, she was already attracting public attention as artist and activist in Montreal.<sup>25</sup> The CBC's documentary intersperses interviews and Obomsawin's personal archival footage, including the same shots that forty years later she would use in the opening credits sequence of *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*. Nevertheless, as represented in her recent documentary, the image of the tree gains new important meanings.

In *Alanis* (1966), Obomsawin's voice-over explains that the tree is Theophile Panadis, her mentor: "to me he is like a tree of this tribe".<sup>26</sup> In the opening credits sequence of *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, there is no voice-off of the filmmaker. Therefore, she represents Panadis as an allusion. In the context of *Waban-aki*, the allusion to her mentor as a Sacred Tree is significant. Panadis's great knowledge of Abenaki language and culture left a mark on young Obomsawin, which, Lewis observes, "had a wealth of traditional knowledge at her fingertips, something she appreciates to this day" (8). However, in *Wabanaki* the allusion may have a wider symbolic

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<sup>25</sup> In the 1960s, Alanis Obomsawin's profile as activist had already called public attention. At that time, Abenaki children from Odanak and the children of the neighbouring town, Pierreville, used to swim in the Saint Francis River. However, it became too polluted. Abenaki children were not welcome in the club at Pierreville. Therefore, Obomsawin, who was already a singer, poet and storyteller in Montreal, started a successful campaign to raise funds to build a swimming pool at Odanak. This profile called CBC's attention (*Alanis* CBC 1966).

<sup>26</sup> Theophile Panadis was Obomsawin's mother's cousin. Lewis describes Theo as a retired woodman, very conservative, and a fluent speaker of Abenaki language that used to tell Abenaki traditional stories to children. Theo's wife, also named Alanis, taught the filmmaker the crafting of baskets. Quoted in Lewis, the filmmaker speaks about her relationship with Panadis and her aunt Alanis. "Those two people gave me something special and strong (...). It was the best time" (Lewis 8).

function, referring not only to Panadis, but also to all the elders that became shelters of the community's knowledge.

Symbolically Panadis and the others members of Waban-aki nations are shelters. They tell stories weaving memories and (re) creating meaning. In this sense, the elders are also nurturers of the community, implying another symbolic function of the tree, as nourishment. Stories nurture people with knowledge about elements that are important for the (re) integration of the Waban-aki nations. Therefore, the documentary conveys the importance of passing on the ancestral knowledge from generation to generation, transposing temporal and territorial boundaries, and, thus (re) constructing history through memory.

Conveyed through the elder's stories, memories are like the fruits of the tree, which nurture the people with teachings, especially about the values of community: love, friendship, compassion, and communion. The documentary discloses the idea that ancestral knowledge is the nurturing element. It comes from time to time, through narration, woven as stories, and, as in Benedict Anderson's terms, allows a people to 'imagine' its community (Anderson 1991).

Bopp et al (2004) state that the other way in which nourishment occurs is through the fallen leaves that fertilize the soil. According to them:

Symbolically, this represents the passing of generations and the spiritual teachings they leave behind for the health and growth of those that come after them. This symbolic meaning of the tree emphasizes the necessity of using the accumulated wisdom of the past to nourish the present and to plan for the future. (22)

In this sense, in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, the tree is not a mere element of the *mise-en-scène*: it is a motif, functioning in symbolic ways, and operating actively in the course of Obomsawin's documentary. One possible meaning is that through the image of the tree the filmmaker suggests the importance of paying attention to roots and ancestral knowledge. However, trees are symbolic of growing in all directions, which implies movement and change. As discussed earlier, Obomsawin suggests that trees are symbolic of human beings. Therefore, it is possible to interpret that the documentary asserts

that being Waban-aki does not mean to be motionless, enclosed in the past. Being Waban-aki is to celebrate the past, investing it with new meanings for both present and future generations.

The village of Odanak, whose glorious past is depicted in the documentary, is also presented in the plenitude of summer, green and full of life, prepared for the meeting of generations. The Abenaki village is ready for the (re) building of Waban-aki cultural sense. Furthermore, the powerful beating of the drum announces that it is time for reunion, to gather to listen to stories, teach and learn Abenaki ways of life. The sound of the drum also emphasises another important quality in Obomsawin's documentary, her treatment of sound.

### **Drumming: the beating heart of the community**

Native American drumming is the heartbeat of the people in which living history comes alive with each beat and song. African and Native American drummers carried tradition, ceremony, ritual, myth, and magic through song. No two drums are the same – each has its own distinctive structure, spirit, and life based on both the culture in which it was made and the hands of the one who made it. The drum is not just a music-maker, but a voice for the soul within the music. Joseph Walker (qtd. in Stevens 2003)

In *Film Art* (1997), David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson remark that most viewers often consider sound as less important than the moving image. Nevertheless, sound is a powerful technique that “can actively shape how we perceive and interpret the image” (316). In the golden age of the Westerns, extra diegetic sound of drums was often used to foreshadow threatening events, namely the ambush of a stagecoach by the ‘bloodthirsty’ Native warriors. Thus, the beating of the ‘warrior drums’ turned into stereotypical sounds that for decades would be embedded in the audience's minds.

As sound is an important element to cue expectations, one aspect in Obomsawin's *Waban-Aki* that deserves attention is her treatment of the soundtrack as her documentary illustrates the creative possibilities that emerge from the careful blending of sound and images. The opening credits are accompanied by a smooth mix of sounds of birds and running water. The sound of the drum in the black and white

footage matches the sound of the axes in the second part of the sequence. Thus, the filmmaker integrates both past and present through an “auditory continuity” (*Film Art* 1997), which is a marker in the overall documentary.

As quoted above, Joseph Walker stresses that drumming is a highly symbolic ritual, with important meanings for each Native culture. Overall, drumming is not performed at random, but it is to put thoughts into a tangible and meaningful form, through a careful and powerful combination of sound and rhythm.<sup>27</sup> Drumming is a celebration of life, and a means to create interactions between people. As Christine Stevens remarks, “when we connect with other humans through rhythm, devoid of race, culture and prejudice, there is something pure and compelling about it” (*The Art and Heart of Drum Circles* 15).

Drumming is essentially a social behaviour. For this reason, in *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, it is possible to consider drumming as an invitation for the celebration of life in all its aspects, including the social one. People may gather under the shelter of Waban-Aki ‘trees,’ listen to the echoes of ancestral voices as the artists and storytellers, including Obomsawin, speak.

### **Telling stories through songs**

No matter what I do, I will always sing (...) It’s what I do in film, but in a different way.  
Alanis Obomsawin

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* is an act of storytelling. Obomsawin herself conveys storytelling practices through various ways, including the song she sings in the openings credits sequence of the documentary. In Alanis Obomsawin: the Vision of a Native Filmmaker (2005), Lewis tells us that, by the end of the 1950s, Obomsawin was already a singer in Montreal. However, she limited her performances to small parties

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<sup>27</sup> Located at the University of Toronto (UofT), the First Nations House (FNH) provides culturally supportive activities to Aboriginal students and the UofT community. During my stay in Toronto, in 2009, I had the opportunity to attend to hand drumming at the FNH in a group led by singer and drummer Michele Perpaul. Each drumming began with a ritual with sacred herbs, signalling a profound respect for drumming as a moment of connection between drummers and the spiritual world. Drumming was also an opportunity for healing.

and occasions. Nevertheless, by the 1960s, her talent was already acknowledged outside her small circles, and soon she received invitations to perform traditional songs all over North America and Europe. Not surprisingly, music, which is one of the types of sound in cinema, is one of the tools through which the filmmaker not only stresses her strong presence in *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, but also allows for the creation of important meanings (28).

According to Bordwell and Thompson, “the rhythm, melody, harmony, and instrumentalization of the music can strongly affect the viewer’s emotional reactions” (324). This is particularly true of Obomsawin’s *Waban-Aki*. Most viewers, having no cue or subtitling, will have to infer their meaning from the song without knowing the words or lyrics. They will relate purely on an emotional or intellectual level to the music. Since the song is in Abenaki language with no subtitling, one can only speculate about the meaning of the lyrics as they interact with the images on the screen and with the images and sounds of the previous sequence. Birds, running water, the sound of the drum, and Obomsawin’s soft voice are linking elements between past and present. Therefore, they suggest the possibility of continuity. Given that, as sounds and musical motif are related, they also suggest hope, which may be considered as a fruit of the Sacred Tree. Hope is important to overcome the disruptions in Waban-aki life, which are the theme of Obomsawin’s song, as she explains, as follows.

The word "Odanak" means village or town. Beloved Odanak, Take care of the Land ... Story of the Song where the person tells the people to take care of Odanak, meaning "the land" and not to forget in the past our people were pushed off their land and mentions one particular area Vermont where one day a woman was washing the clothes in the river and a beaver came and sat on a rock in front of her and the beaver started to sing telling her that taller people were coming to this area and pushing the Waban-Aki into the forest. Odanak is to remind the people what happened before and take good care of this land. (Email message by Alanis Obomsawin)

Thus, the opening credits sequence sums up relevant themes in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*. First, the documentary is a story about the people, the ‘trees’ of the Waban-aki tribes. The story is about disruptions that have occurred because of historical contingencies, namely colonialism and the interference of the state and capitalism in Waban-aki life. However, it is also a story about hope, continuity that is possible when one takes the fruits of the tree, i.e., the teachings that the old generations leave behind, through their stories and art. However, as the image of the men with axes suggests, it is time to work hard, giving new shapes to the ‘trees’.

### **Weaving baskets, weaving community**

As quoted earlier, Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac tells the story of human creation, according to which the Abenaki god, Tabaldak, gave form to human beings from ash trees. Therefore, human beings are carved from trees, as Tabaldak’s works of art, being the Abenaki god the great artist. As human beings may also be artists, they share with Tabaldak the power of creation. As portrayed in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, artists are important conveyors of knowledge and tradition, as they give ‘new’ forms to trees, creating baskets, making drums or flutes, shaping canoes, and producing sculptures.

Basketry is one of the important artistic expressions for Waban-aki peoples, figuring also as an important element in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*. According to Neltje Blanchan, in pre-colonial times, baskets were used in daily life activities, such as for storage of medicine and crops. Baskets had utilitarian functions, and were not only an artistic expression in the sense of ‘art for art’s sake.’ Nevertheless, baskets were also symbolic. In this respect, Blanchan poses.

Basketry is the most expressive vehicle of the tribe’s individuality, the embodiment of its mythology and folklore, tradition, history, poetry, art, and spiritual aspiration- in short, it is, to the Indian mind, all the arts in one. (qtd. in Mello 154).

Not surprisingly, Obomsawin’s documentary presents basketry not only as an artistic expression, but also as an important element for



discussing a number of themes, including colonialism and the state interference on indigenous issues. As depicted in her documentary, basketry implies a relationship between people, their land and natural resources. As these elements change, basketry changes as well. With the arrival of Europeans, there were profound changes in both form and function of the baskets. As shown in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* through Obomsawin's habitual drawings and oral storytelling, the Waban-Aki tribes began to lose territory to European settlers, whose relation with the lands was considerably different from that of most of the indigenous peoples.

Europeans 'possessed' the land, creating settlements and developing agriculture and farming. As a result, the quantity and the quality of the birch trees, which were the raw material for baskets, decreased. Given that, a change was in order, and the Waban-Akis began to use other type of tree for their basketry, ash trees. In addition, since the enforced settlement caused changes in Waban-aki habitual practices, namely fishing and hunting, the Waban-Aki tribes had to adapt to a new market economy in order to survive. This resulted in a change in the function of baskets towards the commercial (Mello 2003).

As Obomsawin discusses in her documentary, in the end of the nineteenth century, Waban-Aki communities were engaged in a market economy with relative success. Basketry was such a prosperous business in the nineteenth century that the families at Odanak used to rent or own a house in tourist resorts in the United States to where they traveled annually (fig.9). The resorts were ideal locations for trading baskets with wealthy Victorian clients. There was a change in style in Waban-Aki baskets, which were made to a Victorian taste (fig.10).



Fig.9: *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*: Waban-aki Victorian houses.



Fig.10: *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*: Waban-aki baskets for Victorian taste.

However, as *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* discusses, between 1900 and 1930, a dramatic change in the basketry business deeply altered the people's way of life. Obomsawin's voice over narration explains that the Department of Indian Affairs took the management of the basket business. Non-indigenous dealers abused their control over the business, offering lower prices to the basket makers, and controlling the distribution of the raw materials, such as ash trees and sweet grass. In addition, the trade of baskets became more difficult because border crossing between Canada and the US became more difficult for indigenous Canadians, although many of them were originally from territories in the US.

*Wabanaki: People from Where the Sun Rises* points towards the interplay of politics and culture. The State's interference in the production and marketing of baskets, created a breach in Abenaki cultural and social life. In this sense, this more recent interference contributed to increase the crisis that began with the contact between the Waban-Aki and European conquerors and settlers. As Victor Turner states, crisis "[occurs] when people take sides, or rather, are in the process of being induced, seduced, cajoled, nudged, or threatened to take sides by those who confront one another" (26). In the light of Turner's concept of crisis, Obomsawin's documentary is about current problems of identification, which is influenced by hegemonic tools created in the late nineteenth century to determine Aboriginal identity, particularly the Indian Act.

According to Kulchyski, the *Indian Act* had to formulate the criteria to define who could have Indian status and who could not.

Paradoxically, in order to create ‘equality’, the Indian Act had to establish differences, often based on the racial theories of the nineteenth century. This racist basis created serious disruptions, which still affect Aboriginal Peoples. Nowadays, many of them have to rely upon non-indigenous criteria for identification. This is especially difficult for women, who lost their Indian status because of marriages to white men. In this respect, a social character in Waban-aki states:

Often in Odanak, we weren’t Indians because my mother had married a white man. So, on the reservation we weren’t Indians. But when we went to Pierreville, they’d shout we were savages. Where do I belong? I don’t know how I made it. (*Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* 2007)

It is not the intention to discuss Obomsawin’s work in terms of gender relations. However, one may not forget that she often focuses on the relationship between mothers and children, grandmothers and granddaughters. In *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, mothers and grandmothers are strong. Through their artistry, they are able to provide for their children even in the absence of their fathers and despite the abusive controlling of the basket market by non-indigenous dealers. Therefore, the documentary confirms Lewis’s statements that Obomsawin does not follow the tradition of the victim. As he maintains, she does not portray “downtrodden victims in need of liberal salvation” (129). On the contrary, her documentaries, including *Waban-aki*, suggest that the problem is exactly the State’s historical ‘concern’ with and interference in Aboriginal issues. Therefore, her documentary corroborates Lewis’s remarks that “benign neglect ‘by the state’ would be a blessing” (129). Thus, *Waban-Aki* emphasises Aboriginals’ right to self-determination.

The issue of self-determination has proved difficult to deal with as the characters in Obomsawin’s documentary show. Nevertheless, part of the solution is to pass on knowledge from generation to generation, strengthening their relationships. Artistic expressions, such as basketry, allow for both passing on knowledge and creating strong links between people. As one of the most recent vehicles for indigenous expression, film also plays an important part in this process of

rebuilding cultural sense, as the following statements by Obomsawin suggest:

The situation surrounding status, and what that has done to the people and what is still happening to them as a result. The laws surrounding status have meant that you lose your status if you marry a non-Indian. I felt I had to do a documentary about this. I knew the people I was talking to pretty well. But I wanted to concentrate on the history, because the children in particular don't hear about the history. It's extremely important for young people to know where they came from, what their history is and why things are the way they are today. This is crucial. If we don't explore this, examine this, as a country, if we don't look at our mistakes, we're doomed to repeat them all. (On Native Soil [www.cbc.ca/arts/film/obomsawin.html](http://www.cbc.ca/arts/film/obomsawin.html))

Considering Obomsawin's faith in the power of film as a tool for the remaking of cultural sense and rewriting of Waban-aki's history, *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* presents another meaningful craft. It is canoe building, which, as discussed as follows, figures as an important metaphor of (re) creation of cultural meaning.

### **Canoe building: the art of (re) building culture**

Crossing the American border, in Maine, the filmmaker interviews Aaron York, a young canoe builder that decided to repair an old Abenaki canoe from Odanak (fig. 11). Nevertheless, it is not an easy job. As the young builder explains, "the body of Aboriginal canoes is the bark. They're made from outside in." He has to replace the damaged parts of the bark. "It will be a big job", the constructor states. As Aaron explains, the canoe is to be (re) made in an 'Aboriginal' way. In order to understand the ancestral process, he has to remove layers of a non-Abenaki material, the fibreglass, which someone put in the old bark canoe. In this sense, the ancestral knowledge rests in the deeper layers of the canoe. In order to find it, Aaron needs to (de) construct the canoe and rebuild it from a current perspective.



Fig.11: *Waban-aki People from Where the Sun Rise*. An old Abenaki canoe for repairing

Moreover, Aaron needs to find an appropriate birch bark tree, and removes its bark without damaging it (fig.12). It is important to remove the bark in the right season. He also has to pay attention to the appropriate side to start the work. With this purpose, he combines traditional knowledge and current tools. Therefore, by presenting the process of reconstruction of the canoe, Obomsawin restates an argument that is at the core of her concerns, the importance of reconstructing communities through their cultural practices.



Fig.12: *Wabanaki People from Where the Sun Rises*: Removing the bark in the traditional way, but with current technology.

The filmmaker follows Aaron throughout the process of rebuilding the canoe. In the closing sequences, the camera focuses on the Saint Francis River. Superimposed images of a black and white photograph show a group of Waban-aki people (fig.13). In the following shot, the canoe is already rebuilt and beautifully painted. It floats on the river (fig.14). A cut introduces a colourful shot of a drum

with white pine tree needles scattered upon its edges. Another cut, the needles move to the center following the beats of the drum (fig.15).

