Visual Voices -

A FESTIVAL OF CANADIAN ABORIGINAL FILM AND VIDEO

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VISUAL VOICES:
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Visual Voices: A Festival of Canadian Aboriginal Film and Video

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Introduction

Three to four per cent of Canada's thirty-one million citizens claim Aboriginal ancestry. Following on historic treaties and agreements, the Government of Canada has entrenched in the Canadian Constitution specific rights for, and obligations to, Aboriginal peoples, who are identified as Indian, Metis and Inuit. Archaeological evidence suggests that Aboriginal peoples have inhabited the northern half of North America, now known as Canada, for more than 10,000 years, and in some areas for perhaps much longer. Aboriginal oral tradition maintains that indigenous peoples have maintained a sacred relationship to the land from "time immemorial."

For more than half a century the National Film Board of Canada has been making films about the Native peoples of Canada, who more recently have chosen to call themselves the First Nations. The thematic focus of these films is wide-ranging, addressing such subjects as social justice, racism, land claims, cultural preservation, political self-determination and the creative arts. Now numbering over four hundred titles, including documentary, drama and animation, these films reflect a substantial commitment on the part of the NFB to chronicle the evolving nature of Canadian Aboriginal life. Such films contribute to a larger national NFB project of recording the broader experience of all Canadians, in all their complexity and variety, to foster a stronger sense of national identity.

With public education and the dissemination of information at the heart of this project, filmmakers are freed from the pressures of creating work for the commercial market. Over the years, the National Film Board of Canada has become a world-renowned leader in the field of documentary film production. NFB films are made available to the general public and educational institutions at a modest price. Despite the impressive number of films produced on Aboriginal subjects, their presence in school curricula remains dependent on informed and enlightened teachers who consider Aboriginal topics worthy of inclusion in courses on Canadian history, culture and experience.

In the majority of these films, Aboriginal peoples have been employed as actors, consultants, researchers and narrators, but only recently as script writers and film directors. There are, of course, notable exceptions, among them the much honoured Abenaki filmmaker and social activist Alanis Obomsawin, who has been making compelling films for the NFB since the early 1970s, and Metis filmmaker Gil Cardinal, who has produced an impressive body of documentary and historical fiction since the late 1980s. They were the exceptions until 1991, when the National Film Board of Canada established Studio One. Based in Edmonton, Alberta, this innovative and intensive program trained Aboriginal peoples in all facets of filmmaking and video production. The intention was to develop and nurture a community of skilled Aboriginal professionals who could use film to tell their own stories, in their own words, using their own imagery. Many of the filmmakers featured in this collection developed their skills through Studio One or its successor, the current Aboriginal Filmmaking Program, established in 1996. Their films have been screened at international film festivals, receiving numerous awards.

Visual Voices: A Festival of Canadian Aboriginal Film and Video presents thirteen films by eleven Canadian Aboriginal directors, including Obomsawin and Cardinal, spanning the years 1987-2002. All are produced by, or in association with, the National Film Board of Canada. With the exception of Obomsawin, Cardinal and a few others, it may still be too early to discuss individual cinematic styles or confirm the existence of a shared Canadian Aboriginal film aesthetic. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some recurring characteristics in what is clearly an emerging cinematic genre.

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- **The film journey**. Several films depict a symbolic journey: a personal and cultural pilgrimage across the physical landscape to affirm a spiritual and communal connection to the land; sometimes it is a journey from past to present, to affirm the critical relevance of that past, and the continual living out of history; or the journey is a process of cultural catharsis and psychic healing in the wake of historic abuse and oppression; the journey may also be an instrument of personal discovery or a symbol of growing cultural empowerment.

- **The presence of strong women**. In this collection, Aboriginal women play a number of important roles: dedicated film directors, passionate community activists, authoritative narrators, keepers and conveyors of cultural knowledge, peacemakers, singers, artists, mothers, sisters and daughters. Their resolute presence before and behind the camera reflects a broader movement among Aboriginal women to reassert a position of traditional power and authority that has been diminished in patriarchal societies. (Even in films by male directors such as Greg Coyes, the narrators are often women.)

- **A connection to oral tradition.** These films create a critical space in which traditional Aboriginal narratives can be spoken, sung, performed and invested with new life. Communal knowledge and history can be preserved in the original language and recognized in a way that honours both the language and the speaker; cultural difference is affirmed and celebrated. For many, the preservation of language is the key to cultural identity. Several of the films in this collection feature indigenous languages and traditional songs on the soundtrack.

- **A cultural connection to the natural world.** Many of these films affirm the belief in a longstanding indigenous relationship to the land and all living things. It is a spiritual connection requiring constant ritual renewal through song, ceremony and prayer. For many, this relationship is the foundation of their Aboriginal identity. Oral tradition maintains that the natural world is a sacred gift from the Creator, to be treated respectfully and responsibly. Through traditional teachings embedded in language, Native peoples acquire the necessary knowledge of plants, animals and the environment to live in harmony with their surroundings. Such knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next. In many Aboriginal cultures, the planet is referred to as Mother Earth, and the North American continent as Turtle Island. These are not superficial references but symbolic of a close cultural bond to the natural world. Many filmmakers address the challenges that arise when this bond is threatened or broken.

- **Concepts of time.** There is an unhurried quality to many contemporary Aboriginal films. They are often slower paced than their western cinematic counterparts, reflecting the easy rhythms of oral tradition. Narratives unfold at their own pace, in their own time, like the cyclical changing of the seasons. Aboriginal filmmakers seem to understand this intuitively, patiently waiting to capture memorable moments on film. Their patience is a mark of respect for storytellers and stories. Aboriginal film narrative, like its oral counterpart, often disrupts the concept of linear historical time, unfolding instead in a kind of "mythic" time, where ancestral voices engage with those of future generations to inform current conversations and decision making. It is a multi-vocal approach to filmmaking in tune with oral tradition and affirming cultural continuity.

- **Confounding documentary conventions.** Aboriginal documentary filmmakers frequently position themselves within communities to tell communal stories expressed through the voices of many individuals. The line between personal and communal voice – between "I" and "we" – is intentionally blurred. Equally perplexing for some can be "historical reconstruction" or "dramatic re-enactment" to convey critical information or express cultural experiences that have no archival counterpart, no visible evidence. Moreover, as a visual repository of collective memory and a means of extending Aboriginal oral tradition into the future, documentary film must allow sufficient flexibility to embrace the mythic, historic and dreamworld dimensions of communal narratives.