As it is possible to notice, the filmmaker closes the documentary by retaking the elements she introduced in the opening sequence. The whole sequence symbolizes the meeting of the people. In this sense, the river and the canoe represent a nexus between different communities, regardless of borderlands imposed by the nation-states. However, in a metaphorical level, the river is the vein through which life flows continuously, generation to generation, as people interact from time to time through their stories and art. They are invited to gather by the powerful sound of the drum.



Fig.13: *Wabanaki People from Where the Sun Rises*: a superimposition of images conveys the ancestors' memories 'flow' continuously from generation to generation, crossing borderlands.



Fig.14: *Wabanaki People from Where the Sun Rises*: Aaron floats in the --rebuilt canoe. Subtitling corroborates the meanings of the image. It is time for rebuilding communities.



Fig.15: *Wabanaki People from Where the Sun Rises*: a close shot of a drum emphasises that the pine tree's needles are back to the center. People are reunited.

### **The direction of renewing**

One may state that Obomsawin practices the art of ‘weaving,’ which is, indeed, a powerful metaphor of community building in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*. The filmmaker intersperses all the visual and sound elements in a way that defies a sense of temporal and spatial linearity. The interplay of photographs, interviews, and old footage corroborates the idea that there are multiple storytellers in the documentary. Each of them conveys memories that are woven as narratives of community. In this respect, Martins points out that Obomsawin “ingeniously articulate[s] various devices, which she turns “into crucial elements in the polyphony of film discourse” (160). It is through this polyphony that, in *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, the filmmaker allows the people to weave memories that bring to light various symbolic elements, namely trees, baskets, and canoes.

Basketry is the art of weaving not only the ash splints, the material source for baskets, but also many relationships. Basket makers need to interact with the land and its resources. This relationship has had significant changes because of the interference of state and capitalism. Given that, implicit in basketry are the interactions between aboriginals and non-aboriginals. Furthermore, the art of basketry is also the art of teaching and learning Waban-aki values. It is the art of conveying memories. Therefore, basketry also implies the weaving of important connections between various generations, especially between grandmothers, mothers and children.

Canoe building is another important metaphor. As Aaron York (re) builds an old canoe, he interplays traditional knowledge and new technologies, emphasising that being Aboriginal does not mean to be apart from the rest of the world. Inventiveness is to adapt non-indigenous technologies, including film apparatus and discourses, and use them as tools at hand. Thus, documentary, as practiced by Obomsawin, is not a purist or a nostalgic desire to return to a past that counters the experience of native peoples today in a world saturated by non-indigenous images and cultures. Conversely, modernity does not mean to erase the past completely. As the rebuilding of the canoe suggests, to be Aboriginal is a continual process of re-membering, re-imagining, and recreating meanings. Thus, beginning with its very title, *Wabanaki: People from Where the Sun Rises* is an assertion of hope,

bringing into view the power of art in the form of a documentary that is itself true poetry on the screen.

A new song is heard  
 There is love in the air  
 The children feel affection from the Great Spirit.  
 The basket is round  
 It holds many sacred feelings  
 From the hands of the weaver  
 Beautiful children touch the basket  
 They receive a vision for the future.  
 Honor the artist.  
 (From Alanis Obomsawin's poem "Honor the Artist")

## **2. Aboriginality in transit: a view of Hollywood's Indians in Neil Diamond's *Reel Injun* (2009)**

In the second part of this chapter, I focus on one of the most recent and prize-winning documentaries by Neil Diamond, a filmmaker from Waskaganish, a Cree community in Northern Quebec, Canada. A photographer and co-founder of the first news magazine to serve his community, he is one of the Aboriginal directors working at the Rezolution Pictures, an Aboriginal film company established in 2001 in Montreal. *Reel Injun* premiered in Canadian theatres in 2009, and has recently garnered the Peabody Award, the Best Documentary in the Fargo Film Festival, and the Gemini Awards ([www.rezolutionpictures.com](http://www.rezolutionpictures.com)).

*Reel Injun* chronicles the history of Hollywood's portrayal of indigenous peoples. Diamond is not the first indigenous filmmaker to focus on the theme of Hollywood's Natives. In 1992, Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva Junior produced *Imagining Indians*, a documentary in which he juxtaposes the theme of misappropriation of Native cultures by Hollywood and its treatment of Native extras and actors (Rony, 1994). However, *Reel Injun* is a very recent production. Therefore, it not only contributes with a view about Hollywood's images of Natives, but also offers a perspective about the latest developments in Aboriginal filmmaking. In *Reel Injun*, a number of different elements converge to



present a history of Hollywood's representations of Natives. Movie clips and photographs are interspersed with interviews with artists, scholars, activists, and other filmmakers, who talk about Hollywood's Indians. In addition, Diamond leaves his homeland close to the Arctic Circle in Canada, and starts a journey to Hollywood, where he expects to make sense out of its influence on indigenous identity formation. As he travels, he visits some of the most common settings for Hollywood's films, and also interviews people that live on the 'margins' of the road, of cinema, and of history.

Some critics have praised Diamond's efforts to rewrite indigenous images on the screen. Kam Williams describes the Cree filmmaker's documentary as "a powerful mythbusting documentary which manages to humanize America's unfairly marginalized indigenous peoples, albeit belatedly" (<http://newsblaze.com>). Avi Offe remarks, "At a running time of 1 hour and 26 minutes, *Reel Injun* manages to be a fascinating, well-researched documentary that simultaneously informs and captivates the audience" ([www.nycmovieguru.com](http://www.nycmovieguru.com)).

Conversely, the documentary, specially its numerous 'collages' and travelogue format, has been the subject of severe critiques. In an online review, Andrew Schenker writes, "combining a road trip from his Native Arctic reservation to Los Angeles with archival cinematic survey, Diamond's treatment of each is perfunctory to the point of inutility" ([www.villagevoice.com](http://www.villagevoice.com)). Another reviewer, Donald Levit, states, "Diamond's presence as a guide is not sufficiently strong to unite material satisfactorily, and, victim of its own ambitions, the eighty-five minutes bulges (sic) with too many clips, locations, faces and theories" ([www.reeltalkreviews.com](http://www.reeltalkreviews.com)).

Perhaps the above negative views result from the assumption that Diamond's journey is a mere physical movement. In "Moving Beyond Borders: The Creation of Nomadic Space through Travel," Erin Bestrom states that "everyone's journey must begin somewhere, a departure from somewhere, a step out the door, a movement beyond the cycles of everyday activities and lifestyle patterns, a step in a new direction" (1). Bestrom's statements point towards the notion that a journey is more than a physical movement from one place to another. A journey also encompasses a "conceptual movement", as the traveler is removed from his familiar context, to be "fully immersed in strange sights" Bestrom's words (1).

Thus, one may consider Diamond's journey as a "conceptual movement" in the terms proposed by Bestrom. Within this perspective, *Reel Injun* brings into view that transit and spatial dislocation defy any idea of stable identity and belonging. Through the trope of traveling, the documentary emphasises that aboriginality is transitory. In this sense, as represented in *Reel Injun*, the trope of traveling corroborates Almeida's statements in relation to travel writers, "Traveling becomes, thus, not only a trope for movement and transference, but also for creation, rereading and translation" (44). Within this perspective, Diamond as a traveler rereads Hollywood's images, and, thus, creates new meanings from the 'reel Injun.'

Moreover, the numerous collages of film clips, still photographs, interviews, and Diamond's 'performances' contribute to undermine notions of homogeneity, stability and centrality, which are at the core of Hollywood's images of indigenous people. The 'collages' of various discourses allows for the filmmaker to invest in one important element that figures as a central characteristic of many indigenous cultures, the 'Indian' humour. Given that, this textual analysis focuses on *Reel Injun* as it humorously leads us to a 'journey' along the history of Hollywood's portrayal of Natives.

### **"He laughs best who laughs last": Indian humour**

The documentary begins with a written narration stating that Hollywood has produced more than four thousand films about Natives. After that, a sequence of shots shows a countdown from '8' to '4'. When it arrives at '4', there is a sound of a gunshot (fig.16), and the camera cuts to a close shot of a boy's face (fig.17). The diegetic music suggests that he is watching an old movie. A male voice-over states, "Growing up in the reservation, the only show in town was the movies in the church basement." A medium shot presents a small screen on which a Western movie is projected (fig.18). On the diegetic screen, an arrow kills George Armstrong Custer in the famous *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). A frontal shot captures the audience's reactions. The voice states, "Raised between Indians and cowboys . . . we cheered for the cowboys 'never realizing ...we were the Indians'" (emphasis added) (fig.19).



Fig.17 (left): *Reel Injun*: counting down to the film screening. Number 4 is symbolic in Diamond's documentary.



Fig.18 (right): *Reel Injun*: an affective shot emphasises the power of visual culture.



Fig.19 (right). *Reel Injun*: the diegetic audience is 'framed', contained by the discourses of the Western on the diegetic screen.



Fig. 20 (left). *Reel Injun*: camera angles and position increases the audience's perception of the image, as the Natives cheer for the cowboys.

A series of shots from Westerns showing battles between Indians and white men contributes to advance Diamond's arguments about Hollywood's hegemonic power. His collages of Hollywood's movies also include more recent and revisionist films, namely *Little Big Man* (1970) by Arthur Penn and Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Among the shots from Hollywood's Westerns is a brief shot of one of the most successful indigenous fiction films to date, Iglolik Isuma's *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (fig.20). It is a shot from the famous sequence in which Atanarjuat, the protagonist, runs naked across the ice, fleeing from his enemies. In the context of *Reel Injun*, the chase sequence gains new meanings. Although at great pains, Atanarjuat runs, overcoming the obstacles, just as Aboriginal cinema has done.



Fig.20: *Reel Injun*: an interpolation of a shot from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* highlights the recent 'battles' of Aboriginal cinema for gaining authority over representation.

Finally, the filmmaker introduces a sequence of Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*, a film that inaugurates a new era for indigenous fiction film production worldwide. In one of the famous sequences of Eyre's

film, the Native character, Thomas, mocks his friends because they watch a Western on TV. He remarks, “You know the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV? It is Indians watching Indians on TV”. He laughs loudly. Then, Diamond cuts to another significant image, a shot from *The Silent Enemy* (1927), showing a Native boy in a canoe (fig.21). The camera focuses on him frontally, so that it seems that the boy is addressing the audience.



Fig.21: *Reel Injun*: In the context of Diamond’s film, a shot from *The Silent Enemy* has new meanings. “He laughs best who laughs last.”

The shot from *The Silent Enemy* is placed in a very significant time and place in Diamond’s documentary, right after he visually sums up the history of Hollywood’s fantasies about Natives. Placed outside its original context, the boy’s image is meaningful in *Reel Injun*. Like Thomas in *Smoke Signals*, the boy laughs. I maintain that he laughs ‘at’ us. Thus, *Reel Injun* powerfully states that historically Hollywood has fooled its audiences with images of the ‘reel Injun.’ However, as the popular dictum states, “he laughs best who laughs last”. Diamond starts his ‘journey’ with an emphasis on one important element in his documentary, humour.

By humorously selecting and interplaying visual and aural elements, Diamond highlights the ironic tone of the documentary, which may be regarded as a strategy for subversion. I would like to stress that in this work I corroborate Kulchyski’s notion of subversion as a strategy to counter appropriation. According to him, “Subversion involves the

practice by marginal and dominated social groups of deploying cultural texts produced by or for the established order in the interest or with the effect of cultural resistance” (614). In short, subversion occurs when marginalized cultures take mainstream reference frames to expose their ambiguity. In this respect, the documentary’s title is meaningful.

Right after the shot of the boy in the canoe, a zoom in introduces the documentary’s title: REEL INJUN. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Derrida proposes the neologism “differance”, which is homophonous to “difference”. Therefore, since the difference between the two words is orthographic, ‘diferrance’ installs a process in which difference is inaudible, becoming visible only in writing. Thus, *Reel Injun* suggests that the image of Indigenous peoples results from an ‘indecision’, a trace of difference between the audible “reel/real Injun”. This indecision allows Hollywood to ‘write’ indigenous identity on screen, images that have pervaded the historical imagination about indigenous peoples worldwide. Conversely, the traces of difference also allow Diamond to subvert the images of the ‘reel Injun,’ rewriting them from the perspective of the oppressed. With this purpose, the filmmaker himself explains that he will set a journey to Hollywood.

### **“Hey Injun, Which Way does this Road Go?”: the Journey to Hollywood**

Particularly notable in the documentary is the presence of Native comedian Charlie Hill. Not coincidentally, his first joke is about a road. The white settler asks, “Hey, Injun. Which way does this road go?” In his ‘tonto’ speaking, the old Indian answers, “Road stays. You go.”<sup>28</sup> Playing with the inability to master the ‘civilized’ language, the joke is also subversive, as it points out the problems and inaccuracy of the master language. Therefore, the joke suggests that, the language is factually incorrect, although grammatically correct. It fails to describe phenomena. The joke also points out that the Indian answers wisely, because he is not lost, but the settler certainly is.

Hill’s joke in *Reel Injun* also suggests other possible meanings. “Which way does this road go?” may be considered as a rhetorical question. In this sense, it is an allusion to the filmmaker’s intention to

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<sup>28</sup> Tonto speaking is a sort of Pidgin English, which, according to Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, signals “an inability to master the ‘civilized’ language” (192).

present the long path of exclusion and appropriation of Native cultures by mainstream films. The question also points out that the documentary aims to present the path followed by current Aboriginal cinema. Furthermore, the joke alludes to Diamond's path, as he travels to Hollywood. In order to provide a view about his travel, in this analysis, I corroborate some of the important concepts presented by Bopp et al in *The Sacred Tree*, assuming, as mentioned above, Diamond's 'conceptual' journey.

The filmmaker takes a plane in his homeland close to the Arctic Circle in Canada. That is the first step on a journey that will lead him to the south, to Montreal, and from there to Western US where Hollywood is located. However, as Bopp et al (2004) observe, from an aboriginal perspective, "the West is where the Thunder Beings live. These are the bringers of power" (53). Considering this idea, and that *Reel Injun* is about a conceptual journey, the West is not only a place, but it is also a symbol of the representational force of Hollywood, which the filmmaker aims at questioning. Therefore, once equated with the hegemonic power of Hollywood, in the context of *Reel Injun* the West is where there might be another kind of power. In Bopp et al's terms, the West encompasses "Power to heal. Power to protect and defend. Power to 'see' and to 'know'" (53 emphasis added).

Bopp et al (2004) also remark that many indigenous cultures often use animals to symbolize human qualities. Since Diamond aims at 'seeing' and 'knowing', one may associate him, a character in his own documentary, to an eagle, which is often considered the symbol of vision. Flying, the eagle has the power to look at the overall path, not only at its perils, but also at its vast possibilities (36). Symbolically, Diamond becomes an eagle, as through the airplane's window, he looks down at the Arctic landscape below him (fig.22). The camera cuts, turning the image of the landscape into an aerial image of a road (fig.23).



Fig. 22: *Reel Injun*: Diamond travels from Waskaganish to the South from where he will set his journey by car to Hollywood.



Fig.23: *Reel Injun*: a shot from *Smoke Signals*. Diamond looks back to the path of indigenous film.

The above still is actually a shot from Eyre's *Smoke Signals*. Thus, blending the diegetic present in the airplane with footage of Eyre's film, Diamond makes a clear reference to an important work in indigenous fictional filmmaking, paying homage to it, and bringing into light the issue of identity as portrayed in *Smoke Signals*. A discussion about Hollywood's influence on indigenous identity formation is the central theme in the selected sequence of Eyre's film. In the well-known sequence of the bus to which Diamond refers, the two protagonists talk humorously about how Hollywood Westerns created ambiguous images of Native peoples.

VICTOR. You've got to look like a warrior. You got to look you've just come back from killing a buffalo.

THOMAS. But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen.

*Smoke Signals* has conventions of the road movie genre. One of the forces that propel characters to a road trip is the possibility of embracing cultural critique as they may "exceed the borders of cultures" (Laderman 2), crossing different territories. This is a particularly important point in Diamond's documentary, as the Cree filmmaker exceeds the borders of his reservation in Northern Canada and enters other territories to make meanings of his own identity. In doing so, he talks back to Hollywood's representations of indigenous people by taking some elements of the road movie iconography, including the road itself.



### The road

In *The figure of the Road: Deconstructive Studies in Humanities Disciplines* (2007), Christopher Morris remarks that “a road may be imagined as the doubling of a line, which is the extension in space of an invisible point (1). In the light of Morris’s statement, roads suggest linearity. Diamond’s use of the image of the road may be a strategy to increase the assumed ‘reality’ of the documentary genre. However, the filmmaker’s deployment of some conventions of the road movie genre may also be considered as a means to subvert some of the conceptions of Western traditions and philosophy, which have a strong emphasis on a linear thought.

For instance, in *Comparing Mythologies*, Cree writer Thomson Highway discusses how Christian mythology is structured linearly. As he poses, “time functions according to the principle and structure of one straight line, a line that travels from point A to point B to point C” (31). Point A corresponds to a beginning as it is described in the *Book of Genesis*. The straight line leads then to the *Book of Revelation*, the Armageddon, and the end of the time. From this perspective, space does not come to fruition. Indeed, as Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, space was taken away from human beings. Hence, as Highway poses, space becomes secondary especially in Christian mythology, in which a conception of linear time prevails with important implications in the Western way of viewing and living in the world.

As Highway reminds us, the linear view of time also leads to conceptions of ‘progress’, whose main premise is that there is a *continuum* that begins sometime with a primitive humanity and invariably leads to ‘civilization’, equated with European conventions and values. This view has contributed to conceptions of space as a synonym of a territory to settle, to colonize, to sell and to buy. Colonization is thus part of the Western ways of conceiving time and space, privileging the former. Within this perspective, Aboriginal people, considered as ‘primitive’ peoples from a Western perspective, were simply on the settlers’ path to ‘progress’ and ‘civilization.’

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the foundations of cinema coincide with the period of the last movements to colonize the West. Given that, earlier films replicate Western notions of space and time. Therefore, as forms of cultural hegemony, representations in film could contribute to disseminate discourses to justify the indigenous dispossession of their territory, and their replacement by a ‘pure’ white

invader settler society (Gittings 2002). Within this perspective, a possible meaning that one may create from Diamond's apparently linear journey is that it exposes the ambiguities of the Western linear thought and representations, which have broken the indigenous circles. One of the strategies to counter the linear thought in *Reel Injun* is the use of collages, which is further discussed later on in this chapter.

### **The 'rez' car**

The other important element in a road movie is the vehicle. Whereas Diamond departs from his town in an airplane, the rest of his journey is by car, actually a 'rez' car, which he describes as "the reservation's Injun vehicle of choice". Illustrating this definition, he makes some collages of movie clips, emphasising that the 'rez' car has been used as a prop in a number of films about indigenous peoples. In the late sixties, in *Stay Away Joe*, Elvis Presley performs an Indian character, Joe Lightcloud, who drives a 'rez' car with no doors and a wooden chair in the place of the driver's seat. In *Powwow Highway* (1989), the 'rez' car is a clunker that barely works. Yet, the protagonist calls it "Protector", comparing it with a pony. In a sequence of *Smoke Signals*, when the protagonists, Thomas and Victor, began their journey to the West, they take a ride in a 'rez' car, which is literally driven 'backwards'. Interviewed in *Reel Injun*, Chris Eyre's defines the 'rez' car as follows:

A 'rez' car is something that you have to keep together with tape and strings, and whose ignition frequently doesn't work. Nobody said to me that they have a car with three wheels. But that would be a 'rez' car.

Referring to the symbolic freedom and escapism suggested by the road movie, Brandão connects the genre to a celebration of American technological advances, which are represented through images of the power of the vehicle. According to her,

The US's appeal for the salvage, for the open road, paradoxically as it may seem, 'celebrates the machine' and the improvements of the industry in the 'customization' of the automobile, the 'strength of the engine', the power of speed and the design of the vehicles. (68 emphasis added)

Considering Brandão's statements, the 'rez' car in *Reel Injun* may be considered as a symbol to be read at least in two ways. Since, as a prop in the road movie genre, the car has often represented the idea of technological advancement, the first possibility is to interpret the Diamond's 'rez' car as a metaphor that Aboriginal peoples are not frozen in a non-technological time, thus, having a space in modernity. However, Diamond has no car keys and has to use a screwdriver to start the engine (fig.24 and 25). Later on in his journey, the engine is overheated and the filmmaker has to get a ride. Therefore, the 'rez' car also suggests that social and economic inequalities have restricted space for indigenous people in modernity. In this sense, the 'rez' car is suggestive of backwardness, an idea that *Smoke Signals* had already conveyed through the image of a vehicle that is literally driven backwards.



Fig.24: *Reel Injun*: the Reservation Injun's 'vehicle of choice'. One must overcome inequalities.

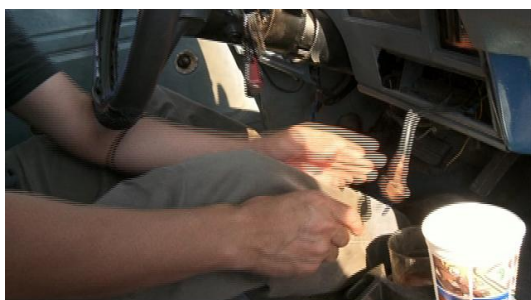


Fig.25: *Reel Injun*: the reservation Injun's 'vehicle of choice' barely works. Yet, one must keep moving .

This dissertation maintains that representations are "signifying practices" (Hall 1997). Within this perspective, there is always a process of interpretation involving the analysis of a sign, which, thus, is opened to other possible readings. Whereas, as discussed above, the 'rez' car

suggests economic and social limitations, it may also function the other way around. From this perspective, although the vehicle barely works and needs repair to continue the journey, a second possibility is to consider the ‘rez’ car as a metaphor of a tool at hand. In this sense, as portrayed in *Reel Injun*, the ‘rez’ car may also be considered as a metaphor of the ingenious Native capacity to adapt to the most unfavourable social and economic conditions.

In a sense, the rez car may also be read as an extended metaphor of the very conditions of indigenous film production. On the one hand, as Brandão puts it, the technological advances in the modes of film production allowed for “opening the grounds for a more dynamic depiction of road narratives” (72). The technological advances are also available to Aboriginal peoples to present their own histories. On the other hand, as I further discuss in Chapter III, Aboriginal cinema reflects the unequal conditions of film production and circulation.

### **The pit stops**

The road and the car evoke an idea of mobility and freedom as the traveller goes from one place to another. However, while roads are suggestive of mobility, they also have ‘pit stops’, which Morris associates to “Derridean pauses”, i.e., moments of “arrested motion” that are “enunciative signs, reminding of gaps or Derridean spacing essential to any discourse (153). The moments of pause allow for further reflections. On his way to West, Diamond stops many times to look at the landscape, interview people or visit reservations and camps, reflecting about the influence of Hollywood’s portrayals of Natives on the shaping of indigenous identity. Diamond first stops by the American Great Plains, the setting for the majority of Hollywood’s Westerns, another film genre that contributed to the creation of stereotypes of Native peoples. One of the best-known sights at the Great Plains is the Monument Valley, located at the heart of the Navajo nation. Monument Valley is one of the most common elements in the Western iconography. Thus, the Great Plains is a site for myths created and perpetrated by Hollywood, mainly by Ford’s iconography.

One of these myths is the nexus between the landscape and freedom. In “Western Meets Eastwood: Genre and Gender on the Road”, Shari Roberts asserts, “the images of the Monument Valley symbolize westward expansion and the opportunity promised by America’s wide open spaces” (48). Portrayed in Ford’s films, Monument Valley was synonymous with an empty land, ready to be reclaimed by the white settler (fig.26). However, through subtitling, *Reel Injun* leaves no doubt about who the ‘real’ ‘owners’ of the most part of American scenery are (fig.27).



Fig.26: John Ford’s Monument Valley, the setting of *Stagecoach* and Ford classics. Ford’s iconography is very clear that the American Plains are empty and ready for possession by white settlers.



Fig. 27: Subtitles in *Reel Injun* make clear that the Monument Valley is now in Native hands.

Diamond also makes an ironic comment about Ford’s iconography through the collage of an old movie that portrays a running buffalo (fig.28). Although the animal moves, his movement is restricted within the limits of the frame. The containment of the animal within the

frame is highly symbolic. In the context of Diamond's documentary, the image is suggestive of the confinement of indigenous peoples in reservations by the late nineteenth century. The collage of this old movie clip in a very specific moment in the documentary, contributes to advance the discussion about important historical issues, which are presented also through still photographs.

Still photographs suggest a 'congealed' moment, a fragment of time, a moment of "arrested motion", as defined earlier in this chapter. Given that, they may also be considered as "Derridean pauses" in Diamond's documentary. As discussed above, these pauses offer opportunities for important reflections. At such moment, the filmmaker interplays archival footage of the buffalo with archival photographs depicting the massacre of one of the last 'free' indigenous communities in North America at Wounded Knee in the late nineteenth century (fig.29).

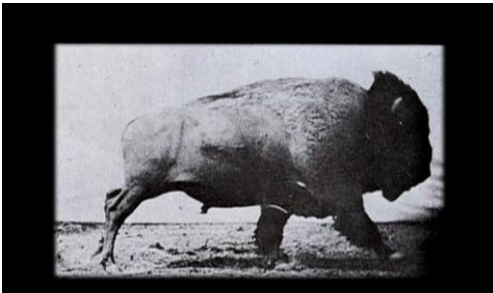


Fig.28: Earlier Archival footage in *Reel Injun*: the buffalo's movement is contained by the frame. In *Reel Injun*, the old footage may be symbolic of the 'confinement' of Natives in reservations.



Fig.29: Archival photography in *Reel Injun*: the massacre of Natives at Wounded Knee in the late nineteenth century coincides with the invention of cinema.

Considering the historical importance of the events in Wounded Knee, the filmmaker also makes us reflect about consequences of the tragic event in the nineteenth century. In current Pine Ridge Reservation, which was the homeland for Crazy Horse, one of the historical figures of the massacre at Wounded Knee, the filmmaker takes some still photographs that offer a view about the unfavourable economic and social conditions of the descendants of the famous Sioux Chief (fig. 30 and 31).



Fig.30: Diamond's still photographs: the filmmaker inserts 'congealed' moments in the documentary, reflecting about current social and economic conditions of Native-Americans.



Fig. 31: Diamond's still photographs. The image of the Native 'warrior' in current times. As an irony of History, the little boy is a descendant of legendary Sioux Chief Crazy Horse.

### **A Native ‘goes Native’: performing a ‘reel Injun’**

Whereas collages of archival footage and photographs are important strategies to counter the stereotypical ‘reel Injun’, Diamond’s performances also contribute to talk back to Hollywood’s portrayal of Natives. As he stops by the American Great Plains, the filmmaker rides a horse, thus alluding to the representational force of another of the Hollywood’s genres, the Western. He ironically states in a dry voice. “I’ve always wanted to ride a horse in the open plains. I finally feel like a Re (a) el Injun”. Literally ‘performing’ an Injun on horseback, the filmmaker invokes one of the most common icons in Westerns, the image of the stoic Native warrior that is almost one with his horse (fig. 32).



Fig.32: *Reel Injun*: Without feathers or headbands, a ‘real’ Indian ‘goes Native’ in the Great Plains.

The sequence in the Plains is suggestive of cultural engagements as created from both ‘images’ and ‘performance’, since Diamond ‘represents’ a Hollywood’s ‘Injun’. Created as a fiction, his ‘Injun’ character alludes to the image that has pervaded the imagination of generations, frequently revolving around the stereotypes of the villainous savage or the noble savage. However, contrarily to the common images of the Injun in mainstream cinema, Diamond does not wear feathers or headbands, but jeans and a T-shirt, highlighting the ironic tone of the documentary.



In the Plains, by means of performing the Hollywood's Indian character, Diamond subverts the notion of 'going Native,' which is a central issue for his discussion in another of the memorable sequences of the documentary. The filmmaker arrives at one of the various summer camps that are spread across North America (fig.33). The camp's leader is an Austrian. In the camp's large dining room, dozens of non-indigenous boys 'go Native'. The noise is almost unbearable, as the 'warriors' scream uncontrollably, banging their fists on the tables. As Restoule explains in relation to Mohawk cultures, the word warrior is not an appropriate translation for a noble concept. According to him, for the Mohawks the concept of warrior implies responsibilities and roles that are "quite the opposite" of the notion of "renegades and without law and order" (66), an image that was crystallised by mainstream films.



Fig.33: *Reel Injun*: an Austrian counsellor and 'Native' 'warrior' in the summer camp.

The boys' conceptions about Natives were formed through the stereotypical images of warriors created by mainstream cultural productions. Their notions of what is to be indigenous were formed through ambiguous and unstable images that were crystallized through film. The white boys' behaviour in the camp shows the ambiguities of the stereotype, which is often a mix of repulse-fetish. Once seen as repulsive bloodthirsty warriors, Natives also became fashionably the epitome of the return to spirituality and nature. Not coincidentally, most of the 'warrior' boys are 'ecologically' painted green.

Sitting silently in the corner of the room, Diamond looks at the strange performance of ‘Nativeness’ (fig.34). In a sense, he has something in common with the boys he looks at, since, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Diamond’s conceptions of his own Native identity were influenced by the films he watched in the church basement. Sadly, Diamond states: “I hope not to disappoint them [the boys]”. Without feathers or paintings, he, the only ‘Real Indian’ in the camp, does not look like a warrior, does not look like the ‘reel Injun’ of the boys’ imagination.



Fig.34: *Reel Injun*: Diamond states, “I hope not to disappoint them.” Probably, he does not fit the ‘white’ boys’ expectations of what being an Native means.

### **An Injun goes white**

In a later sequence in Goldfield Ghost Town, a Wild West theme park located right in a Navajo reservation in the Open Plains, time has come for Diamond to perform a cowboy, another of the important elements in the iconography of Hollywood’s Westerns (fig.35). The image of the cowboy encompasses qualities that are essential to cross frontiers and move westward. Thus, he represents the ideal of heroism, individuality, aggression, independence and control. In other words, he is the epitome of masculinity. In this respect, it is interesting to quote one of the most famous Hollywood’s cowboys, John Wayne in an interview in 1970. “I like to play *men* be they good guys or bad . . . lighting a cigarette. ‘I don’t mind being brutal or tough or cruel . . . The

day the film companies think that a Western is a place for weaklings, I'll go" (John Wayne's Ordeal: 107 qtd in Roberts 48).

Diamond attempts at demystifying the stereotypical images of the cowboy. Not only the scenario, but also the choices of camera angle and position are suggestive of common iconography of the Western genre. Properly dressed as a cowboy, the filmmaker looks at his rival. The camera focuses on Diamond's eyes. A cut, and the focus changes to his rival's eyes. The interaction of looks enhances the suspenseful atmosphere. The filmmaker asks, "On 4?" (fig.36 and 37) His rival agrees, assuming that the deal is to count from '1 to 4' before shooting. However, Diamond immediately says "4", takes the gun, shoots, and 'kills' the rival cowboy (fig. 37).



Fig.35: *Reel Injun*: a wannabe cowboy in the Ghost Town: no expertise with the gun. Diamond plays with one of the Western genre conventions to introduce a very humorous sequence in the documentary. Humour allows for the filmmaker to create a documentary that invites the audience to reflect about the power of film to create ambiguous discourses, namely, the discourses of the superiority of the 'white' settlers.

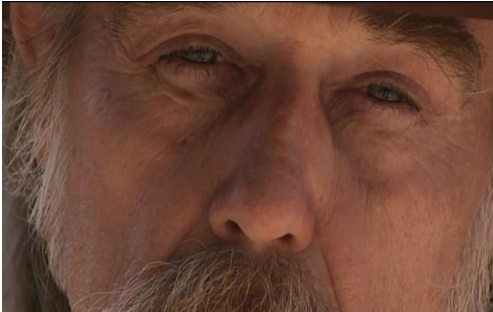


Fig. 36: *Reel Injun*: Neil Diamond plays with Western genre codes: the interaction of looks is one of the iconic images of toughness, an essential quality for a cowboy.



Fig. 37: *Reel Injun*: Diamond shoots on '4'. He has his revenge against the stereotypical images he watched in the movies in the church basement.

Diamond also plays with the idea of ‘going white,’ since it is an opportunity to subvert some codes of the Western genre, which in his childhood made him cheer for the cowboys in the films he watched in the church basement. The sequence somehow dialogues with the sequence in the Open Plains, where the filmmaker ‘performs’ an Indian, as he looks at two common stereotypes. In the Western setting, he becomes the ‘cowboy’. We may create meanings from the two sequences when they are juxtaposed for analytical purposes. A possible interpretation is that the filmmaker asserts that not only the Indian is constructed as ‘representation’, but also the cowboy is a product of imagination. Therefore, Diamond reminds us that even the images of cowboys, such as the ones portrayed by John Wayne are constructions (fig.38). The difference is that actual white people have not been damaged by John Wayne’s stereotypical cowboys.

Thus, in the overall context of *Reel Injun*, both the sequences in the Open Plains and in the Ghost Town are remarkable statements of power. Diamond has the chance to show how John Wayne’s tough cowboy images may serve other purposes. A meaningful shot shows how Wayne’s images have become a commodity form in the Navajo Market (fig.39), which now profits by selling souvenirs, namely mugs and toilet paper, to tourists.



Fig.38: Still from *Reel Injun*: collage of an image of the tough cowboy performed by John Wayne.



Fig.39: The ‘power’ of the stereotype, from the perspective of *Reel Injun*. Commodification of John Wayne’s image at the Navajo marketplace.

### **Where does this road go to after all? A new horizon for Aboriginal representation**

The journey is an organizational principle around which Diamond is allowed to create a documentary that focuses on people that live by the margins of the road, by the margins of the nation-state, and by the margins of History. On the one hand, the trope of traveling may be suggestive of low costs of film production. On the other hand, travelling is the strategy that allows the filmmaker to go to location to record the fundamental colours, elements and sounds of the scenery. Therefore, the journey enables the filmmaker to see other ‘truths’ and other paths.

Diamond seems to travel linearly, straight to Hollywood. However, as I have maintained throughout this analysis, his journey is also a conceptual movement. Bopp et al (2002) connect childhood with the symbolic East, the place of all beginnings. In this sense, Diamond’s journey begins with his memories of childhood, even before he takes the plane from his Northern homeland to the South. Then, as Diamond leaves his hometown in Northern Canada, he moves to the South, literally and symbolically. According to Bopp et al, the South is the place where one may express “feelings openly and freely” (51). From the South, Diamond sets out on his journey by car down to Hollywood, crossing borderlands between Canada and the US.



In the West, i.e., in Hollywood, the filmmaker expects to draw a new meaning for the imaginary Native. Yet, Diamond is literally led back to the North, not very far from his home. As Bopp et al state in *The Sacred Tree* (2004), “The North is the place of winter, of white snows that remind us of the white hair of the elders. It is the dawning place of true wisdom” (62). Thus, at the end of the documentary, the filmmaker symbolically closes a circle, and defies our initial assumptions that his journey is merely linear. He finally stops at Igloodik, a cold and remote hamlet in the Canadian North, which, for thousands of years has been home for the Inuit people, once known as Eskimos (fig.40). Igloodik is the home for an emergent and important film industry that has crossed its local boundaries, entering mainstream film circuits, such as Toronto and Cannes.



Fig.40. *Reel Injun*: Diamond comes full circle. The road leads to the North, a new horizon for Aboriginal filmmaking.