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- **A sense of intimacy.** This video collection is distinguished by numerous moments of personal and cultural intimacy, scenes of joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, that can only come from a strong bond of trust and respect between filmmaker and subject. Acutely aware of the history of cultural misrepresentation in the mainstream media, Aboriginal filmmakers strive to present a more balanced and accurate reflection of Aboriginal experience, one with a more humane vision and a more personal voice. The filmmakers do not take this responsibility lightly. The patience and care they bring to their work is reflected in the many candid moments captured on screen.

- **Cultural resilience.** In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds and a devastating history, Aboriginal peoples have demonstrated a remarkable ability for cultural adaptation and transformation. Their collective refusal to vanish and assimilate to the dominant culture is a testimony to the strength and continued relevance of their traditions. These films bear witness to this spirit of cultural tenacity and vitality and an infinite capacity for survival.

- **A concern for cultural and cross-cultural education.** In presenting history from an Aboriginal point of view and reasserting the worth of traditional cultural values and practices, indigenous filmmakers are creating important visual archives for their communities, preserving the visions and voices of respected leaders and honouring individuals whose words and actions inspire. The potential of such films to educate and inspire, however, is not limited to the local community. In today's global society these films have the capacity to build bridges between cultures and combat ignorance and misunderstanding. Admiration and respect for personal integrity and human compassion are not culturally bounded.

Beyond the desire to validate cultural experience through film, Aboriginal filmmakers seek to radically alter the way that Canadian history is told, taught and understood, both at home and internationally. Through their work they seek to revise and enrich the national narrative, by inserting stories of indigenous experience captured on film and told in the strong voices of Aboriginal elders, artists, activists, singers, storytellers, clowns and children. Theirs are not the voices of the past but voices for the future – affirming a profound and compassionate Aboriginal presence in the national conscience, and underscoring a longstanding sacred bond and responsibility to the land.

The videos in this collection have been organized into six thematic segments: 1) the Oka crisis of 1990, 2) journeys through history, 3) Aboriginal women in the arts, 4) family and urban dynamics, 5) the wisdom and humour of elders and 6) relationships to the land. This Viewer's Guide provides a brief commentary on each video followed by discussion questions.

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PART 1. Pivotal Moment, Pivotal Film

***Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, Alanis Obomsawin, writer-director, 1993, 119 min.**

It is appropriate to open this Festival with one of the most acclaimed films in the National Film Board catalogue, produced by one of the most respected and honoured Aboriginal filmmakers in Canada. With *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, Alanis Obomsawin brings an important Aboriginal perspective to what is now referred to as "the Oka crisis" of 1990, a seminal moment in Canadian history that forever altered the way in which the government and citizens of Canada understand their relationship to Aboriginal peoples. It was an unsettling moment that still reverberates in the minds and public memory of many Canadians.

Winner of more than eighteen awards, *Kanehsatake* exemplifies a distinctive personal style of documentary filmmaking that Obomsawin has developed over three and a half decades as a National Film Board producer. Skilfully interweaving interviews with observations, and archival photographs with commissioned artworks, she brings emotional force to the presentation of information. Her potent combination of the lyrical and political, the personal and communal, is as much a hallmark of her work as her steady voice-over narration.

Kanehsatake chronicles the 78-day armed standoff that unfolded over the summer of 1990 between members of the Mohawk community of Kanehsatake, located next to the village of Oka, Quebec, and the provincial police (the Sûreté du Québec) and Canadian Army. What began on July 11, with the Mohawk blockade of a dirt road to protest the proposed expansion of a nine-hole golf course onto sacred burial grounds, quickly escalated into a national crisis following the still unsolved death of a young corporal in an aborted police assault on the blockade. Soon after, armed and masked Mohawk Warriors erected barricades on major highways nearby and took up positions in the surrounding forest, vowing to defend their lands to the death. In a show of solidarity, a second Mohawk community, Kahnawake, located just south of Montreal, blockaded the Mercier Bridge into Montreal, sparking mass confusion and major inconvenience. Other Native communities across Canada set up similar sympathy blockades while hundreds of individuals from as far away as Mexico converged on Oka to demonstrate their support for the Mohawks and call attention to the more widespread struggle for indigenous rights and Aboriginal self-determination. Oka became the unlikely flashpoint in this struggle, bringing a number of simmering issues to public attention.

Throughout the long hot summer, Obomsawin had cameras rolling on several fronts. Before the confrontation came to a chaotic, and, for the most part, bloodless conclusion on September 26, more than 2600 troops had been deployed to the two Mohawk communities to restore order. They came in riot gear and full battle dress, in tanks and in helicopters, unrolling endless bails of gleaming razor-wire onto the roads and into the woods. Something was terribly wrong in the true north strong and free.

Throughout the standoff, images of armed and dangerous Mohawk Warriors dominated the mainstream media while a succession of politicians condemned their lawless acts and callous disregard for democracy. Their behaviour was grievously "un-Canadian," they said, and therefore intolerable. The issues that provoked the standoff were mostly ignored.

These issues are central to the story Obomsawin recounts in *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance.* It is a decidedly different story from the one that ran on the nightly news, distilled down to two hours from more than 100 hours of footage gathered from both sides of the barricades, and from both Mohawk communities, at considerable personal risk to Obomsawin and her crew. Drawing on more than twenty years of filmmaking experience and a lifelong familiarity with Aboriginal storytelling traditions, Obomsawin constructs a compelling narrative that portrays events at Oka as merely the latest developments in a struggle for cultural survival that has been ongoing for almost three centuries. At the heart of this narrative is a tale of political deception, cultural suppression and flagrant land theft that few outside the Mohawk community have heard, until now. Obomsawin

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narrates their story in a measured and assuring voice.

More importantly, Obomsawin takes viewers inside the story to meet the women, children, elders and spiritual leaders providing strength and support for the Warriors on the front lines and on the front page. By taking her cameras behind the barricades, Obomsawin allows viewers to experience what it is like to be there and be Mohawk when the police and Army march on their communities. We witness events as they happen and experience a range of quickly shifting emotions. Obomsawin captures the chaos and confusion, the outrage and fear, the mounting tensions, and the unflinching resolve of the Mohawk people. As days turn into weeks, with no end in sight, we share their emotional and physical exhaustion as well. Sustaining them throughout is a spiritual commitment to protect the land and a communal commitment to improve the lives of their children and those of future generations. In the words of Brian Mike Myers, “We will at least be able to leave the earth knowing that while we were here we did all that we could to set in motion for them a better future.”

The provincial police and Canadian Army do not emerge as sympathetic defenders of democracy in this film, but merely extensions of an insensitive political system possessing a limited historical understanding of injustice and “un-Canadian” behaviour. It is not surprising to hear Mohawk spokeswoman Ellen Gabriel say, “We were fighting something without a spirit. There was no thought to it. They were like robots.”