### Conclusion

Although different in styles and themes, the two documentaries analysed in this chapter share one important goal, as they engage in resistance to hegemonic discourses, namely capitalism, the state, and mainstream cultural representations. Discussing how these oppressive systems have marginalized indigenous people, the two documentaries are educational in purpose. In this sense, they bring into view political, social, economic and cultural problems that have affected the life of

many indigenous people in the world. Nevertheless, neither *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* nor *Reel Injun* represent Aboriginals as mere victims of the systems of oppression.

Given that, both documentaries are strong assertions about the ability of Aboriginal peoples to (re) build their cultural sense. Obomsawin exposes the nation's shortcomings, showing the incoherencies of the modern nation-state. One important point is that Obomsawin defies the notion of a coherent state from within the NFB, which David Hogarth defines as a "hegemonic cultural apparatus par excellence" (qtd. in Gittings 31). Therefore, *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* becomes powerfully subversive, corroborating film scholar Richard Barsam's statements as quoted in Gittings:

The astonishing characteristic of these films [Aboriginal films], produced with government funds is that they present the subject's, not the government's point of view and are critical of government policies and practices. (31)

Subversion is also at the core of Diamond's documentary, as the filmmaker takes some of the mainstream film discourses to expose their ambiguity. However, the subversive tone in both documentaries also results from the filmmakers' careful manipulation of filmic elements. For this reason, *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun -Rises* and *Reel Injun* illustrate the power of film as art.

As Obomsawin's documentary asserts, Aboriginals may also overcome disruptions through the strengthening of their artistry, which implies important relationships between people as they teach or learn crafts, tell stories, sing or make films. Woven in a compelling way, stories, photographs, songs, and paintings contribute to transform her documentary into a beautiful work of art, which both entertains and teaches. One particularly interesting point is the filmmaker's careful manipulation of sound, which, thus, conveys her emphasis on the oral tradition of storytelling. As I have maintained throughout this chapter, *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* is poetry on the screen, offering a visually and aurally powerful view of the history of the Waban-aki people and their artistry. In this sense, I corroborate Martins, as she notices the lyricism of Obomsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*. Quoting Obomsawin's



statements that “the camera can speak, but it can also listen” (qtd. in Merata Mita, 15), Martins adds, “and so does poetry” (152).

Diamond’s artistry is to create a compelling work of collage, which, from a current perspective, gives new meanings to old movie clips and photographs. From the beginning, he also practices another art, the art of comedy, conveyed through collages of archival footage and the inclusion of stand up comedian Charlie Hill’s jokes and Diamond’s performances throughout the documentary. Therefore, the filmmaker invites us to laugh as he leads us to a journey along the history of the ‘reel Injun.’ In an online interview to Stephanie Skenderis from the CBC News, asked about the tone of his documentary, Diamond explains his motivations to use humour as a tool in *Reel Injun*:

A film like this could easily have been a very, very angry film, just because, those images [stereotypes] are so offensive. They don’t even come close to telling the true story of what happened to native people. But that approach to the subject would just turn people off. It’s better to make them laugh or cry than make them angry.

Be it through a lyric or ironic tone, both documentaries make important statements about the power of visual culture, and the relevance of the involvement of Indigenous filmmakers in the creation of a new imaginary about aboriginality. In this respect, one important point, particularly in *Reel Injun*, is its aim to raise awareness of Aboriginal cinema itself. From the beginning of the documentary, Diamond praises the indigenous film industry that has grown worldwide, particularly the one that has emerged in the Arctic, Igloodik Isuma Films. In the following chapter, I focus on this important cinema of the Arctic, which has produced films that, like the two documentaries analysed in this chapter, are also politically powerful and beautiful works of art.

## CHAPTER II

### REBUILDING CULTURE WITH 'ICE AND FIRE': IGLOOLIK ISUMA'S FILMS

We are all artists. Every person is an artist. That is how I see it. Everybody is an artist: some people can do things better than others. Some are abstract artists. What they see is there, and some of us can't see it!-

Zacharias Kunuk

One of my illusions is that the role of art in society is that art is what moves society forward; politics or war does not move society forward. Art is the change agent. Societies are stable until they move at the pace of and on the engine of artistic vision.

Norman Cohn

As the filmic analysis of documentaries in the previous chapter demonstrated, a central concern of Aboriginal filmmakers is to raise awareness of indigenous identity politics. However, one important aspect that this dissertation has attempted at disclosing is how film as art powerfully conveys the theme of identity politics. In *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, Obomsawin focuses on artistic expression not only as theme, but also as a powerful style of filmmaking that appeals to all our senses as she speaks about the history of her people. *Reel Injun* is the art of collage, which gives new meanings to archival footage and photographs, rewriting the history of Hollywood's Indians from an indigenous perspective. As quoted above, Igloolik Isuma Corporation's co-founders, Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, also emphasise their concern with producing films that are art primarily. Within this perspective, this chapter focuses on two fictional films by Isuma, *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, calling attention to the power of Inuit cinematic practice as art that brings to view important meanings of being Inuit in current times.

Considering the purpose of this chapter, it is designed as follows. First, the chapter contextualizes Isuma's practice and concerns within the struggle to (re)make the Inuit cultural sense. Thus, the chapter provides an overview of the main discourses about the Inuit, and, after that, a brief account of Igloodik Isuma Corporation's history and goals. Then, the chapter analyses *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* as it portrays landscapes, *igloos*, and a chase sequence across the Arctic from which one may create meanings of 'Inuitness'. After that, the chapter analyses *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* and its display of the subject matter of photography as an important tool not only to present Inuit cultural elements within the context of the film's diegesis, but also to suggest meanings about Inuit control over the creative process of their representation.

### **'A Peep at the Esquimaux': the main discourses about the Inuit**

As mentioned above, my main concern is to focus on Isuma's film art as a tool to trigger discussions about Inuit cultural identity. This work relies heavily upon filmic analysis, which aims to show how, metaphorically, Isuma's film 'write' with 'ice and fire' a new imaginary about the Arctic, defying common stereotypes of Inuit people, which mainstream cultures have often portrayed within the frame of the noble savage. As anthropologist Asen Balikci explains in "Anthropology, Film and the Arctic Peoples" (1989), this stereotypical view has its origins in the reports by earlier Arctic explorers, whose descriptions as happy, lovable, clean, and courageous were inspirations for popular literature in Europe (7), as the following statements in a children's book suggest:

Mrs Frazer readily handed to them a large collection, one of which soon caught their attention. Its title was new, and there were pictures on it, of ESQUIMAUX; those harmless natives of the Frozen Seas, about whom the children had heard so much from their parents, and whom they had been taught to consider with feelings of pity, as the most desolate human beings; often famishing, as they had been told, with hunger; perishing with cold, and destitute of all the comforts and convenience of life; yet cheerful, and contented with their hard lot;

thereby affording a lesson to natives of a happier country, who, in the midst of abundance, are often miserable and discontented, even at the slightest privation. (*A Peep at the Esquimaux* 1825). Introduction vii)

In the above quotation, two little girls and their mother go for a walk at Soho Bazaar. The girls are delighted as they find a children's book about the Eskimos. Published in 1825 in London, the anonymous book is an example of how in the nineteenth century many literary works romanticized the Eskimos as noble savages. Thus, as Mathew Pettit maintains, the main historical discourse about Inuit peoples has been the image of the "happy-go-lucky Eskimo" (fig.41-42), made static in a pre-contact time (176). Later Victorian literature also contributed to perpetrate the stereotype. Moreover, Victorian writers such as Mary Shelley turned the Arctic landscape as the place where the European self locates his/ her fear. Not coincidentally, Frankenstein's creature, as a strange 'other', hides itself in the Arctic.



Fig.41: Illustration from *A Peep at the Esquimaux* (1825, 6).

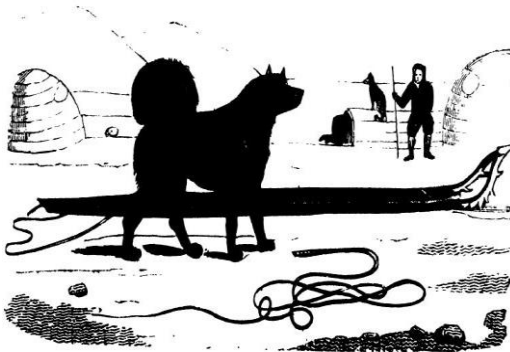


Fig.42: Illustration from *A Peep at the Esquimaux* (1825, 20).

From literary works, the stereotypical images of the Eskimo made their way to film. Thomas Edison was the first to produce cinematographic images of Inuit peoples in *In the Land of the Eskimos* (Singer 2003). Earlier Canadian cinema also portrayed the Eskimos as childish and primitive. In his analysis of *Back to God's Country* (1919), Gittings describes a sequence in which an Eskimo woman attempts to eat soap, which she mistakes for food (26). This exaggerated portrayal, which is suggestive of slapstick comedy, recurs in another important film.

In the most famous film about the Eskimos, the docudrama by Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922), a number of elements contribute to the representation of a subject matter that fits the audience's expectations of a simple and peaceful people. One remarkable example is the infamous sequence in which the Inuk protagonist, Nanook, bites a gramophone record in order to examine it. Flaherty's representation highlights Nanook's childishness, thus contributing to the dissemination of assumptions that the Inuit and technological advances were incompatible.<sup>29</sup>

The representation of the Inuit as frozen in a primitive time and non-technological world had consequences in Inuit 'real' world. While *Back to God's Country* and *Nanook* were being produced, profound economic, political and social changes were already at play in the Arctic. Thus, according to Pettit, "as they [Inuit] are made static, there is no need for the dominant culture to examine their modern struggles, and the political redress that such an examination would demand is avoided" (176).

Whereas other indigenous peoples in the Americas were soon dispossessed of traditional lands and resources by the European colonizing powers, the Inuit were submitted to colonialism relatively recently. The delay to colonizing the Arctic was due to its

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<sup>29</sup> In "Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies: Resignifying Indigenous Lives," Faye Ginsburg observes that the gramophone sequence and the film itself obscures the Inuit contributions to the production of *Nanook*, as they worked in functions that correspond to current technicians, camera operators, and consultants. However, the Inuit's expertise remained unacknowledged, as one of Flaherty's contributors, Allakarialak, who performed the role of Nanook, died of starvation in the Arctic (81).

inappropriateness to agriculture. Moreover, colonizers assumed that the region was devoid of resources to exploit. However, as Collins and McMahan-Coleman explains in “Heritage and Regional Development: an Indigenous Perspective,” in the twentieth century the Canadian government established a post of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to face the threat of territorial expansion by other nation states. The attempts at colonizing the region increased as oil resources were found in the Arctic, by the mid twentieth century (7).

As Robert Michael Evans poses, for the Inuit, colonialism meant an enforced relocation to settlements. The most obvious result of the compulsory relocation was a change in the Inuit relationship with the land, as they were frequently obliged to move to locations that were not appropriate for the activities that were at the core of Inuit survival. As a result, there was a change from a livelihood based on fishing and hunting to a market economy. This was a paradox, whether one takes into account that few waged jobs were available in the Arctic (*Isuma: Inuit Video Art* 2008).

Once able and proud hunters and fishers, Inuit began to face material poverty, and along with it, the transformation of a system of belief that had functioned for millennia. As poverty rose, they became more and more dependent on government assistance. More disruptions occurred as children were removed from their families, sent to industrial boarding schools, and obliged to speak a language other than Inuktitut. Moreover, the millenary Inuit religious system was gradually replaced by Christianity. Thus, without previous connections, many Inuit also began to face other familial and social problems, namely, internal violence, alcoholism and drug addiction, and suicide (Evans 2008).

The following lines from a poem by Inuk satirist and poet Alooook Ippellie presents a view about the schizophrenic social and cultural contexts surrounding the Inuit. Ippellie brings into view the complex process of Inuit identification in current times. The poet faces the challenge of being trapped and unable to cope with either the old Inuit ways or modernity. The only solution is to become a choreographer. However, the dancing is actually a war between his feet, as each of them attempt at stepping on opposing sides of the border. Since each foot fight against the other, in a mixture of dancing and war, the poet performs the choreography at great pains, especially because the border becomes wider:

It is never easy  
 Walking with an invisible border  
 Separating my left and right foot  
 I feel like an illegitimate child  
 Forsaken by my parents.  
 At least I can claim innocence  
 Since I did not ask to come  
 Into this world

.....  
 I have resorted to fancy dancing  
 In order to survive each day  
 No wonder I have earned  
 The dubious reputation of being  
 The world's premier choreographer  
 Of distinctive dance steps  
 That allows me to avoid  
 Potential personal paranoia  
 On both sides of this invisible border.  
 (Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of memory  
 and High-Definition in Inuit Storytelling 67)

In the essay “Walking both Sides of an Invisible Border”, Ippellie emphatically states that “today, the majority of the Inuit population is snugly stuck in vortex flux – between two vastly different cultures” (*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of memory and High-Definition in Inuit Storytelling* 82). According to him, currently, Inuit peoples, in special the youth, face a “cultural amnesia” (82), which results from the ‘invisible’ divide between Inuit and non- Inuit cultures.

Urging for the recovering of the history of the people, Ippellie underscores the role of filmmaking in the process of Inuit cultural renaissance. As he states, “It is time we begin cultivating true Inuit historians who possess the talent with a ‘Midas touch’” (*Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of memory and High-Definition in Inuit Storytelling* 83). As the Inuk poet maintains, Inuit filmmaking as practiced by Isuma Film Productions has a Midas touch, becoming a powerful space for Inuit peoples to rewrite themselves in history and resignify their cultures for Inuit and non-Inuit audiences alike.

### **The Midas touch: Igloodik Isuma Corporation**

Igloodik Isuma Productions is a film collective located in Igloodik, a remote hamlet in the Canadian Arctic, with a population of around 2500 inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> Many people would consider Igloodik the most improbable place for the development of a very active film industry. However, that small and remote Arctic town named for *igloos* is home for the amazing number of three film companies: an office of the Inuit Broadcast Corporation (IBC), Tariagsuk Film Company, and Igloodik Isuma Productions (Evans, 2008).

Although Isuma was officially incorporated in 1990, the company's origins may be traced back to the early 1980s, when Paul Apak Angilirq and Zacharias Kunuk were two Inuit artists working at the IBC. Complaining about the location of the IBC in Ottawa, and concerned with problems of budgeting, Angilirq e Kunuk decided to leave the organization. In the late 1980s, they met New Yorker video artist Norman Cohn, a Brooklynite who had moved to Nunavut. Along with another Inuk, Pauloosie Qulitalik, Kunuk and Cohn founded Isuma (Evans 2008).

A rapid search in Isuma's official website shows how the company has become an important space not only for Inuit, but also for indigenous peoples worldwide to create and disseminate their cultural production. Available in the website are dozens of videos produced by indigenous filmmakers from all over the world. Throughout its history, Isuma has expanded to include Isuma TV and Isuma Publishers ([www.isuma.tv](http://www.isuma.tv)), producing films and books that are both important political statements and high quality works of art.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In "Film Co-operatives", Marsh Murphy explains that film collectives are co-ops, and this model is very popular in Canada, where Canada Council sustains film collectives for the Arts. Film collectives are important to independent filmmakers, because, through the cooperative model, members can rent production and post-production equipments for lower rental rates than the rates at commercial rental-houses ([www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com)). In the *ImagineNative Film Festival* (2009) in Toronto, I attended a workshop about film collectives. Norman Cohn also highlighted the role of film collectives in the context of Aboriginal film production and circulation as they provide more opportunities for their members to access tools for film production and distribution. Interesting is that Isuma also has some sub co-ops, including Arnait Films, with a majority of female members. The National Film Board (NFB) is also another organization that sustains co-ops.

<sup>31</sup> Evans proposes that to understand the context of Isuma's production, it is important to know its ties with the development of Inuit art in the course of more than four thousand millennia.



Most of the production by Isuma has been in the documentary format. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the company was internationally recognized with its first fictional film, *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*. In this respect, as quoted below, Cohn presents a view according to which Isuma's successful enterprise has affected importantly the wider political context of Canadian film production:

(...) in that sense making the film was not just a political statement, it was a political act in that these agencies [the Canadian film system] are not the same anymore. Their rules have changed. The Department of Canadian Heritage has changed. The definition of how Canadian culture is represented to the rest of the world has changed as a result of *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*. (*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: A Sense of High Definition and Memory in Inuit Filmmaking* 267)<sup>32</sup>

One may ask what makes *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* so powerful to the point that, as quoted in Isuma's official website, the former French president Jacques Chirac highly praised the film, by stating, "la civilization Inuit est une civilization passionnée et ce film magnifique permet d'en entrevoir certains aspects" (www. isuma.tv). Whereas contextual factors, namely the way of working and doing things that are worth for Igloodik's community, figure as reasons for the

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Inuit art is strongly connected with the Arctic lifestyle, being concerned with both aesthetics and survival in a challenging environment (*Isuma: Inuit Video Art* 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Cohn's statements corroborate Alanis Obomsawin as she speaks about the inclusion of Aboriginals in the public sphere.

Aboriginal peoples have done a lot of work to force the changes. What you see now is the result of a hard work . . . to get the inclusion in the institutions. Over the years we have managed to have a presence in there . . . Now it is the other way around . . . It is the Universities, the government that want us on their side. (my personal video recording of Obomsawin, during *the ImagineNative Film Festival* 2009 in Toronto)

success of *Atanarjuat*, one must also acknowledge that Isuma's film is visually and aurally compelling, as the following textual analysis aims at demonstrating.