After eleven weeks, and with autumn fast approaching, the Mohawks called an end to the standoff. Ronald Cross, the Warrior known to the media as “Lasagna,” observed, “Even if we’re not recognized as a nation, it’s brought all Indian nations together. In a way, our battle is won.”

Throughout the standoff, there were never more than thirty Warriors, nineteen women, seven children, one spiritual leader, and one traditional chief, behind the lines.

In July 1992, all but three of those charged with offences were acquitted by a jury. The cost to Canadian taxpayers eventually exceeded 155 million dollars.

In 1997, the Federal Government purchased the disputed land from the village of Oka to allow for the expansion of the Mohawk cemetery.

Obomsawin has since made three more films on events arising from the confrontation at Oka: *My Name is Kahentiiosta* (1995), *Spudwrench - Kahnawake Man* (1997), and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (2000).

A passionate advocate for social justice and indigenous rights, Obomsawin has sought to give voice to Aboriginal peoples throughout her filmmaking career. She has done this and more, providing those voices with faces, names, families, and personal and communal histories. Moreover, the many moments of cultural intimacy she has captured on film transcend both the moment and the cultural context. This may be her most profound contribution to the shaping of a closer Canadian community: bridging the gap between citizens and reaching across cultural and racial boundaries to touch us all.

Discussion

1. What can be learned from the experience of the Mohawks at Kanehsatake?

2. How does the presence of the filmmaker affect the events or our view of them?

3. How can a marginalized people alter the course of events affecting them?

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PART 2, Journeys through History with Greg Coyes

2a) *No Turning Back: The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, Greg Coyes, director, 1996, 47 min.

No Turning Back opens with images of the Mohawk standoff at Oka, Quebec, and Cree actor-narrator Tina Keeper recalling how she watched in disbelief, with her young son by her side, as those dark days in 1990 played out across her television screen. “How could this be happening in Canada?” she wondered. She was not the only one to ask.

In 1991, in the wake of the events at Oka, the Government of Canada established the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), a massive inquiry set up to investigate the grievances of Aboriginal peoples and to begin a process of national reconciliation. The Commission was comprised of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members. Over the next three years, they visited over 100 Aboriginal communities and heard more than 1000 presentations. In 1996 the commission submitted its report in five volumes. It remains the most thorough examination of Aboriginal concerns ever undertaken in Canada.

In *No Turning Back*, Metis filmmaker Greg Coyes records this historic process of consultation, employing a largely Aboriginal film crew to document over 300 hours of hearings. For the commissioners, it was an enlightening and emotionally exhausting journey. They quickly learned that the problems of cultural abuse and systemic neglect were more widespread and deeply ingrained than imagined. There would be no simple solutions, but there could be a commitment to change and cross-cultural healing.

Coyes intercuts the words of the commissioners with testimonials from individuals who welcomed the chance to finally tell their stories of struggle and survival, of forced relocation, alien education and cultural isolation. Their stories are disturbing, their faces not easily forgotten. In voices both eloquent and angry, weary and cautiously optimistic, they condemn past injustices and call for the creation of a new co-operative relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

Tina Keeper’s recurring on-camera narration, filmed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, anchors the film with a firm and authoritative presence. This authority is visually heightened by the tailored red jacket that she wears throughout, which recalls the dress uniform of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. As an actor, Keeper is widely known for her award-winning role as RCMP constable Michelle Kenidi in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s television series *North of 60.*

The inquiry was not structured to facilitate input from Aboriginal youth, yet woven throughout the film is a running commentary from a young Aboriginal hip-hop singing duo who repeatedly ask, “What’s so royal about this Royal Commission?” Their call for accountability, along with youthful energy, help focus the discussion on the future. Their playful scepticism of yet another government study of Aboriginal people (“the Indian problem”) is understandable, and, in hindsight, seems justified. To date, few of the RCAP recommendations have been implemented.

Discussion

1. How can the concerns of indigenous peoples be made known?

2. How do we get from studying a problem to addressing it?

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2b) *How the Fiddle Flows*, Greg Coyes, director, 2002, 48 min.

In *How the Fiddle Flows* Greg Coyes takes viewers on another historic trip across Canada, this time using the fiddle as a grand metaphor to tell a distinctly Canadian story, the birth of the Metis people. It is a story of mythic dimension. For Coyes, himself a Metis, this is a personal and communal journey. The well-known Canadian Metis actor Tantoo Cardinal provides the narration for this adventure. This is her history too.

Coyes weaves together two parallel tales in contemporary and historic time, retracing through music the westward movement of the French voyageurs in eastern Canada, and the Scots fur traders in the west. Both travelled by canoe along the interior waterways of the continent, intermarrying with Aboriginal peoples along the way and merging their cultures to give birth to the new Metis Nation in the West in the early 19th century. The Metis claim to be the original "true Canadians," – the "children of love," born of freedom and possibility – asserting a distinct hybrid history and language (*michif*) and a distinctive visual and musical tradition. At the heart of this hybrid heritage is the soaring sound of the fiddle, which has sustained the Metis as a people through years of cultural displacement and political oppression. In recent years, the fiddle has come to symbolize the spirit of Metis cultural revitalization.

How the Fiddle Flows offers a fresh perspective on Canadian history. Military encounters and political rebellion are not the focus here. The enduring spirit of the Metis people is. And it is most passionately expressed through the rhythms and restless energy of their music. Coyes travels the historic river routes to visit with master Metis fiddlers in their homes and film them in performance at community gatherings and festivals. It is a mostly joyous journey of rediscovery and cultural re-affirmation, marked by skilled musicianship, enthusiastic fiddle playing, and everywhere, the infectious celebration of traditional step-dancing. As the music unfolds, family histories are told. On occasion, exuberance is tempered with sadness as the sound of a high lonesome lament mourns the loss of promises left unfulfilled. But regret is disheartening, music is enlivening.

The rhythms of nature resonate with the pulse of the people throughout this film. Fiddle music dances across the prairie skies as sunlight plays on the waters where paddlers push on down the river. In scenes such as these, Coyes brings history into the present, visualizing that spirit of cultural exhilaration, and the belief that something rich and magical was about to enter the world in a land of unlimited space and opportunity. The same spirit of lightness and liberation is evoked in the description of a fiddler's smooth and gentle playing style, as one that can lift you off the ground and make you feel "like you're dancing on moccasins that are three inches thick."

In a 1982 amendment to the Canadian Constitution, the Government of Canada recognized the Metis as a distinct people. In 2003, historic Metis rights were recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Discussion

1. How do people of mixed ancestry find their place in a society?

2. Are there political implications to claiming a mixed heritage?

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PART 3, Heartbeat of the Nations: Aboriginal Women in the Arts

3a) *Singing Our Stories*, Annie Faziér Henry, director, 1998, 49 min.

In *How the Fiddle Flows* (Part 2 of this collection) Greg Coyes shows how music can sustain and re-energize the spirit of a people and become a symbol of cultural revival. He also demonstrates how this enlivening spirit can be captured on film and perpetuated.

Achieving similar success is *Singing Our Stories*, Annie Fraziér Henry's cinematic tribute to the creative impulse and musical legacy of Aboriginal women. Like Coyes, Henry takes viewers on a musical journey across the continent, in this case, from the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina to the northern Prairies and the northwest coast of Vancouver Island. Along the way we are introduced to the music of six Aboriginal women's collectives from six diverse geographic regions: Ulali, and the Monk-Sanders Family Singers from New York and North Carolina, the Women Singers and Drummers of Old Agency, Alberta, the 'Namgis Traditional Singers from British Columbia, the Zuni Olla Maidens from New Mexico, and Walela, from Tennessee by way of California. Changes in the physical landscape are mirrored in the differing cultural soundscapes, yet the voices of Aboriginal women remain strong throughout. The film is narrated in the Cree language by artist-actor and filmmaker Shirley Cheechoo.

Henry stresses the important and often overlooked role of Aboriginal women in maintaining cultural continuity by passing traditional knowledge down through the generations – from mother to daughter to daughter – in song, regalia and ceremony. Her film features an impressive mix of musical genres, from songs of the ceremonial drum to songs with obvious blues, country and contemporary folk influences. This diversity of sound suggests a rich and much larger world of Aboriginal women's music and experience that remains largely unrecognized and unsung.

The featured performers in *Singing Our Stories* clearly enjoy singing with one another and share a deep commitment to the music and the cultural traditions. The film contains many memorable moments, such as the exuberant front-porch performance by four generations of the Monk-Sanders Family Singers; Rita Coolidge and members of Walela gathered around the kitchen table, effortlessly harmonizing with the recorded voice of their Cherokee grandmother; and Jennifer Kreisberg of Ulali reflecting on the power of song to inspire and empower Aboriginal women while bringing pleasure to peoples from many different cultures.

Like the music in *How the Fiddles Flows*, the music in *Singing Our Stories* embodies a spirit of cultural survival and communal celebration. There are no singular voices of angst or anger here, no songs of protest or political dissent. Those voices undoubtedly exist but they are not the subject of this film. For Henry, it is the rich musical legacy of Aboriginal sisterhood and solidarity that deserves recognition. It is enough to "celebrate and pay tribute to the lives of the women who keep on singing because they must," and introduce them to a wider audience.

Discussion

1. How does women's music, passed down through the generations, sustain and enrich those who sing it?

2. How does this music enrich those who hear it?

3. What are the local examples of women's musical expression?

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3b) *Hands of History*, Loretta Todd, director, 1994, 52 min.

Before directing *Singing Our Stories*, Annie Fraziér Henry, who is also a composer and performer, contributed to the musical soundtrack of other NFB films, including *Hands of History* by Metis filmmaker Loretta Todd; the film opens with a women's honour song.

Todd's film is a fitting complement to Henry's, exploring Aboriginal women's creative expression in the visual and tactile arts through the work of four contemporary artists from western Canada: Joane Cardinal-Schubert and Jane Ash Poitras are multimedia artists from Alberta who blend modern materials with traditional symbols to create paintings, collages and art gallery installations; Doreen Jensen is an accomplished carver from British Columbia who works within the artistic tradition of her Northwest Coast heritage; Rena Point Bolton, also from British Columbia, is an expert basketmaker who shuns the label "artist," considering herself merely a woman being obedient to the teachings of her elders.

As the film opens, Doreen Jensen is delivering an address at the opening of the exhibition *Indigena: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years,* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa in 1992. In her remarks, Jensen notes the historic under-appreciation of Aboriginal women's artistic production, attributing it to the misapplication of Euroamerican aesthetic criteria, which established artificial distinctions between "art" and "craft." Finely woven basketry, exquisite moosehair embroidery, porcupine quillwork, intricate beadwork, and appliquéd ceremonial robes, the majority made by women, were thus relegated to the minor category of craft. Minimized in importance was the integration of these artforms into the wider world of cultural expression that includes song, dance, poetry, and drama. It is this world of expressive beauty that Todd seeks to capture in her film.

Todd values traditional and contemporary arts equally and reflects this belief in the structure of her film. Throughout, interviews with the four artists are interwoven with images of their varied works and practice. The resulting composite or communal profile highlights the pivotal role of women's artistic expression in the maintenance of Aboriginal culture.

All four artists praise the technical and artistic skills of the ancestors that inspired them. The discipline and dedication of their elders are reflected in their own practices. Each artist has devoted years to perfecting her art, viewing it as an important means of preserving and sharing cultural knowledge. *Hands of History* portrays each artist as an educator: Jensen assumes the role of public speaker and art historian; Rena Point Bolton conducts a basket weaving workshop with young students in northern British Columbia; Jane Ash Poitras explains to an Arizona art gallery owner the spiritual significance of her series of paintings "Shaman's Ride"; and Joane Cardinal-Schubert re-presents Aboriginal history to gallery visitors in a performance called *The Lesson*.

Coming full circle, Todd concludes her film where she began, with Doreen Jensen's address at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Jensen's concluding remarks, on the broader significance of Aboriginal arts and culture, become Todd's final thoughts as well:

> Canada is an image that hasn't emerged yet because this country hasn't recognized its First Nations. This whole foundation is shaky. If Canada is to emerge as a nation with a cultural identity and purpose, we have to accept First Nations art and what it has to tell us about the spirit and the land.

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Discussion

1. How do women's arts contribute to the cultural continuity of indigenous peoples?

2. What can they contribute to an understanding of national identity?

PART 4, Family Dynamics

4a) *For Angela*, Daniel Prouty, writer/co-director (with Nancy Trites Botkin), 1993, 21 min.

Cree actor Tina Keeper (*No Turning Back ,* Part 2 of this collection) plays the principal role in this award-winning drama set in present-day Winnipeg, Manitoba. The film recounts the true story of Rhonda Gordon (Keeper), an aspiring journalist and single mother who is subjected to racial taunting while waiting for a bus with her young daughter Angela (played by Tiffany Peters). Devastated by the effect this incident has on Angela's self-esteem, Rhonda resolves to find the young school boys who committed this thoughtless act and force them to take responsibility for their hurtful actions and racist remarks.