### **1. *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (2001): the power of film as art.**

Central to the contemporary success of *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* is the oral tradition, as the film displays a millenary legend passed down orally from generation-to-generation. Therefore, I sum up the oral legend as well as its adaptation by Isuma's filmmakers. According to Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, the legend about Atanarjuat is set in the pre-colonial past, and was first mentioned in writing in the beginning of the nineteenth century by English explorer Captain George Lyon ("An Ethnographic Commentary: the Legend of Atanarjuat, Inuit and Shamanism" 209).<sup>33</sup> Later in the twentieth century, the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen also mentioned the legend in his *Across Arctic America* (1927). Although there are different versions of the legend, its main narrative elements include two brothers called Amarjuaq and Atanarjuat. Because of a scheme of jealousy and revenge, the brothers' enemies kill Amarjuaq.<sup>34</sup> In order to survive, Atanarjuat escapes from his skin tent, and runs naked on the thin ice, as enemies chase him. He finds refuge in a neighbour camp, and, after recovering from the severe injuries he suffered during the escape, he returns to his clan and has his revenge.

The film's plot may be summed up as follows. Ambitioning the clan's leadership, Sauri kills his own father Kumaglak. Thus, evil disrupts the balance of the community. Twenty years later, Atanarjuat, the protagonist, and Sauri's son, Oki, are already grown men. Atanarjuat falls in love with Atuat, who is Oki's fiancée. Tension between the two rivals increases. They compete for the girl's love and Atanarjuat wins. The couple is happily married, until Atanarjuat takes a

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<sup>33</sup> Captain George Lyon was the commander of the British ship H.M.S *Hecla*, and made several trips to the Arctic. He wrote *The Private Journal of G.F. Lyon a report During the Recent Voyage of Discovery under the Captain Parry* (1825) where he mentions two brothers called Amug yoo-a and Att-na-ghioo, which according to Lyon were chief Patrons of the country about Amytyook (361).

<sup>34</sup>In *Across Arctic America* (1927), Rasmussen writes the legend of Aumazuat and Atanârzuat as it was told by an Inuk storyteller called Inugpasugjuk. In his version, Atanarzuat is killed and Aumazuat is the one that escapes from the tent (298).

second wife, Puja, who joins his clan. Soon she begins to cause trouble by refusing to help Atuat with housekeeping.

The lazy Puja also seduces Atanarjuat's brother, Amaquuat. Atanarjuat expels her from the camp, but, after some time, she returns begging for forgiveness. The clan is not aware that the revengeful Puja plotted with Oki against Atanarjuat. While the two brothers rest in their summer tent, Oki and his companions thrust the dwelling with their spears, killing Amaquuat. Atanarjuat escapes, running naked on the ice. His enemies unsuccessfully chase the protagonist, but he finds refuge in a neighbour camp, where, after recovering from his injuries, he returns home. The elders ostracize Oki and his companions.

As it is possible to notice, the line of action in the film is quite simple, as it is in the oral legend. However, for those not used to Inuit cultures, the film offers no easy interpretations. It was entirely shot in Inuktitut, the Inuit language. In the opening sequences, there are no references to time and space from a Western perspective. Consequently, the film may provoke a feeling of estrangement and loss that cause non-Inuit audiences to compare it to something more familiar in Western traditions. Melnyk states, "one critic described the film as 'overwhelming in its meaning' because it speaks with the same power as 'Greek epic poetry and Shakespearean epic tragedy'" (261). Isuma's website displays the extensive list of critical reviews including *MacLean's* references to the film as "an Arctic masterpiece" and Margaret Atwood's statements describing the film as a "knockout [. . .] a generational saga with many Homeric elements- love, jealousy, rivalry between young contenders, extraordinary feats of strength, resentments passed from fathers to sons, and crimes that beget consequences years later" (www.isuma.tv).

The film begins with an extreme long shot focuses on the icy and blue landscape. It is nearly impossible to distinguish between land and sky, except for the almost imperceptible horizon and the moon at the background of the frame. In the middle of the frame, an Inuk character walks in circles, while some dogs bark around him. A character states voice-off, "I can only sing this song to someone who understands it. Let's hear it" (fig.43).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, in the past, the main form to tell stories was through oral tradition. Given that, the above statements suggest one of the important aspects of the film, its emphasis on oral tradition. Within the context of the film's diegesis, the character, as a

storyteller, makes a rhetorical statement, advising the other characters to listen carefully to the story, paying attention to its elements, and, mainly, to its moral lessons.



Fig.43: *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: from the opening credits sequence, the film states itself as art of oral storytelling.

Considered metaphorically, the character's statements may be translated into 'We can only make a film to someone who understands it.' That is to say that the experience of viewing and interpreting *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* requires a close attention not only to the narrative elements themselves, but also to the specific elements of film as they convey important moral teachings from current perspectives. *Atanarjuat* is a 3-hour length film. Since the establishing shot, which lasts almost a minute, the narrative events unfold slowly through an editing that privileges the long take. Especially, in the initial thirty minutes, the pace is very slow. As a result, one may pay attention to several visual and sound elements of the film. Therefore, 'one can only understand' *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* by paying attention to the way the narrative world emerges from a careful treatment of filmic elements.

### This is ‘our land’: cinematography and the Arctic landscape

One of the remarkable aspects of the film is the portrayal of Arctic landscapes. In *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*, landscapes are powerful, as the following stills from the film highlight (fig.44). The winter landscape is presented in its different hues ranging from the almost pure white to the bluest ice. Most of the angles are at eye level, so that they may increase the audience’s perception of a vast landscape. The colors and angles suggest that the filmmakers do not aim to construct formalist images. As a result, many moments in the film suggest its tendency to a realistic expression, which is also conveyed by the strategy of using available lighting that contributes to create a ‘documentary’ look (fig.45)<sup>35</sup>.

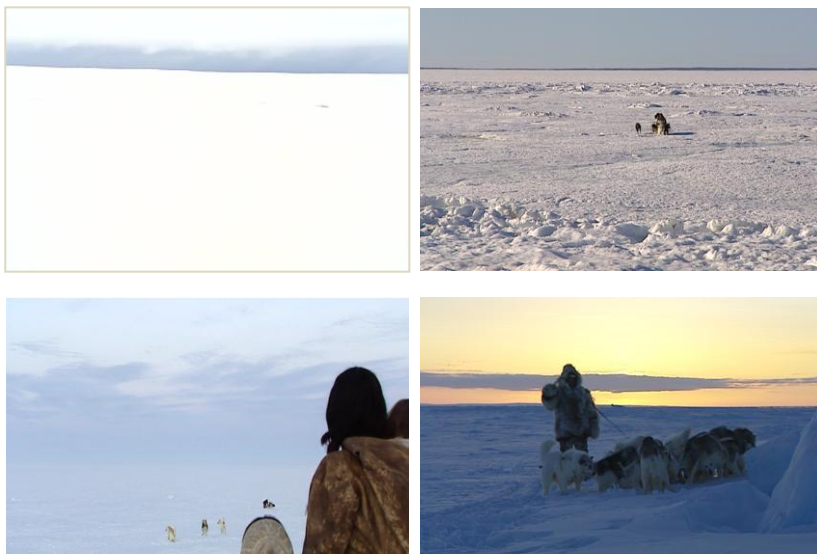


Fig.44: Stills from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*. Angles and lighting emphasise the documentary look of Isuma’s fictional films.

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<sup>35</sup> The documentary look in fictional films by Isuma may be associated with its tradition in the documentary genre. Since its foundation, the company has produced dozens of documentaries about Inuit life. The investment on fictional film is more recent. In “Traveling Through Layers: Inuit Artists Appropriate New Technologies,” Katarina Soukup defines Isuma’s aesthetics as docudrama, which implicates, for instance, in film acting. According to Cohn, quoted in Soukup, “Instead of taking an actor and putting him in a character, we take a character and put him in the actor” (242).

The Arctic summer is equally portrayed with a rich palette of colours. Some shots focus on the melting ice as it reflects the sunlight, resulting in images of landscapes and characters that are involved in pure gold (fig.45). In other shots, the reflections of the sun's rays on the camera lens produce colourful effects, painting the ground with hues of green and violet. In some moments, the camera captures beautiful images of the blue sky and the flowery ground as they are 'divided' or, one may say, 'united', by a horizon of ice (fig.46). In other moments, the green grass is shown in all its shades (fig.47). In some shots, green grass and silver stones contrast with the reds and oranges of other elements in the frame, creating an impressive palette of colours (fig.48).



Fig.45: Stills from *Atanarjuat:the Fast Runner*. A powerful medium shot literally sheds 'light' into the Arctic landscape, turning it into pure gold.



Fig.46: Stills from *Atanarjuat:the Fast Runner*. A beautiful palette of colours. Time for rebirth as the ice recedes and the arctic soil is 'painted' rose.



Fig.47: Stills from *Atanarjuat:the Fast Runner*.  
life expresses itself in various ways and nuances.



Fig. 48: Stills from *Atanarjuat:the Fast Runner*.  
shades of green and silver contrasts with the reds  
and oranges of the meat and fire.

In “Visions of landscape: East and West”, William S. Talbot points out that the art of representing landscape “usually reveals a concept of the world and of man’s place in it, which is the result of many aspects of the culture that produced it” (112). In this respect, it is possible to make sense out of the way Isuma’s filmmakers represent the Arctic landscapes. The variety of colours in both winter and summer and the contrast between their different landscapes suggest the view that the Arctic is not a desolate region. Therefore, the film counters the idea that Inuit peoples are condemned to struggle against the harsh and eternally frozen environment. As the film portrays, the Arctic is full of life, in both winter and summer. Life expresses itself in the characters

that work and play in the snow in winter or look at the beautiful landscape in the summer.

Through powerful portrayal of the landscape, Isuma's film practice corroborates Thomas D. Andrews and Susan Buggey as they state, "Aboriginal cultural landscapes are not sites or relics. They are living landscapes that indigenous people identify as fundamentally important to their cultural heritage, areas that embody their relationship with the land" (65). Given that, one important aspect the film discloses is the 'human landscape' (fig.49). Indeed, *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* is about being human and all the implications of humanity: love, passion, anger, jealousy, regret, compassion, and so forth. Therefore, Isuma's films visually state that the story is about the Inuit, 'the humans', their daily life routines, their virtues and frailties.



Fig.49: 'human landscape' as portrayed in *Atanarjuat* stresses the powerful relationship between Inuit and the land.



### The art of *igloo* building

Besides suggesting the integration between the Inuit and the landscape, the composition of the film's *mise-en-scène* and cinematography also brings into view some of the important elements of the Inuit cultural landscape. Among them is the ice dwelling, which in the course of the narrative may be considered as highly symbolic. Given that, I select one specific sequence for analysis, in which the characters build an *igluvigac*, which, as d'Anglure explains, is a large family dwelling made of ice ("An Ethnographic Commentary: the Legend of Atanarjuat, Inuit and Shamanism" 213). This sequence is interesting as it raises a discussion about important values that *Atanarjuat* seems to recollect, including the importance of paying attention to issues that are relevant not to the individual but to the community. I introduce this analysis with a brief view of *How to Build an Igloo* (1949), a documentary directed and narrated by Douglas Wilkinson, with the sponsorship of the NFB<sup>36</sup>.

Wilkinson's documentary describes the construction of an *igloo* by two Inuit hunters. The opening shots present the Inuit as they arrive in their dogsled at the camp next to a post of the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>37</sup> A long shot focuses on the buildings (fig.50). Curiously,

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<sup>36</sup> Although it may sound anachronistic, the inclusion of Wilkinson's documentary in this analysis is due to some important reasons. In "Iglu to Iglurjuak", Frank James Tester discusses the effects of the replacement of Inuit dwellings by European-style houses. As he poses, Douglas Wilkinson was appointed commissioner for Northern Affairs. Thus, significantly, Wilkinson "who once celebrated traditional Inuit life with his film *Land of the Long Day*, was fully committed to the project of modernization, of which housing was the centerpiece" (236). For understanding of how official documentary records reveal the discourses revolving around formation of knowledge about Inuit dwellings in various media, including drawing and film, Tester examines a number of governmental texts, including Wilkinson's reports and memos. As Tester maintains, Wilkinson's memos in particular suggest how, because of the new style of housing, Inuit became more dependent on government support, having to redefine many aspects of their life. Among the changes was as reordering of the concept of time, with obvious implications to Inuit ways of seeing and living in the world. As perceptions of space and time were altered, and the Inuit had to pay for their houses, there were serious effects for the accomplishment of traditional activities, namely hunting and fishing. These activities were not compatible with a routine of having to wake up early and go to work or school. Inuit hunters became less proud of themselves, and community and family relations were seriously altered in the process.

<sup>37</sup> In "Distributed Work over the Centuries: Trust and Control in Hudson's Bay Company, 1670-1826," Michael O'Leary, Wanda Orlikowski and JoAnne Yates provide an in depth perspective about the Hudson's Bay Company. The company was chartered by a group of

the choice of camera position and angle suggests a look at the scenery from the perspective of the hunters. This subjective shot corroborates the voice-over narrator, who states “They [the Eskimos] ‘look forward’ to a mug of tea and a packet of biscuits from the trade post”. The following shots present the hunters as they build their *igloo* next to the trade post. As the action is presented mostly through long and medium shots and eye level camera angles, most of the time the audience ‘looks at’ the *igloo* building from afar (fig.51). Furthermore, the documentary does not present the interior of the dwelling when its building is finally accomplished.



Fig. 50: The choice of camera angles corroborates the voice over narrator, who is Doug Wilkinson himself, as he states that the Eskimos admire the white men’s buildings. A long shot of a post of the Hudson’s Bay Company emphasises the Eskimo hunters’ object of ‘admiration’.



Fig.51: Medium and long shots emphasises the action and the ability of the Eskimo hunters. Nonetheless, the lack of subjective shots does not allow the viewers to be closer to the action.

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London Merchants in the late seventeenth century to trade furs along the shores of Hudson Bay and James Bay in the Canadian Arctic According to the authors, the company is the longest continually operating company in North America (28).

From the above description, one may infer that *How to Build an Igloo* presents interesting discourses. The film's title is quite revealing. It sounds like 'do-it-yourself', suggesting that the *igloo* may be easily made. In this respect, it is interesting to notice that Wilkinson intersperses an animation to explain how the *igloo* is built. Thus, the filmmaker emphasises the documentary's 'educational' and 'didactic' purposes, aiming at presenting a view of the Eskimo culture to southerners. I maintain that the documentary also suggests discourses that were conforming to a view of the modernization of the Arctic in the late 1940s.

Wilkinson's documentary does not give space for the Eskimo hunters to speak. As they are voiceless, their ability as builders has to be presented by an omniscient and over determined narrator, who is Wilkinson himself. Throughout the documentary, his statements seem to celebrate the Eskimos' abilities as *igloo* builders. Nevertheless, the combination of his narration with the manipulation of camera angles and positions contributes to present the Eskimos and their dwelling as objects of curiosity. One important aspect in the documentary is its emphasis on the practice of trading. Nevertheless, there is no effort to acknowledge the impacts of trading on the Eskimos' lives.<sup>38</sup> More important, since the Eskimos are voiceless and their 'ability' to build is only an object of curiosity, the documentary makes no effort to acknowledge the significance of ice dwellings for the Inuit.

In "An Ethnographic Commentary: the Legend of Atanarjuat, Inuit and Shamanism", D'Anglure calls our attention to the symbolism of the Inuit dwellings, which may represent life in various dimensions. As he poses, the ice dwelling is to the Inuit as "the womb is to a foetus" (215). In this human scale, the ice dwelling is more than a shelter for protection against the harsh environment. The dwelling gives birth to the sense of community. It is where the people gather, especially during the long wintertime, when the few sources of social cohesion include storytelling, which both entertains and teaches. Considering the importance of ice dwellings for Inuit cultures, not surprisingly,

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<sup>38</sup> In 1972, during the celebrations of the three centennial of the Hudson's Bay Company, the documentary *The Other Side of the Ledger: an Indian View of the Hudson's Bay Company* offered an indigenous view about, actually a less romantic view about the HBC, showing its contribution to the impoverishment of Aboriginal Peoples. Directed by Martin Defalco and co-directed by Willie Dunn, with narration by George Manuel

*Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* presents it through a careful combination of lighting and camera angles.

In the selected sequence of the film, the action occurs inside the ice dwelling. The whole sequence corroborates the film's production diary as it asserts, "the goal of *Atanarjuat* is to make the viewer feel inside of the action, looking out, rather than outside looking in" (*Atanarjuat: the fast Runner*, DVD extras). From a very low and close angle, the first shots of the sequence show an elder as he adjusts the dome's apex to place the last ice block. A cut, and a medium shot focuses on a character that cuts ice blocks on the floor. The camera cuts again, and, from a close angle, focuses on the elder as he tries to find an ice block that fits the apex (fig.52). Since, the first one is too small, Atanarjuat picks up another block to give it to the elder (fig.53).



Fig.52: Stills from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: Close and low angles emphasise the role of elders in Inuit cultures.



Fig.53: Stills from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: medium shots and lighting create a powerful view of the *igloo*.

A cut, and a long shot shows Oki's sister, Puja, as she walks towards the *igloo*. As she enters the dwelling, a full shot focuses on her.

She brings water and offers it to Atanarjuat. There is an interaction of looks between him and the woman, while he drinks the water (fig. 54).



Fig.54: *Stills from Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: The interaction of looks anticipates some narrative events.

One of the hero's enemies deliberately hits his back, and he loses his balance. As he falls on the icy floor, the other men burst out laughing at him. Angrily, Atanarjuat intends to fight, but his brother wisely advises the protagonist to remain calm, avoiding the quarrel (fig.55).





Fig.55: Oki and his friend mock Atanarjuat, and his brother prevents the quarrel.

As the action inside the dwelling advances some of the important events in the narrative, the sequence also brings to view important narrative elements through a powerful manipulation of camera and lighting. The combination of close and medium angles with a careful lighting enhances the dimension of the *igluvigac*, especially when Puja enters the dwelling. Thus, the way it is represented allows us to consider it in symbolic terms. It is as large as to encompass a whole cosmos. At this supra-human level, the ice shelter is a metaphor for a world that is in danger to collapse as a result from the protagonist's wrong choices.