The event that inspired this film is all too familiar to members of many visible minorities. Rhonda's decision to fight back for the sake of her daughter is inspiring and empowering in its refusal to accept the status quo. Tina Keeper delivers a heartfelt performance as a woman who finds the courage to confront prejudice and to challenge racial intolerance. In the process, she finds her voice as a writer and the personal conviction to "look without fear into the shadows" to tell stories that can make a difference. Both Keeper and Gordon serve as role models for their commitment to raising awareness of social justice and their dedication to eliminating destructive cultural stereotypes.

The emotional impact is heightened by the brief testimonial, at the film's end, from Rhonda Gordon and Angela Saskowsky, the mother and daughter whose story inspired this work. Their words remind us that the struggle for respect and basic human dignity is ongoing.

Discussion

1. What can be done about racial taunting?

2. How can young people be helped to deal with it?

3. Can fear of difference be eliminated?

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4b) *Foster Child*, Gil Cardinal, director, 1987, 43 min.

The close relationship between mother and child depicted in *For Angela* was not something Metis filmmaker Gil Cardinal was able to experience. As an infant, he was placed by his mother in the care of the provincial child welfare system and raised in Edmonton, Alberta, as a foster child. At the age of 35, he began a search for more information about his family history and his biological roots. *Foster Child* documents this very personal journey. It is a painfully slow one marked by frequent frustrations and small, bittersweet victories, but Cardinal proceeds with the persistence of a private detective and the determination of a journalist.

In the end, it is the small victories that provide him with some degree of closure. Cardinal's respectful and unhurried style of observational filmmaking is well suited to documenting his search. It is an intimate approach to an intimate subject and quietly engaging. Viewers are not so much invited to witness, as to share in Cardinal's most personal moments of discovery, savouring his joys, experiencing his setbacks and reflecting on his sorrows.

Cardinal's story is not uncommon. He knows, from her obituary, that his mother Lucy died in 1974, but he wants to know more. In *Foster Child* his search for family unfolds in several memorable scenes: We experience his frustration with a government child care worker who is not permitted to show him his government records as a foster child but who does help him in his search. We later feel his anticipation and trepidation on first meeting his mother's brother, and we share his exhilaration and mixed emotions on first seeing a photograph of his mother. We also experience his disappointment and pain on learning of his brother Donny's death the previous year, and find consolation in learning about Donny through his widow, Linda. Most important, we share Cardinal's gradual understanding of the hardships faced by young Native women coming into the city and the desperate and isolating circumstances that might lead his mother to put him into care in the hope of offering him a better future. In placing a marker on his mother's previously unmarked grave, Cardinal comes to terms with their mutual histories, realizing that he now belongs to two realities, two families and two cultures.

Still, he wonders what life might have been like.

Discussion

1. Is it necessary to know one's family background to be content with oneself?

2. Do we all need to feel part of a family or community story to anchor our life?

3. Why did Cardinal document his search?

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4c) *David with F.A.S.*, Gil Cardinal, director, 1996, 44 min.

Cardinal revisits the world of melancholy and "what might have been" in this critically acclaimed 1996 documentary, *David with F.A.S.* Like *Foster Child*, the film demonstrates Cardinal's ability to evoke a sense of disarming intimacy through compassionate inquiry and unobtrusive observation. His quietly understated narration and respectful deference towards his subjects further distinguish his films and documentary style. Cardinal brings a thoughtful and uncommon degree of gentleness to his craft.

The video profiles David Vandenbrink, a 21-year-old Aboriginal adoptee who suffers from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, an alcohol-related birth defect. The brain damage from which he suffers is caused by the alcohol consumed by his birth-mother while pregnant. David's affliction is permanent: there is no treatment, there is no cure. What this means is that David's brain can receive information but it has difficulty organizing and making sense of it. Through no fault of his own, he can't lead a normal life, nor can his family.

With David's recent diagnosis of F.A.S. and news that his older brother Michael suffers from the same syndrome, the Vandenbrink family begins to understand the disorder that has confounded them, causing so much stress and anxiety. A diagnosis of F.A.S. invariably invokes feelings of guilt for past parental and family decisions made on the basis of unrealistic expectations. It can also bring profound grief for lost hopes and dreams that now require radical revision. Fortunately, the Vandenbrinks find some comfort through sharing their experiences with an F.A.S. support group.

Cardinal introduces us to members of David's family: his mother Mary, a tireless social worker now devoted to raising public awareness of F.A.S.; his father Henry, a visibly weary police constable not yet willing or able to revise his expectations for a deep and meaningful relationship with his adult sons; and Danielle, one of David's three sisters, who appeals for recognition of the emotional strain placed on the siblings of F.A.S sufferers. Blaming the condition for depriving her of a normal childhood, she says, "We lived it too." We also meet Lorraine, David's live-in caregiver, who organizes his life and helps him cope with his depression, a common secondary disability for many suffering from F.A.S.

David's affliction allows him little control over many aspects of his life. Recognizing this, Cardinal teaches David to use a video camera so that he might have some direct input into the way his story is told. It is a productive plan. David is anxious to communicate what it is like to live with this debilitating disorder; he is equally anxious to gain acceptance as a person of worth. His video images and accompanying commentaries are among the most revealing and emotionally compelling. In seemingly mundane sequences of David cleaning his room or staring at his bedroom ceiling, we experience first-hand the boredom and intellectual frustration that he feels. Occasionally, we glimpse the dry wit and dark humour that help him cope with his circumstances, but his struggle with depression is constant. It is visible in the lack of emotional expression on his face and in the unvarying monotone of his voice. It is also present in his discussion of suicide and his disturbing documentation of a guilt-ridden bout of drinking on a winter's night on the back porch. David is acutely aware of his increased potential for becoming alcoholic, but sometimes he succumbs. "It's not been good for me tonight," he says into the camera.

F.A.S. is the number one cause of mental retardation in the Western world but entirely preventable. Because of F.A.S., David will never achieve his full human potential. His ability to contribute to society will be forever limited by his affliction. Cardinal says that David's loss is *our* loss.

David with F.A.S. is not specifically about "Aboriginal experience," although it was made by a renowned Canadian Aboriginal filmmaker, about the life of a young Aboriginal man. Ethnicity is not the primary focus

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here, prenatal damage and mental health are, which transcend all racial and national boundaries.

David with F.A.S. makes an important contribution to the international understanding of F.A.S. and the field of mental health education. Cardinal gives David the last word: "I demand to be heard. I am different and yet the same. I have much to teach the world."