Because Atanarjuat focuses his attention on Puja, he cannot pass the right block to the elder. Atanarjuat fails. His physical fall is also a symbolic fall. Thus, the whole sequence is meaningful, as it introduces some issues that the narrative discusses further. Atanarjuat is a faulty hero. He breaks a taboo by stealing his rival's future wife, Atuat.<sup>39</sup> Taboos were a form of maintenance of social cohesion, and breaking them inevitably would lead to social disruptions. Atanarjuat also takes Puja as a second wife. Therefore, the hero contributes to the death of his brother.

Another important aspect of the *igloo* is its temporariness. The dwelling lasts as long as winter lasts. Given that, the *igloo* also suggests

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<sup>39</sup> In *Across Arctic America* (1927), one of the most famous of Igloodik's shamans, Avva, tells explorer Knud Rasmussen the reason for Inuit peoples to follow rules of taboo strictly. The shaman states, "We Fear" (130). Thus, taboos were created due to the difficulties of life, in respect to the elements with which Inuit peoples could not deal with in old times, namely diseases, famine, and so forth.

the transitory nature of things and people. In this sense, although it is fixed on the ground, the ice dwelling implies movement and transformation, which are at the core of *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*. The reestablishment of the community's balance depends on Atanarjuat's transformation. Atanarjuat has to move on. Only in movement, will he be able to transform himself, go back to the community's old values and restore its balance. Thus, another important metaphorical element in the film is running.

### **Just keep running and you'll find it: the art of editing**

The climax of the film is the 'chase' sequence, which completely alters the rhythm and pace of the narrative. The sequence begins when Atanarjuat flees from Oki and his companions, after they killed the hero's brother in his tent. Atanarjuat has to run for his life. Hence, the subheading of the film is 'the fast runner'. Therefore, at the core of the most dramatic sequence of the film is an emphasis on movement and velocity. Not surprisingly, Isuma's filmmakers explore some common techniques to reinforce the dramatic atmosphere that foregrounds the chase sequence.

In *Understanding Movies* (1990), Louis Giannetti, observes that movement also relates to psychological phenomena. According to him, the human eyes tend to read images from left to right. Thus, when a film sequence follows this expectation, the movement seems natural. Atanarjuat and his chasers run from the right to the left of the frame. Thus, in the light of Giannetti's statements, the character movement in Isuma's film increases the tense and uncomfortable atmosphere, which results from shooting the chase sequence from right to left.

According to Giannetti, the choices of angle and distance from which the camera captures the movement also contribute to the creation of meanings. As he explains, slower movements result from higher and longer shots. Conversely, closer and lower angles tend to emphasise movement, which, thus, seems more intense (81). As Atanarjuat runs, the camera focuses on him from different angles and distance. In some moments, close shots of the hero's feet 'speed up' his movement across the ice. Medium shots focus on Atanarjuat's expressions, emphasising his energetic movement. Low and close angles of the hero's feet contribute to the viewer's perception of increasing movement.

The dolly movement that follows Atanarjuat and his chasers also contributes to increase the perception of velocity. However, there are

moments in the sequence in which the camera apparatus does not move simultaneously with the characters. Focused from an extreme long shot from a stationary camera apparatus, the characters, Atanarjuat in particular, move out to the depth of the frame. This choice of camera angle and position contributes to our perception that the characters have slowed down. Running for his life, Atanarjuat does not know exactly where to go. He simply runs to nowhere (fig.56).



Fig.56: Stills from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: The manipulation of camera, as well as editing, increases the suspense of the chase sequence.



Apparently guided by a powerful shaman, Atanarjuat stops for a very brief moment, and, then, changes his direction. An extreme long shot focuses on the hero as he moves towards the camera. He comes closer and closer. A cut, the camera captures the image of his movement upwards, as the protagonist jumps to transpose the melting ice. A rapid cut, and the camera captures his movement frontally and from upside down. Another cut, the hero's feet hit the ground. Choices of camera angle and editing corroborate the intentions of the filmmakers, which, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, is to put the audience right into the action (fig.57).



Fig.57: Stills from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: the jump sequence. The turning point in the film. Atanarjuat finally goes towards the right direction.

Photographed and edited in a compelling way, the 'jump' is one of the most important moments in the 'chase' sequence, and, I maintain, in the overall context of the film's narrative. Atanarjuat needs to move forward, but he also has to move upwards. Not coincidentally, the powerful jump occurs after the protagonist is guided by the voice of a shaman. Before moving forward to cross the melting ice, the hero has to move upward. Given that, for propelling his movement, he also has to

increase his velocity. This is the moment when he really becomes a ‘fast runner.’ Yet, he is the ‘fast runner’ not because of physical movement and velocity themselves, but because finally he can go toward the right direction (fig.58).



Fig.58: *Atanarjuat*: a new perspective for the hero.

Whereas cinematography and editing creates a compelling chase sequence, another important point to discuss is the hero’s nakedness. On the one hand, he is fragile, completely dispossessed of the basic conditions to overcome the challenges of the harsh climate. On the other hand, as he is dispossessed of his garments, he is able to run faster than Oki and his companions. Although the chasers are protected against the cold, their movement and velocity are constrained because of the weight of their parkas. However, Atanarjuat’s nakedness may also be considered in symbolic terms. Naked, the protagonist is like a newborn child. Metaphorically, the skin tent from where he has to flee is the womb that gives him the painful birth. Only through the traumatic birth, will he become a new man. In this respect, two other elements are meaningful throughout the narrative, the water and the ice (fig.59).

In order to come into a new life, symbolically, Atanarjuat has to be like both water and ice. Therefore, it is an important point that the chase sequence occurs when the ice is melting. It is the moment when ice returns to the form of water. Like running water, the hero has the power to move towards his new direction. Now Atanarjuat is ready to contact ancestral knowledge, and ‘dress up’ important values, but from a new perspective. In this sense, it is also significant that he returns home

when the water is again transformed into ice. Atanarjuat is himself like ice. Transformed, he may stand still, thus restoring the balance that he had disrupted.



Fig. 59: Stills from *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*: the hero is painfully transformed into another man, a moment of ‘arrested motion.’

Considering the hero’s nakedness, it is relevant to notice that acting is also one of the remarkable aspects of Inuit filmmaking, which contributed to the success of *Atanarjuat*. Particularly notable in this sequence is Nataar Ungalaak’s performance especially in the chase sequence. In this respect, Ungalaak declares in the DVD extras:

Being there in the cold ice was tough. . . The hardest was when *Atanarjuat* was just about . . . to stumble in the water. . . That was the hardest part for me. . . To face that ice on my tummy. My tummy . . . my tummy was kind of numb for a day and a half.

Ungalaak’s performance, especially in the extremely hard sequence in which he runs naked across the ice, reveals one important aspect of Isuma’s style of filmmaking, the company’s emphasis on

communitarian work. Because of the obvious difficulty of the performance in the harsh environment, the actor could not fail, having only one chance to perform the action. In this sense, he demonstrates his strong commitment to the Inuit crew, resulting in the creation of the powerful images, such as the ones displayed in the chase sequence.

### ***Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner and Inuit current concerns***

Although it is about a millenary legend, *Atanarjuat* is a statement made from the perspective of the end of the twentieth century. Hence, I restate that the film is not a mere return to the past, but a (re) imagining that gives new meanings to the oral legend. Although *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* maintains some of the oral legend's main narrative elements, the screenplay came out through a very particular process. Paul Apak Angilirq pieced together different versions of the legend told by eight elders. Thus, the screenplay is a good example of how Isuma combines art with practical purposes and goals for social development.<sup>40</sup> *Atanarjuat's* script is currently the "first long piece of written literature in the Inuktitut language" contributing with an important tool to enhance literacy in Inuktitut (Melnyk 260). Given that, one of the most obvious signifying practices in *Atanarjuat* is the filmmakers' choice to shoot in the official language of Nunavut, the most recent Canadian territory, with a majority of Inuit population. The choice of language here is an assertion of power. Not coincidentally, *Atanarjuat* was being shot when Nunavut became an official territory of Canada.

Furthermore, Angilirq's procedure corroborates the idea that for Inuit peoples no one is the owner of a story. In this respect, Gillian Robinson poses, "each storyteller – being human – changes the story and in changing it, pays tribute to the true nature of memory, a constantly changing reminder that there is no one world or one seeing" (*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of high definition and memory in Inuit filmmaking* 8-9). Hence, the process of writing

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<sup>40</sup> According to Evans (*Isuma: Inuit Video Art* 2008), the history of Isuma and the other film companies in the Arctic have ties with the development of Inuit Art in the course of four thousand years. Art has been a tool for celebration of life. Yet, art has also been utilitarian. Due to the recent shifting in Inuit lifestyle, art has also been commodified. Commodification is a means to implement the few economic resources available in the region. Therefore, film is an example of what Faye Ginsburg calls "embedded aesthetics, in which art is intertwined with social concerns (368).

*Atanarjuat's* screenplay brings into view that storytelling is a multilayered practice. In other words, *Atanarjuat* is an act of a collective memory. It is active, dynamic, and corroborates the notion that, as stories transmitted orally are creative processes, they change according to the specific concerns of their creators.

So far, one may notice that the film provides a central reason for the course of actions: ambition for power, as, aiming at the camp's leadership, Sauri unscrupulously plots to kill his father. Moreover, the film presents a love triangle. This allows for the introduction of the theme of breaking a taboo as another threat to the balance of community life. *Atanarjuat* is the film's hero. Yet, he is faulty. When he takes *Atuat* from his rival *Oki*, a taboo is broken, disrupting community balance. Whereas, as discussed earlier in this chapter, taboos were tools for maintaining social cohesion in the past, this theme is still relevant in current times. In an interview to Kimberly Chun, *Kunuk* states that the story of *Atanarjuat* is cautionary. "It is about people who break taboo. Something bad is bound to happen" (Cineaste 18 June 2008).

*Puja* is an additional character in the film, since the oral versions of the legend do not mention her. From the beginning, she shows her interest in *Atanarjuat*. After becoming a second wife to him, she reveals herself as egotistic and individualistic. She refuses to work, perhaps aiming at disrupting *Atuat's* balance. *Puja* is a narrative tool for the development of another love triangle, one that completely changes the life in the camp. She seduces her brother-in-law, *Amaqjuat*. Her behaviour, as well as her revengeful nature, defies any sense of life in community.

In the oral versions, *Atanarjuat* is revengeful. He returns home and violently kills his enemies. In the film, he makes another choice. He may favour the community balance, not by killing his enemies, but by controlling his own desire for revenge. Furthermore, he may avoid the chain of revenge by ostracizing *Puja*, *Oki* and their companions. As the evil characters 'go to the land' alone, they are offered an opportunity to meet their ancestral knowledge and, maybe, reflect about their misbehaviour. Therefore, the film's ending is perhaps one of the strongest revisions of the legend. Individualism, violence, revenge, and killing do not fit current Inuit perspectives in a new political community, such as the one established in the recently created territory of Nunavut, of which *Igloodik* is part. Thus, one may speculate that one of the important subtexts of *Isuma's* film is that 'going to the land' and

to the old values and beliefs is more effective than any kind of repressive force by police or state to make a peaceful community.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, told from a current perspective through Isuma's film, the legend of *Atanarjuat* emphasises the problems of breaking communitarian connections, and offers a view about the way to solve the problems. It is important to recall the values of community, and many elements in the film contribute to such a discussion. The shot of beautiful geographic and human landscapes, the *igloo* building sequence and the astonishing sequence in which the protagonist runs across the ice suggest that the survival of the fictional community depends on their capacity to observe ancestral wisdom. Within this perspective, the film suggests that the Inuit have the power to overcome current ruptures, by metaphorically placing the right building blocks of community: trust, love, compassion, patience, justice. These are timeless values.

Nevertheless, to be faithful to timeless values does not mean to ignore the importance of adaptation to new circumstances and modernity. In this sense, as protagonists and narrators of their own stories, contemporary Inuit filmmakers may (re)signify their cultures for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike. One may say that, whereas *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* emphasises locality, it also speaks about issues that are at the core of any other cultures in the world, representing Inuit not as stereotypes, but as human beings that feel anger, love, compassion, passion, jealousy, like any other people. Therefore, Isuma's film is a statement that Inuit are not exotic people, objects of curiosity, but actually 'the humans.'

## **2. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2007): Inuit Histories from Inuit Perspectives**

This section is about *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2007), Isuma's second fictional film, which is set in the early 1920s. By that time, the contact between Inuit and the European whalers, traders, and missionaries had already deeply transformed the lifestyle in the Arctic.

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<sup>41</sup> Ostracism is not an abstract issue in Inuit cultures. *Issaituq* (2007), a fictional film by Inuk filmmaker, Bruce Hauli, concerns the issue of ostracism in current times. A young Inuk character commits a crime, and the community sentences him to go to a remote camp. In the end, there is redemption, as, after spending a time completely alone in the land, the young man has an epiphany, and realizes the true way to follow.

Concerned with the preservation of Inuit cultures, which, he believed, would vanish with the continuous European influence on Inuit ways of life, the Danish-Inuit folklorist and explorer, Knud Rasmussen, set a number of expeditions to the Arctic, which are known as Thule Expeditions (Rasmussen 1927).

Rasmussen was a fluent speaker of Inuktitut because his mother was Inuk. Therefore, the Danish explorer did not have a theoretical perception of the language. Rasmussen ‘lived’ it. Hence, he could communicate very proficiently with Inuit peoples. Thus, he recorded in writing Inuit songs, legends, and rituals. According to William Thalbitzer, Rasmussen’s method was singular because he could record the Eskimos’ texts as they were dictated to him, and translate them afterwards (“Knud Rasmussen: In Memoriam” 588).

During the *Fifth Thule Expedition*, Rasmussen travelled from Greenland to North America and, from there to Russia in the longest dogsled journey across the Arctic. He did not travel alone. His team included a number of people, namely the naturalist and photographer Peter Freuchen, and the cartographer Therkel Mathiassen. The expedition resulted in twelve volumes of scientific accounts known as *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition*. Each of them encompasses extensive information about every single Inuit group that Rasmussen and his companions visited. He also wrote *Across Arctic America* (1927), the popular narrative account about his journey. Other members of the crew, such as Mathiassen, also wrote a number of scientific accounts about the expedition.

In the spring of 1922, Rasmussen and his crew visited the region of Igloodik, where they met one of the most famous Inuit shamans, Avva. The explorers witnessed the shaman and his clan’s struggle to remain faithful to Inuit belief systems, which were being replaced by other values and practices, namely Christianity, trade, and settlement. Avva and his family’s stories are recorded in the volume *Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos* (1929) as well as in *Across Arctic America* (1927).

Eighty-five years after the *Fifth Thule Expedition*, Isuma’s *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* premiered in Canadian theatres. One expectation that the film’s title raises is that Rasmussen is the narrator or a central character in the fictional account by Isuma. In this textual analysis, I focus on how, as the narrative develops, one may say that the great characters and narrators in the film are the Inuit storytellers, or

even the Arctic landscape that earlier Isuma's productions, such as *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*, had already celebrated. Considering this purpose, this analysis provides a close reading of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, focusing on some of the elements that contribute to a powerful representation of the Inuit in the film.

During the Fifth Thule Expedition, Rasmussen's crew took many photographs, which figure as important elements in the Danish explorer's books. Hence, it is not a coincidence that *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* also emphasises the subject matter of photography, which, as an important theme in both the opening and closing credits sequences of the film, literally 'frames' the narrative. Given that, photography becomes a *motif*, operating symbolically in the narrative, and allowing us to make sense out of the film as it comments about the colonial history of the Arctic. Furthermore, an interesting possibility is to consider that, through the theme of photography, the filmmakers suggest that they do hold control over the creative process of visual production.

### **The opening credits sequence and the world(s) of a photograph**

The opening credits sequence of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* presents the whole process of production of a black and white photograph, which is shown at the end of the sequence. The action takes place in the interior of a small wooden cabin.<sup>42</sup> On the left side, a Western lamp hangs from the ceiling, illuminating an elder Inuk man and a young Inuk woman sitting in the background. At the forefront, a metal kettle is hung from above, staying over a *qullip*, the traditional Inuit oil lamp.<sup>43</sup> An elder woman stands up behind it. The characters look straight at the camera, as it focuses frontally on them.

While the credits appear on the screen, the elder woman pays close attention at an Inuk character, who has just entered the onscreen

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<sup>42</sup> As it is mentioned in the screenplay for *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, the Inuit are in the cabin of a famous ship, Captain George Comer's schooner *Era*, which got stuck in the ice by the Repulse Bay (*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of memory and high definition Inuit storytelling* 288).

<sup>43</sup> Isuma's sister company Arnait produced the documentary *Qullip* (2007) in which Inuit women explain its functions, way of working and symbolisms ([www.isuma.tv](http://www.isuma.tv)).



space, coming from the right off-screen space. The camera focuses on his back. Other characters, one after another, also come from the right off-screen space. The credits state that the film is about “a series of events reported in ‘The Journals of Knud Rasmussen’”. Gradually, the characters take positions in the limited space. Some of them stand up in the background. The elder woman moves from the right to the left side of the frame, and a smiling woman wearing a richly embroidered Inuit parka, stands behind the *qullip*.<sup>44</sup> The youngest woman in the group sits at the forefront (fig.60).



Fig.60: Stills from *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*: lighting and the organization of *mise-en-scène* are relevant in the opening credits sequence of the film.

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<sup>44</sup> The screenplay tells us that the woman in the embroidered parka is Shoofly, who, as many people believe, was Comer's lover. According to the documentary by Arnait, *Inuit Piquingit* Shoofly's embroidered parka was taken by Comer to America, and now the rich garment is in a museum in the US ([www.isuma.tv](http://www.isuma.tv)).

Captions set the narrative's place and historical time "Arctic Canada, 1912". The youngest woman keeps the *qullip*'s fire by manipulating the blubber on it. Finally, the smiling young Inuk man who organized the group sits next to her. Immovable, all the characters look straight at the camera (fig.61).

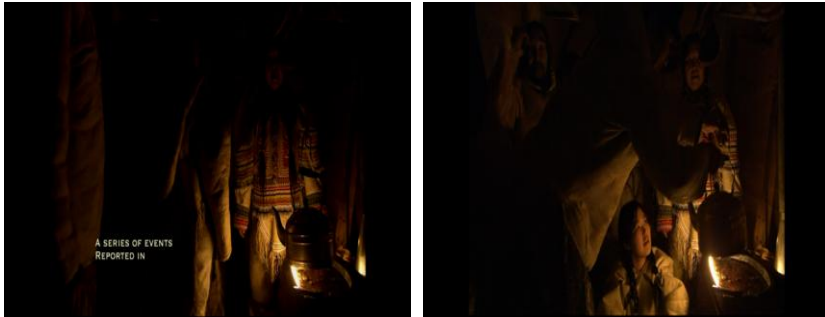


Fig. 61: Stills from *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*: Lighting, organization of the *mise-en-scène*, and camera angles highlight Inuit elements.

The image freezes, turns into sepia, and finally into the black and white photograph, which is shown at the end of the sequence. As the camera zooms in slowly, it closes upon the face of the young woman at the foreground of the frame. Voice over she begins to narrate the story in Inuktitut language, subtitled as follows. "I am called Usarak. Though I was named Apak when I was a young woman, during the time of the story I am telling you now" (fig.62).



Fig.62: *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* opening credits sequence: the representation of an early ethnographic photography. From a current perspective, it is a statement about Inuit creative power.

In order to provide an interpretation for the sequence described above, it is important to consider one essential element in the photograph, the frame. In *A Imagem* (2005), Jacques Aumont brings to view the importance of the frame, which he defines as a border whose function is to show that an image has a limited character. Aumont points out two types of frame. The first one is the “object-frame”, which is necessarily a material, perceptible border, such as the wooden frame of a painting or picture. The other is not a material frame, but a conceptual, less tangible border, which he calls “limiting-frame” (104). In each case, the frame gives the image its format and size, showing a world that is perceptibly apart from its outside. Then, one of the functions of the frame is to give access to an imaginary world, the diegetic world within the borders of the frame.

The second world is outside the frame, thus being invisible in the photograph. As Stanley Cavell remarks, “the virtual presence of the rest of the world and its explicit eviction are as essential to the experience of the photograph as it is what it presents explicitly” (qtd. in Dubois, 179). Therefore, considering that the world outside the frame is as important as what is visible in the fictional space of the frame, one may create meanings from the fact that Isuma’s filmmakers present the whole production of the photographic act, thus emphasising that it is a partial view, which is limited by a frame.

### **The eyes of the photographer and the colonial framing**

At first glance, the photograph in the opening sequence of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* is very simple. It is a *tableau vivant* of a group of Inuit people in a small wooden cabin. However, a further examination shows that the treatment of space in the photograph is much more complex than one may initially assume. Whereas there is not an “object-frame”, there is a “limiting-frame” separating the world within the frame from ‘the rest of the world’. The diegetic photographer creates the ‘limiting-frame’, as he selects the subject of the photograph. Thus, the space within the frame represents a vision of a world apart, whose perception is made singular by the process of selection, as described above.

Considering that the selection of the world within the photographic frame is necessarily partial, it establishes a relationship between the eyes of the photographer and his/her subjects as they are

organized within the photograph's *mise-en-scène*. In other words, as Aumont reminds us, the framing establishes a 'truth' from the photographer's perspective, which invariably is translated into assessment of what the subject of representation (2005).

*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen's* screenplay tells us that the photographer is the historical figure of Captain George Comer, although he is never visible or mentioned in the film (fig. 63).<sup>45</sup> The fictional Comer's photograph displays an 'objective' image of Inuit 'reality', suggesting an untouched Inuit culture. However, the image he depicts is paradoxically uncanny because it seems more 'real' and 'coherent' than 'reality,' especially considering the growing interaction between Inuit and non- Inuit worldviews at the time the narrative is set.



Fig. 63: *Inuit Pigutingit*: Comer's archival photograph of Shoofly in her richly embroidered parka . *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen's* opening credits presents her in the traditional garments. Above, on the right, a photograph of the historical Captain Comer ([www.isuma.tv/hi/en/isuma-productions/inuit-pigutingit](http://www.isuma.tv/hi/en/isuma-productions/inuit-pigutingit)).

Another border, a diegetic frame, literally encloses the props and characters. It is the wooden cabin, a non-Inuit shelter. It is a "limiting-

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<sup>45</sup> According to Fred Calabretta, curator of the *Mystic Seaport at the Museum of America and the Sea*, Comer was an American whaler and also a successful amateur photographer and archaeologist. As Calabretta accounts, Comer made fourteen expeditions to the Arctic. Currently, there are thirty surviving journals and notebooks by the whaler. Moreover, he made sixty-five sound recordings of Inuit people, collected around four thousand artefacts for museums, made three hundred plaster masks of Inuit people, and took around three hundred photographs. Thus, the film's reference to Comer emphasises in especial the theme of ethnographic photography ([www.mysticseaport.org](http://www.mysticseaport.org)).

frame”, analogous to the Western ‘civilizing’ mission, which, by the time of the film’s narrative, aimed at imposing upon Inuit peoples a new lifestyle. One of the results of the ‘civilizing’ mission was the change of Inuit semi-nomadic life for a lifestyle based on settlement. In this sense, the wooden cabin as a diegetic frame may be considered from the perspective proposed in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatari’s *Mil Plateaus: Capitalismo e Esquizofrenia* (1997).

Deleuze and Guatari propose the concept of the “striated space” (52), which is marked by fences and walls that are at the same time limiting and limited. The “striated space” is the space of the sedentary, thus opposing the “smooth space” of the nomad (52).<sup>46</sup> In *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, the wooden cabin becomes the “striated space”, which is also implicit in the trope of cartography, conveyed by a map on the cabin’s wall. From this perspective, the cabin and the map allude to a colonial geography that was demarcating Inuit’s territories, and more importantly, their bodies and minds. In this sense, the cabin as a metaphorical frame has a rhetorical function of communicating important diegetic contents that the film’s narrative further discusses: the constraint of Inuit people by the colonial enterprise in the Arctic in the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **The control of the creative process**

While one may initially assume that *Isuma* merely corroborates the diegetic photographer’s view of an ‘untouched’ Inuit life, there are significant moments of subversion in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. As stated above, the opening credits sequence begins by presenting the whole process of production of a photograph. In this sense, the film discloses some of the current conceptions about the photographic process. Earlier assumptions about photography, considered it as devoid of control and intentionality, because photographs were products of mechanical recording.<sup>47</sup> However, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*

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<sup>46</sup> In the Brazilian edition, “striated space” is translated into “espaço estriado,” and “smooth space” into “espaço liso”.

<sup>47</sup> It is well known that the notion of photographs as mechanical recording established a cleavage between art and photography. Charles Baudelaire was the first to claim that photography was objective and for this reason, it should serve only the sciences. “But,” Baudelaire states, “if [photography] be allowed to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary, upon anything whose value depends solely upon the addition of

emphasises that there is a great amount of control and intentionality in the photographic process. Most important in the context of the film is that the fictional Comer is not the controller of the *mise-en-scène* for the diegetic photograph.

An Inuk character is in the position of controlling the creative process of the photograph's production. He strategically eliminates some non-Inuit elements from the scenery, namely, the kettle and the Western lamp. Therefore, he offers the photographer a view of an 'untouched' Inuit culture. Nevertheless, in the moment of the photographic act itself, the Inuk keeps his non-Inuit cap. More importantly, he smiles to the camera. Read against the grain, his gesture may be considered as a reminder that the Inuit offer the photographer a highly and consciously mediated portrayal of their culture. Thus, one may infer that the group consciously 'perform' an 'actuality', their 'Inuitness', before the fictional photographic camera.

### **Through Inuit eyes**

Besides the photographer's look, there is another look implicit in the opening credits sequence of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. In a distant future, Apak, now called Usarak, looks at the black and white photograph, signalling one important function of photography, the representation of time. Aumont reminds us that our vision happens in time, because we live in time and with time (*A Image* 2005). Thus, photographs imply not only a selection of space as described above, but also a selection of time. This brings into view the importance of the photograph sequence in the whole context of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. The black and white photograph explores what Aumont considers as "one of the most important cleavages regarding time" (76), duration.

As a product, the photograph becomes frozen in time, since the still image interrupts, immobilizes, and highlights duration, capturing a fractured moment; that is to say that the photographic image captures time. In *Câmara Clara* (1980), Roland Barthes works overtime to deny the photograph any possible efficacy in the present. According to him, "the photograph does not call up the past"; it does not "restore what

has been abolished (by time, by distance) but [ ] attests to what I see ‘existed’” (123 ).<sup>48</sup> Thus, restating that a photograph represents the melancholic passing of things, Barthes remarks that it “is without future” (134).<sup>49</sup> From his perspective, photographs encapsulate a temporal paradox of ‘here-now’ and ‘there-then’, in which there is only a single way: the present looks at the past, conveying death.

From Barthes’s perspective, one may assume that in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* the photographic subjects are suspended, frozen, fixed out-of-time and space. In this sense, the photograph puts its subjects in a black hole, a hole in time and space, out of history. Therefore, Usarak’s look at the photograph is a look at the things past and dead.

However, reading Barthes against the grain, Steve Edwards states that the ‘here-now’ and ‘there-then’ “must work both ways round”. According to him, the photograph “reminds[s] us of the unstoppable passing of time”. Nevertheless, the image “simultaneously brings a moment from the past ‘to life’ for us” (*Photography: a Very Short Introduction* 119 emphasis added). The opening credits sequence of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* does not focus on biological time that regulates the great natural rhythms. The sequence does not depict the time that a clock can mechanically measure, but a time that is felt with the help of memory. In this sense, it is worth to consider that the photograph highlights traces of the past, the effects of memory.

In the past, the diegetic Comer gave her a ‘congealed’ moment, a fragment of time. Usarak has the power to rewrite it in her own terms. Through her memories, she recreates the history behind the photographic act. Usarak’s memories signal a conflation between present and past, a collapsing of distance pointing toward the possibility of continuity. The moment ‘out-of-history’ of the photograph allows Usarak in the present to rewrite herself in history. Weaving the memories from outside of their context, Usarak reconstructs the past not

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<sup>48</sup> This is my translation for the Brazilian edition of Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*.

A fotografia não rememora o passado (não há nada de proustiano em uma foto). O efeito que ela produz em mim não é o de restituir o que é abolido (pelo tempo, pela distância), mas o de atestar que o que vejo de fato existiu. Ora, esse é um efeito verdadeiramente escandaloso. (123)

<sup>49</sup> In the Brazilian edition: photography is “desprovida de futuro” (134).

as something dead, but as a fiction, a story, which is ‘alive’. Within this perspective, since memory always takes place in the present, the photograph brings ‘life’, allowing her to become the gatekeeper of the community’s memories and life.

Thus, not coincidentally, she is the character that keeps the *qullip*’s fire, which figures as another important element in the narrative (fig.64). As the Inuk removes the kettle and the western lamp from the onscreen space in the beginning of the opening credits sequence, the *qullip* becomes the only source of light. For this reason, one may assume that the traditional oil lamp is not a mere prop, but operates actively, functioning in symbolic ways. The light of the *qullip* attracts the viewer’s attention to the right of the frame. In this sense, the traditional oil lamp emphasises the ‘margins’, which, literally become the dominant in the frame.



Fig. 64: Stills from *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*: the recurrent close angles on the *qullip* underscore its importance in the overall context of Isuma’s films.



### The closing sequences: walking through a “smooth space”

The closing credits sequence of the film illustrates my argument that to understand possible meanings in the photograph sequences, it is important to consider both what is inside and outside the photographic frame. The closing credits sequence presents a series of photographs from Rasmussen’s *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* and his narrative *Across Arctic America* (fig. 65). Rasmussen himself states that he was interested in the search for a culture that could make him “feel transported to another age; an age of legends of the past” (qtd. in Wachowich 125). Thus, one may infer that his photographs aimed at recording Inuit people and artefacts, being a ‘document’ of their lifestyles before they vanished.

The film displays Rasmussen’s photographs of historical figures that are characters in Isuma’s film, namely, Apak, Taparte, Ivaluarjuk, Avva, Orulu, Rasmussen, Mathiassen, and others. Therefore, one may also infer that the filmmakers pay homage to the Danish explorer’s efforts to preserve Inuit culture. Actually, it is known that Isuma’s filmmakers also rely heavily upon the works by Rasmussen and other Arctic explorers. As Ippellie states in “Walking both Sides of an Invisible Border”, Rasmussen contributed a lot to the preservation of Inuit cultural practices and traditions.

It is today’s present living generations who owe it to people like anthropologist Knud Rasmussen and photographer-historian Peter Pitseolak, to thank them posthumously with heart-felt reverence for the incredible effort they expended to help keep our ancestors’ voices alive and still kicking after all these intermediate years. (82)

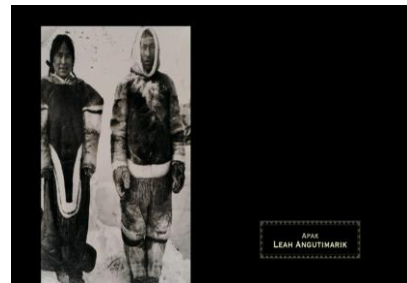
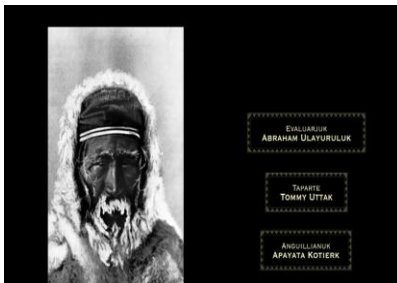




Fig. 65: Stills from *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* Ivaluarjuk, Taparte and Apak, Rasmussen. One may notice the similarity between the still (on the right) of a group of Inuit people in an *igloo* and the black and white photograph in the opening credits sequence of the film

One may also assume that Rasmussen's ethnographic photographs signal the ending of the film, since they are presented with some closing credits and an *aria* by Enrico Caruso as background musical *motif*.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, right after presenting the photographs, the filmmakers interpolate a long take of the icy landscape (fig.66), which gives a new meaning to the narrative's ending. Lasting almost two minutes, the take has as its great character the untamed, majestic, vast Arctic landscape. The non-diegetic musical *motif* is still the aria by Caruso, which as displayed in the sequence seems to call more attention to the splendid whiteness of the Arctic landscape. The *aria* also suggests the connection between the images onscreen and the photographs by Rasmussen, which were shown previously in the sequence.

From the left to the right of the frame, some characters travel in a dogsled. Since they are focused from a high angle and extreme long shot, one may only speculate that they are Avva and his wife Orulu. As we know from the film's plot, because the shaman and his wife are almost dying of starvation, they have no other choice, but to abandon

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<sup>50</sup>Enrico Caruso was a famous Italian tenor (1873 -1921). The legendary opera singer is also known for performing in Manchester in 1909. The following day 40.000 thousand people heard the recording of his concert broadcast from a gramophone player with a very big horn (Gerry Morris and Andrew McIntyre, *Insight Required*, <[www.lateralthinker.com/comment/insightrequired%20final.pdf](http://www.lateralthinker.com/comment/insightrequired%20final.pdf)>)

the traditional way of life. They have to join the neighbour camp where they will find food. There, the Inuit were already Christianized and, thus, Avva and Orulu move not only to another camp, but also to another world.



Fig. 66: *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*: The interpolation of a long take, of almost two minutes of duration, depicting Avva and Orulu as they travel through a ‘smooth space’, suggests that their stories are not constrained by the civilization mission. They may rewrite themselves in history.

As distant observers, we follow the couple until they finally meet another group of people, probably the already Christianized Inuit. One may think that the film corroborates the official history, telling us that Avva and Orulu were inevitably ‘whitened out’ and assimilated into the ‘civilized’ world. However, other meanings may be created from the images whether one considers the interpolation of the long take between two parts of the closing credits sequence. This interplay suggests the existence of a world outside the narrative’s ‘frame’, signalling a possibility of ‘continuity’ as the couple move across the desert of ice.

As Deleuze and Guatari state, because of their nature, the deserts of sand or ice do not lend themselves easily to the establishment of borders and frontiers. In the deserts of ice, no demarcations divide the

land from the sky, thus, there is no intermediary distance, perspective or frame. Only traces of people's trajectories mark the desert. Yet, these traces are temporary, as they are easily erased by snow or wind (52). Therefore, the desert is a "smooth space" that rejects the conceptions of borderlands, being the place across which the nomad moves. However, this movement is not at random, since the nomad knows exactly where to go when moving from one place to another in the territory (52).

In the light of Deleuze and Guatari, one may create important meanings especially through a comparison between the opening and closing credits sequence of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. Whereas in the beginning of the film, the characters are constrained within the space of a wooden cabin, in the end of the narrative, Avva and Orulu move freely in the vast landscape, towards the out-of-frame space. Thus, because the film visually emphasises that the characters travel through a "smooth space", the narrative itself rejects closure, suggesting the effacement of temporal and spatial borders. In this sense, the film suggests that Avva and Orulu will have a possibility to rewrite themselves in history, as their stories become known from time to time.

### **Conclusion**

The closing credits sequence of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* underscores an important point, which is discussed from the very title of the film. While acknowledging the 'scientific' and written accounts as valid and important sources for current (re) creation of Inuit cultural sense, the film's title, when it is considered within the context of the whole narrative, subversively questions the assumptions that Isuma's fictional film is an account solely based on Rasmussen's perspective. Therefore, the film points towards the idea that the Danish explorer's version of Inuit history is only one among other important versions. This idea becomes evident in the opening credits sequence when Usarak begins to tell the story from an Inuk perspective. Throughout the narrative, Avva, Orulu and others also add their view to the 'official' history of Igloodik.