Discussion

1. What does David have to teach the world?

2. How can people be made aware of the dangers of drinking alcohol while pregnant?

3. This problem is world-wide but little acknowledged. Why?

PART 5, Wisdom, Humour and Cultural Health

5a) *Urban Elder*, Robert S. Adams, director, 1997, 29 min.

In Gil Cardinal's film *David with F.A.S.* (Part 4 of this collection), David Vandenbrink reads a poem that he wrote about human isolation and "how unknown everyone is to everyone else." As Aboriginal people from across Canada move in greater numbers to large urban centres, the threat of personal and cultural isolation becomes increasingly real. To minimize the dangers of disconnection, urban Aboriginal communities have created a national network of "friendship centres" to provide newcomers with a cultural home base and basic information on social and governmental services available in the city. Following custom, they have also sought the advice and assistance of "elders," the older members of their communities, who are respected for their wise counsel and knowledge of cultural traditions.

Vern Harper is one such elder. *Urban Elder* documents his work among the large urban Aboriginal population in the greater metropolitan city of Toronto, Ontario. Numbering more than 65,000 in 1997 when the film was made, Toronto's indigenous population is a culturally diverse mix of peoples, whose roots and community ties extend across the country. For many, the city is an alien and unwelcoming environment. The challenge for Harper and elders in other urban centres is to help Aboriginal people to see themselves as members of an extended indigenous family with a rich history, common values and shared spiritual beliefs.

More than anything else, it is the affirmation of a shared spirituality that Harper believes is the key to Aboriginal survival in the city. Drawing on the traditional teachings of his Plains Cree heritage, he invites members of all Native nations to join him on his daily walk along the "Red Road" of the ancestors. It is a drug- and alcohol-free journey that emphasizes prayer, fasting and ritual. In the film, we witness negative feelings being displaced by good thoughts through the burning of sweetgrass; prayers of petition and thanksgiving being carried up to the Creator on the wisps of tobacco smoke from a ceremonial pipe; and the cleansing of mind, body and spirit through a communal sweat lodge ceremony. Those who have joined Harper on the Red Road speak of a renewed awareness of their relationship to the natural environment (Mother Earth) and to each other. They speak, too, of a restored sense of balance in their lives and a renewed pride in their Aboriginal identity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the poignant testimonials from young Aboriginal inmates at the Warkworth Federal Penitentiary where Harper serves as traditional teacher and spiritual guide.

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In a film largely devoted to Harper's role as a source of spiritual nourishment, it is instructive to learn what, or who, nourishes Harper himself. Clearly, it is his family, and in particular, his young daughter Cody, who we first see performing in a ballet recital before her proud parents. Already in training as a medicine woman, she draws inspiration from two worlds, blending artistic creativity with spiritual discipline. It is a cultural fusion brimming with promise for the future and one that greatly pleases the elder Harper. In what may be the film's most intimate moment, we see Cody gently brushing her father's long flowing silver hair. It is a moving image that quietly illustrates the effortless flow of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Discussion

1. Do all communities have elders?

2. What is the role of elders in indigenous and other communities?

3. How can indigenous people living in urban areas maintain their culture?

5b) *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod*, Steve Van Denzen, director, Drew Hayden Taylor, screenwriter, 1999, 24 min.

While *Urban Elder* addresses the threat of cultural isolation in the city, *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod* calls attention to an equally disturbing form of separation that can just as readily cripple the mind and spirit of those who remain on the land.

This is one of several themes interwoven in a film that is quite unlike the others in this Festival collection. Written by Ojibway humorist Drew Hayden Taylor, *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod* is a fictional narrative that blends comedy, drama and mystery, recalling in both form and feeling a situation comedy or light comic drama made for television. This is not surprising since Taylor has written many TV screenplays that have found wide appeal among family audiences. Taylor's humour, however, is often deceptive, concealing serious themes that are revealed as his stories unfold. Such is the case with *Bunny Weequod,* a modern-day fable that stresses the continued relevance of traditional tribal practices and warns against their neglect. In a modern technological world, he identifies environmental conservation as a major concern. The film's major focus, however, is language retention. The entire dialogue spoken by the film's four characters is in Ojibway, and subtitled onscreen.

The narrative, imagined in a contemporary lakeside setting, recounts an incident in the life of Bunny Weequod, a fisherman (played by Lorne Cardinal) married to Janine (Kateri Walker), a community health care worker. Troubled by the increasing number of dead fish floating to the surface of the lake, Bunny sets out in his motorboat to investigate, only to capsize in the darkness and get pulled under water by a mysterious force. Reappearing the next morning, he is literally a changed man, now prone to bizarre acts of behaviour. After hearing his story, Esther (Bernelda Wheeler), a local elder, concludes that Bunny may have had an encounter with "the little people," the spirit beings of traditional Ojibway mythology who are believed to live beneath the lake. They may be displeased with him, she suggests, for ignoring the cultural protocols long associated with fishing there. Thus enlightened, Bunny acts to honour his traditions, symbolically affirming his relationship to the natural world, and thereby restoring a sense of balance and harmony to his life.

The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod was funded, in part, by a program for Native language preservation. As a modest vehicle for demonstrating the vitality of Aboriginal languages and the relevance of traditional teachings

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in contemporary Aboriginal life, the film may be no less instructive than a well-crafted documentary.

Discussion

1. How does humour help to convey a message?

2. How does fiction compare with documentary as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge?

3. What are the benefits of producing films in a Native language? What are the drawbacks?

5c) *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, Drew Hayden Taylor, writer-director, 2000, 55 min.

The comic spirit that enlivens Drew Hayden Taylor's screenplay for *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod* is the subject of *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, a feature-length documentary that marks Taylor's debut as a film director. Taylor describes the film as a "journey up the river of laughter in search of the source of Aboriginal humour." But is there an "Aboriginal humour"? Taylor's film is persuasive. There certainly are Aboriginal humorists. Many Native people consider humour to be one of their most cultivated cultural characteristics and the key to their collective survival. They point to the widespread and time-honoured practice of teasing as a form of social control, and the prevalence of self-deprecating humour among leaders to signify humility. They call attention, as well, to the many comic adventures of "the trickster," a clever and mischievous demi-deity who figures prominently in the cautionary tales and creation stories of Aboriginal peoples across North America. Unfortunately, much of this is unknown to the mainstream media, who continue to portray Native peoples as quaint and colourful symbols of the past, or sad and colourless victims of the present. This is no laughing matter. Or is it?

Question: "What do you call a Native vegetarian? Answer: "A very bad hunter."