As soon as the narration begins, what prevails is the notion that stories are not subject to ownership. In this sense, I corroborate Robinson as she states, "different storytellers add their own sense of memory, space and time to any narrative" (*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of high definition and memory in Inuit filmmaking* 7). Given that, like *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*, *The Journals of Knud*

*Rasmussen* is an act of collective memory, underscoring the point that storytelling is active and dynamic. As creative processes, they may be envisioned through different media, Rasmussen's written accounts, Usarak's oral storytelling and Isuma's digital filmmaking. Like the fictional Usarak, through their creative efforts Isuma's filmmakers may look at the past, shedding light to it, and resignifying it for present and future generations. In this sense, the two fictional films analysed in this chapter corroborate Marlene Brant Castellano's statements about the interplay of indigenous traditions and current technologies: "the knowledge that will support their [Aboriginal cultures] survival in the future will not be an artefact from the past. It will be a 'living fire', rekindled from survival embers with the materials of the twentieth first century" (30 emphasis added). In the light of Castellano's words, one may say that Inuit filmmaking becomes symbolically a *qullip*, and 'writes with fire' a beautiful version of Inuit history, their art and their current struggles, through the visual power of the Arctic cinema.

## CHAPTER III

### FINAL REMARKS

As pointed out in this research, there is a substantial critical and theoretical debate about culture and identity in Canada, which includes the ‘category’ of Aboriginal cinema. It is not only an academic area of research, but also a very productive cultural field. The body of academic writing about Aboriginal films has grown in recent years. In addition, as I could experience in Canada, there is a growing body of specific spaces for dissemination of Aboriginal films. Just to name but a few, the *ImagineNative Film and Media Festival* in Toronto, *Winnipeg Aboriginal Film Festival*, *Dreamspeaker Film Festival* in Edmonton, and *Cowichan International Aboriginal Festival of Film and Art* in British Columbia. Aboriginal films have also crossed boundaries, entering mainstream arenas of film screening worldwide. This broader circulation highlights the importance of Aboriginal film for the (re) creation of meanings of aboriginality for both natives and non-Natives alike.

Therefore, as the increasing academic and public interest in the field suggests, the richness of Aboriginal (or Native, Indigenous, Fourth World, First Nations and so forth) cinema comes to the foreground. In this sense, this dissertation looked at four films as they illustrate that Aboriginal cinema is an important counter space for the dissemination of ideas and contentions, especially regarding geographic and imaginary borderlands between indigenous peoples and mainstream cultures in a multicultural democracy as Canada has historically situated itself.

Aboriginal films bring to view languages, identities and histories that were suppressed for the creation of a ‘coherent’ nation-state, thus, as Melnyk poses, reminding us of the “nationalisms” of the Canadian ‘First Nations’. In this respect, Melnyk asserts that Aboriginal cinema is considered as one of the three traditions in Canadian cinema, along with the English-Canadian cinema and the French-Canadian tradition in Quebec, (Melnyk, 2004).<sup>51</sup> Aboriginal cinema embraces the path of

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<sup>51</sup> In *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004), Melnyk frames the history of Canadian

Quebec filmmakers in the 60s and 70s, “when a profound political project energized the arts” (264). While Melnyk stresses the political concern of Aboriginal films, he also reminds us of their artistry. Given that, in this dissertation I also put forward the importance of looking at what makes Aboriginal films effective, powerful, moving, beautiful, works of art. This is how one may consider Aboriginal cultures (purposefully in the plural), which are represented in Aboriginal films, as complex, rich and varied as their producers are.

In *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, as Alanis Obomsawin focuses on Waban-aki craft, she also creates a documentary that is aesthetically appealing. The filmmaker interweaves photography, interviews, music and storytelling. Through all these elements people convey their memories, and create meanings of being Waban-aki in current times. Memories also emerge as the filmmaker describes the beautiful colors of the splints and the smell of the sweet grass. Memories come powerfully like the sound of the drum and in Obomsawin’s voice as a singer, storyteller and filmmaker. Thus, as she carefully combines sounds and images through a rich cinematographic style, the filmmaker communicates ideas and emotions in a special way.

To make meanings out of the historical world, Obomsawin attempts at moving us bodily. Therefore, *Wabanaki: People from Where the Sun Rises* appeals to all human senses: auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, visual, and gustatory. Thus, it is within the perspective of rhetoric and aesthetics that Obomsawin structures her work in the same way the basket makers weave their baskets. Her documentary suggests culture as a complex weaving of elements that have crossed or antagonized in the historical encounters between Waban-aki and non-Waban-aki peoples.

As discussed in Chapter I of this dissertation, Neil Diamond’s *Reel Injun* is also the art of editing, as he intersperses interviews, photo-

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cinema within the terms of two competing national projects, the English Canadian and Quebec cinemas, which he defines as two of the gods in the pantheon of cinema in Canada. Zeus is the god of Hollywood that has influenced English-Canadian cinema, whereas Athena is the voice of France that has haunted Quebec traditions. According to him, the third god is the Aboriginal cinema, which “has emerged from his long, voiceless exile during the period of Euro-Canadian conquest to reject both Zeus and Athena and remind the world of the resurgence of First Nations nationalisms within Canadian identity” (9-10). Melnyk proposes this analogy to highlight the multiple paths of a ‘national’ cinema in Canada, and to develop the argument that Canadian cinema has been incredibly ‘foreign’ to its own public.

graphs and archival footage to discuss the history of Hollywood's portrayal of indigenous people. In the beginning of the documentary, one may assume that Diamond is going to tell once more the same story that has been told repeatedly. Nevertheless, in the opening sequences, the Cree filmmaker subtly states that he presents another story, as he interpolates some shots of various Westerns depicting battles between Indians and the American Cavalry. Within this archival footage, the filmmaker interposes a very brief shot of the famous chase sequence of *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner*, in which the homonymous protagonist runs naked on the ice, fleeing from his chasers. Therefore, Diamond asserts that *Reel Injun* is not a mere recollection of images and interviews about Hollywood's Indians. It is an assertion about the power of Aboriginal cinema to take dominant discourses and subvert them, with humor, in favor of a representation of and from the marginalized cultures.

Iglolik Isuma's films perfected the art of 'writing with light,' which is at the core of photography and cinematography. Both *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* are effectively shot so that, as the filmmakers manipulate camera, light and soundtrack, one may even hear and 'feel' the cracking as the characters walk on the icy landscape. The representation of the landscape becomes a statement that Inuit peoples are not mere victims of a harsh environment. As portrayed in both films by Isuma, the Arctic landscape is colorful, defying any notions of a homogeneous frozen North. Therefore, choices of color and lighting contribute to the creation of images that emphasize that the Arctic is plenty of life.

Through the combination of narrative elements and cinematographic strategies, including, cinematography, *mise-en-scène* and editing, both documentaries and fictional films disclose cultural elements, which suggest important meanings of aboriginality and resistance to hegemonic discourses. *Waban-aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* focuses on the art of baskets, canoe building and carving, which are not only material culture, but also important metaphors of the relationships between people, their environment, their history, their past, present and future.

In *Atanarjuat* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, beautifully shot images of igloo building highlight that ice dwellings are not mere shelters. They are also statements about the power of Inuit peoples to overcome challenges posed by the Arctic environment. More important, the ice dwellings as portrayed in Isuma's films also emphasize certain



cultural practices that are at the core of the Inuit belief systems, namely the importance of working in team and doing things that are relevant not to the individual alone, but to the whole community.<sup>52</sup>

Lighting in both of Isuma's films is meaningful as it contrasts the hues of the ice and the oranges of the *qullip*'s fire. Therefore, as the cinematographic style symbolically 'writes' Inuit stories with 'ice and fire', it suggests that life in the Arctic results from an integration of different elements. However, difference does not necessarily mean incompatibility. The wise combination of the two different elements, ice and fire, has favored Inuit peoples for thousands of years. One may extend this metaphor of ice and fire to a broader context, considering that the respect for difference is essential for all human relationships.

Even when *Reel Injun* takes very 'American' symbols, the car and the road, for instance, the filmmaker invests them with new meanings. As discussed in Chapter I of this dissertation, the 'rez' car may be considered at least in two different ways. The car is symbolically an assertion about technological advancements. Thus, as a prop in Diamond's documentary, the car is a *motif* that contributes to develop the argument that Aboriginal people occupy a space in modernity and, thus, they are not confined in non-technological world. Nevertheless, it is a restricted space because of the unequal economic and social conditions, which are suggested by the image of the car that barely works.

However, since signs may be read in multiple ways, the vehicle, as a prop in Diamond's documentary, may also be seen as a statement about the Native power to use tools at hand to overcome the inequalities. In this metaphorical sense, the choice of props in *Reel Injun* may also be considered as a statement about the conditions of Aboriginal cinema itself. This emergent cinema brings into view important cinematic innovations, namely the successful films by Isuma. Nevertheless, Abori-

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<sup>52</sup> Concerning this emphasis on community, in *Isuma: Inuit Video Art* (2008), Evans remarks that working in community is at the heart of Isuma's film practice. According to him Isuma's films are the conduits for Inuit traditions, rituals, and stories, contributing to the (re)imagining of the cultural past. In order to portray traditional Inuit past, costumes are prepared, tents and Igloos are built, tools are made, make-up is applied, rituals and traditions are enacted. These activities are accomplished in a community-based work, highlighting the strong sense of locality and group identity at Isuma. In practical terms, Isuma's film production contributes to increase the number of paying jobs in the region. Given that, as Evans maintains, Isuma reflects Inuit culture not only through film content, but also through the particular approach to work.

ginal cinema also has to face important challenges, namely the difficulty to produce and disseminate indigenous films.

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, the NFB, through the Aboriginal Filmmaking Programme, is the major sponsor for Aboriginal films. Although the NFB is concerned with the development of an Aboriginal film community in Canada, as Gittings poses, “money is available primarily for the support of documentary, although other genres will be given consideration” (215). Accordingly, Restoule observes that the result is that the documentary has become the major genre for Aboriginal expression in film. Although the NFB is internationally acknowledged and, as Restoule maintains, the “documentary form is effective in opening up the possibilities for greater complexity and variation in Native perspectives” (95), the documentary genre has not been so effective in triggering an international audience.

In respect to Aboriginal fictional film production, the conditions are even more unfavorable. According to Restoule, “Most would-be First Nations directors and producers are unable to obtain creative control of large budget fictional films” (93). Besides the problem of budgeting, Aboriginal film, especially fictional films, also faces the challenges of distribution. As Mathew Pettit states, “conventional film distribution only reaches twenty percent of the world’s Indigenous people” (189). Concerning Canada, as Pettit states, there is a circular process, “without markets, no distributor is forthcoming; without distributor, no new markets are being created; finally, without either, no new films are being produced” (190). Similarly, Melnyk states, Aboriginal films “do not have major impact on public consciousness in general, though they play significant roles in their respective communities” (265).

Maybe Isuma’s model of creating film collectives and investing in new technologies, namely digital video and internet, could be a solution for implementing a strong Aboriginal film production and circulation. Nevertheless, there is still an increasing debate about whether digitalized media will rise or demise Aboriginal cultures. The following quotations from Ginsburg’s “Rethinking the Digital Age” illustrate such debates.

Wasn’t it the Hopi that warned of a time when the world would be circled by a spiders’ web of power lines? That time has come....There is no doubt that First Nations Peoples are wired and ready to surf and chat. It seems like a distant memory

when the tone of discussion about computers, interactivity, and aboriginal people was filled with prophetic caution. Ironically, the image of Natives is still firmly planted in the past. The idea that Indians would be on the frontier of a technology is inconsistent with the dominant image of “traditional” Indians. (Rickard qtd in Ginsburg 2008, 288)

So seductive is the power of the ICT medium that it might only appear to remove centralized control out of the hands of government and into the hands of the people, giving them the notion of ... empowerment. While ongoing struggles for self-determination play a complex role in the drive to bring the information age to indigenous communities in Australia and around the world, it can be argued that self-determination within one system may well be a further buy in to another. (Latukeyu, 2006, 4 qtd in Ginsburg 2008, 288)

As Ginsburg maintains, at the core of the above statements is a fundamental question about “who has the right to control knowledge and what are the consequences of the new circulatory regimes introduced by digital technologies” (“Rethinking the Digital Age” 4). In a world where most of the resources, wealth and power are in the hands of economic and political elites, Aboriginal film may be visionary and utopian. It may not be the solution for social and economic problems indigenous peoples face, since, as Lewis poses, “there is no agreement about the impact of cinema as an engine for promoting social changes (141)”. In other words, there is no guarantee that Aboriginal cinema will yield the results it wants. Nevertheless, as Cornel West states in “The Politics of Cultural Difference”, “there is a guarantee that the status quo will remain or regress if no pressure is applied at all” (20). Similarly, Aboriginal writer and activist Lee Maracle states that there are few tools available for the rebuilding of Aboriginal cultures. Nevertheless, she also poses, “rebuild we must” (1996 x).

I consider Aboriginal cinema as an important tool to rebuke the ideological images that have circulated in the mass media especially in films, and have affected the lives of ‘real’ indigenous peoples. Therefore, as Aboriginal filmmakers such as Obomsawin, Kunuk, Diamond,

and many others create powerful images of indigenous cultures, it is one more step to bring unheard voices and new perspectives to the screen. However, Aboriginal cinema is also important in a broader context.

Many Aboriginal films put forward ways of viewing that are important for both Natives and non-Natives alike. This is not to claim an essentialist position, but to emphasize that the films analyzed in this dissertation raise awareness of the importance of paying attention to indigenous epistemologies, which have very often been neglected in the academic space. In this respect, Lewis observes that the exigencies of the academy have made it “an unwelcome home to alternative ways of knowing”, demanding that scholars who approach indigenous issues “strip away the sacred and the perplexingly unfamiliar to create ‘legitimate’ forms of intellectual knowledge” (185).

One important issue is to consider the power of indigenous film to use indigenous episteme to portray issues that are significant both locally and globally. Examples come from Isuma Productions, which has recently produced *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change* (2010), a collaborative work between Zacharias Kunuk and researcher Ian Mauro to document Inuit experience regarding climate change. Other indigenous filmmakers have produced important works concerning the environmental challenges in this new millennium. Warren Cariou’s *Land of Oil and Water* (2009) is a compelling testimonial about oil drilling, its repercussions on the ecosystems, and the costs not only for indigenous peoples, but also for all human beings.

In this sense, it is particularly important to make some considerations about other possibilities of study. Sometimes one has to leave one’s own circle to look at it from another perspective. The opportunity of going to Canada allowed me to think about the importance of Brazilian indigenous cinema.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, the role of this cinema within the context of indigenous cinema in the Americas still deserves further public and academic attention.

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<sup>53</sup> The project *Video in the Villages* has a history of more than a quarter of century of collaborative work between filmmaker Vincent Carelli and indigenous filmmakers in Brazil. In 2009, *Corumbiara*, a documentary about a massacre of Indians in northern Brazil, was awarded Best Film and Best Director in *Gramado Film Festival*, which is one of the most important Brazilian film festivals. *Corumbiara* went on to international acknowledgement, being selected for various festivals worldwide. In the most recent edition of the festival, another indigenous production, *Hiper-Mulheres* was awarded a prize for Best Montage ([www.videonasaldeias.org.br/2009/noticias.php?c=22](http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/2009/noticias.php?c=22)).

Thus, a comparative study about Brazilian and Canadian Aboriginal films may be a very productive opportunity for the analysis of the relations between the two countries, which, despite their differences, have much in common in respect to film production and circulation. As Rosangela Fachel de Medeiros poses in “Brazil/Canada, tão longe, tão perto: cinema e identidade nacional,” the US film industry haunts film production and distribution in both Canada and Brazil. Therefore, the national imaginary in both countries is highly influenced by images created by ‘American’ films. Both Brazilian and Canadian cinemas lack substantial audiences. Both cinemas rely heavily upon state sponsorship (*Interfaces Brasil /Canada*, 2004).

Therefore, an analytical possibility is to compare indigenous film industry in both countries as it reflects the complex contexts of Brazilian and Canadian ‘identities’ and their ‘national’ cinema(s). In this sense, an interesting possibility is to focus on how Brazilian and Canadian indigenous filmmakers discuss controversial themes, namely, the constructions of hydroelectric power stations in the Amazon Basin in Brazil and James Bay in Canada, and, thus, show the importance of indigenous people to influence the management of state affairs. In addition, a comparative study could offer a view of how Aboriginal filmmakers in both countries deal with film aesthetics itself.

As I come to the end of this dissertation, it is also important to review one of my initial concerns. As I proposed in the introduction, my intention was to present a view of the richness of Aboriginal cinema in Canada. This could be considered as a pretentious goal, because I am neither Canadian, nor an indigenous person. There were many challenges, including the limitations of knowledge about Aboriginal cultures. Thus, in the beginning of this project, I felt that I did not have the right to enter the ‘Aboriginal intellectual territory.’ Nevertheless, throughout the process, I realized that the feeling of being intrusive was caused by vestigial and erroneous thoughts that cultures are enclosed in themselves.

Given that, this dissertation also speaks about me as a learner, who wishes to share with others an experience of leaving my own circle, immersing in other sights, and being transformed in the process. In this spirit, I expect to have contributed with a view, a work of interpretation, which, although partial as any representation is, was done with a profound admiration for the alternative ways of seeing and living in the world. Aboriginal filmmakers offer views that make us reflect about the

important political and cultural projects of Aboriginal people to the future of what should be our 'shared' world. Hence, the importance of paying attention to them, as they speak to all of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. I feel rewarded for the opportunity of contributing to the discussion about the richness, creativity and power of Aboriginal film art. Therefore, corroborating Alanis Obomsawin, already quoted in this dissertation, I also state, "Honor the Artist(s)".

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