Taylor tells this joke in the opening minutes of the film, adding that most Aboriginal people would find the joke very funny. But why? Like most jokes, its humour depends on a combination of surprise and incongruity. In this case, the joke exemplifies a type of hybrid humour that mixes mainstream consumer concepts with traditional Native/Indian symbols, in endlessly amusing combinations. (Imagine too, birchbark-panelled cars and traditional meals of moose meat and Kentucky Fried Chicken!) Much of the humour in this film derives from the creative clash of cultural symbols and practices, while shedding light on Aboriginal efforts to confront and reconcile the realities of two different but converging worlds.

Foregoing the actual "journey up the river of laughter," Taylor instead takes viewers on a fun-filled road trip across Canadian "Indian country," stopping along the way to visit fellow Aboriginal humorists in Ottawa, Guelph, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Whitehorse. We meet standup comedians Don Burnstick and Don Kelly; author Tom King and the cast of CBC Radio's *Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*; Herbie Barnes and his sketch comedy troupe; and Sharon Shorty and Jackie Bear, who transform themselves into beloved Yukon elders Sarah and Susie. They are a talented and diverse comic community who find the universal in the particular, to connect with both Native and non-Native audience members. Unlike the actors in *Bunny Weequod*, the humorists in this film all speak English. Does it matter? Is their humour any less "Aboriginal," any less "authentic"?

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Taylor films each performer in action before a live audience – in one instance, at a conference, another, at a nightclub, another at an elders' lodge, and, in the case of *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, live-to-tape in a recording studio. These immensely entertaining scenes are nicely balanced with backstage and offstage interviews where performers reflect on the nature of their comedy. For example, writer and radio personality Tom King calls humour his "safe position," where he can comment on serious Aboriginal issues and make more of an impact on listeners than he ever could through anger: "You can get into their kitchen with humour," he says. "If you're pounding on the front door they won't let you in." *The Dead Dog Café* is alive and well and living in kitchen radios across Canada. On a good day, listeners can get a sense of what it's like to live as an Aboriginal person in Canada.

For the young members of Herbie Barnes's improvisational troupe, humour is also a "safe position" where they can acquire professional comedy skills and develop personal self-confidence as well. Within this safe space, humour becomes a liberating and transforming tool, allowing performers to move beyond past stage productions of Aboriginal tragedies and into a space of cultural celebration and renewal.

Cultural renewal is also at the core of Don Burnstick's "Redskin" humour. With an ever-growing fan base among Natives and non-Natives, Burnstick embraces every opportunity to build bridges between cultures by twisting the pain out of racist stereotypes, replacing it with mutual respect and cultural appreciation. Having triumphed over a life of despair on the streets, he can attest to humour's healing powers.

Sharon Shorty and Jackie Bear can similarly attest to the healing powers of Aboriginal humour. In their lovingly conceived portrayals of Sarah and Susie, characters loosely based on deceased relatives, they not only honour the memory of these departed family members, whose loss they still mourn, they perpetuate, in their dress, mannerisms, and playful banter, the spirit of a generation of elders who represent the heart and backbone of a community.

Like dance and music and trickster tales, Aboriginal humour expresses the spirit of individual and collective Aboriginal communities. There is no one source, but many.

Discussion

1. How does humour heal?

2. How do marginalized peoples use humour to confront the larger society?

3. Can humour transcend language and nationalities?

PART 6, Cultural Landscapes
6a) *Laxwesa Wa - Strength of the River*, Barb Cranmer, writer-director, 1995, 54 min.

In a rare piece of archival footage from Annie Fraziér Henry's film *Singing Our Stories* (Part 3 of this collection), a young Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw girl from Alert Bay, British Columbia, receives a traditional coming-of-age song from a family elder in a public ceremony. This ritual transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next is common to many Aboriginal societies. It is part of an ongoing process of cultural affirmation and perpetuation that anchors personal identity in community, and communal identity in place. The young girl in the archival footage is Barb Cranmer, now an award-winning documentary filmmaker herself. Many of her works explore the communal experience of the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw and their neighbours and their enduring relationship to the land and sea. In *Laxwesa Wa - Strength of the River*, Cranmer gives voice to members of the indigenous

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coastal community at a time when their collective identity as fishing societies and their ancestral relationship to their homeland are both endangered. The filmmaker's sister, Donna Cranmer, provides the narration.

From the opening frames of the film, the Northwest Coast appears as a place of unparalleled beauty, where snow-covered mountains merge with dense cedar forests, and surging rivers flow down to the Pacific Ocean. According to oral tradition, indigenous peoples have inhabited the coastal inlets and islands for countless millennia, living off the bounty of the sea. In their world, the waters are sacred, and the Creator a most generous provider. Salmon, in all its many shades and variations – sockeye, pink, cohoe, chum, and spring – is the ultimate gift of spiritual and physical sustenance. In addition to salmon, numerous other species of fish and seafood can be found in coastal waters. Traditionally, all that was required of indigenous people to maintain this constant supply of riches was a commitment to respect the strength and spirit of the rivers and to practise communal sharing and conservation.

In *Laxwesa Wa*, individuals from three different coastal communities – the 'Namgis, Sto:lo and Heiltsuk – affirm their active participation in a way of life that has developed distinct patterns of local practice. For example, we see Georgina Malloway on the banks of the Fraser River, "wind drying" salmon in the traditional Sto:lo manner; and observe Edwin Newman and members of the Heiltsuk First Nation setting hemlock trees in the river to harvest herring roe in the manner of their ancestors.

But these idyllic images mask a darker and more pressing issue facing Aboriginal coastal communities, and Cranmer interweaves the different regional voices to tell their common story. In recent years, the fish have been returning in fewer numbers. Native peoples trace this decline back to the early decades of the 20th century, when commercial fisheries and canneries first came to the coast. Hereditary claims to traditional fishing grounds were routinely ignored as commercial fishing licences were distributed to non-Natives in increasing numbers. By the 1960s, with fish stocks drastically depleted from a combination of over-fishing and mismanagement, the Government imposed severe limitations on the number of boats allowed on the water and the amount of time allocated for fishing. The impact on Native communities was predictably devastating, in some cases, transforming self-sufficient communities into welfare-dependent ones overnight. Since then, in a continuing effort to replenish stocks, the time permitted for fishing has been shortened, from weeks, to days, and now hours. "What kind of cultural legacy is that to pass on to a son?" asks one frustrated father.

For those raised in traditional Aboriginal fishing societies, the way out of this dilemma is obvious: government officials entrusted with managing the fisheries must begin to value traditional Aboriginal knowledge of local resources, and start integrating it into their programs. Ideally, cultural co-management agreements should be implemented. At the same time, Aboriginal peoples should pursue the establishment of their own community-owned fisheries, such as the one opened by the Heiltsuk in Bella Bella. Blending modern technology with traditional teachings, the Bella Bella fishery provides the community with a stable economic and social base, while serving as a model for other communities and for the future.

As a cultural advocate and social activist, Cranmer uses film to bring local stories to a global audience and local voices to an international forum. *Laxwesa Wa - Strength of the River* contributes to international conversations on environmental protection, indigenous survival and social justice. Through such films, issues are explored, alliances forged and strength is gathered.

Discussion

1. What role do indigenous people have in the use and management of natural resources?
What role should they have?

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2. Is co-management of resources possible?
Can a balance be found between traditional and scientific knowledge?

3. What can be done to ensure that commercial interests
do not always triumph over environmental concerns?

6b) *My Village in Nunavik*, Bobby Kenuajuak, director, 1999, 47 min.

Like the traditional fishing societies of the North Pacific coast profiled in *Laxwesa Wa - Strength of the River*, the coastal communities of the Arctic have developed complex cultural relationships to the land and ever-present waters. *My Village in Nunavik* looks at one such community.

> This sea of the North is cold regardless of the season. On the banks of Hudson Bay the water temperature would make you shiver. The sea is terribly alluring. Our eyes are always drawn to it. We get excited as little children at the thought of going out on the water.

With these words, spoken in the Inuktitut language, and translated in voice-over narration, 23-year-old Bobby Kenuajuak sets the tone for this affectionate, yet unsentimental film tribute to his home community of Puvirnituq, a settlement located just south of the 60th parallel on the shores of Hudson Bay, in the Nunavik region of northern Quebec. As the winner of a National Film Board competition for Aboriginal filmmakers, Kenuajuak spent eighteen months at the NFB headquarters in Montreal honing his filmmaking skills and producing this documentary from footage shot over three seasons. *My Village in Nunavik* is an unselfconscious appreciation of friends, family and communal activities that draws from both ancient Inuit traditions and more recent influences introduced to the north from southern Canada and abroad. The film is deliberately and unapologetically celebratory, boasting a cultural capacity for endless adaptation and a tenacious spirit of mutual support generally ignored in news reports by commentators from the south. A communal spirit of goodwill permeates this film.

In describing his home village, Kenuajuak is careful to distinguish between the physical settlement of Puvirnituq and the community of people who live there. Built by the government just sixty years ago, the settlement provides basic housing, educational and health care facilities, an Anglican church, and a large co-operative store stocked with expensive foods and consumer goods imported from the south. For the most part, life is good. One of the most tangible, and most appreciated, benefits of the settlement is the community radio station, which allows families and individuals to stay connected to one another while away from the village. Kenuajuak stresses that the real life of the community exists outside the village, in the vast and wide open spaces that the Inuit have occupied for generations. Visitors might consider the treeless, rocky landscape arid and cold, but the Inuit view it as beautiful and bountiful. And warmly familiar. “We learn to read it like you learn to read the writing in books,” Kenuajuak says. “It is part of us and we are part of it.”

This reciprocal relationship is most effectively captured on film in scenes tracking the stages of the annual goose hunt: we sense the excitement surrounding communal preparations for the trip, the exhilaration that comes from travelling across dark waters to ancient hunting grounds, the thrill and stark reality of the actual hunt, and the camaraderie shared in the subsequent cooking, feasting and storytelling. As Kenuajuak points out, for the residents of Puvirnituq, hunting is a necessity, not a sport. And the wild game is both healthier and cheaper than food sold at the co-op.

The communal closeness experienced and reinforced through traditional activities may help to explain the relative ease with which the community is able to integrate elements from other cultures. This closeness is no

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doubt strengthened by the cultural security that comes from continuing to speak one's own language. Kenuajuak portrays Puvirnituq, despite its remote location, as a member of the modern world where foreign influences are culturally enriching, and only occasionally threatening. Nowhere is this more apparent than in scenes of the popular regional music festival, which features a surprisingly varied range of Inuit participants, none more surprising than the elderly country and western singer dressed in flashy red cowboy attire, or the four young women performing Scottish highland dancing, a custom introduced to Puvirnituq thirty years ago by a teacher from Scotland. With 60% of the population under the age of twenty, the festival also includes a rock band. As one young man observes, "Rock music is at the centre of our lives, like youth elsewhere."

The young people in this film are like youth elsewhere, and also like youth nowhere else. In Kenuajuak's big home movie, energetic teenage boys play basketball in the gymnasium, listen to the latest rock CDs, and tell each other hunting stories around a crackling fire on the beach. Young girls keep alive the ancient sounds of Inuit throat singing, small children slide down snowhills, and play among the ruins of traditional summer campsites. These are all hopeful and optimistic images for the future. This film is Kenuajuak's vision of a future securely anchored in the past.

Fittingly, Kenuajuak concludes his film with coverage of midwinter holiday festivities and a joyous communal gathering to welcome in the new year. In the aftermath of celebrations, bright lights and starlight reflect on the snow as ambient guitar chords fade into the night.

Kenuajuak's vision of Puvirnituq is decidedly non-judgmental and intentionally free of critique. It is a lovingly crafted picture of home and an image of community at its best. As a template for possibility, it is a community where change carries no negative implications; no room for social inequity, political unrest, unemployment and community dysfunction. Violence, suicide and substance abuse have no place.

Discussion

1. What may account for the filmmaker's optimism and hopeful vision?

2. How can indigenous communities control or filter out the negative effects of outside influences?

3. Can young Aboriginal filmmakers play a positive role in cultural preservation and global integration?

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Biographies

Robert S. Adams is a producer-director of Cree, Saulteaux and Scottish ancestry. A photographer with a university degree in communications and theology, he has more than two decades experience in the film industry. In addition to *Urban Elder*, Adams directed *The Long Walk* (NFB, 1998), the story of Canadian Aboriginal AIDS activist Ken Ward.

Gil Cardinal is a well-respected Metis filmmaker from Edmonton, Alberta, who has been producing prize-winning films for the NFB since the late 1980s. Equally at home making documentaries or works of historical fiction, his NFB credits include *Tikinagan* (1991), the *Chiefs* series (2003), and *Totem, The Return of the G'psgolox Pole* (2003).

Greg Coyes is a Metis filmmaker of Cree, Mohawk, French and Polish ancestry. He has worked in the Canadian film industry for the past two decades, first as an actor, then as a writer, producer and director. Recent works include an animated film based on the paintings of Norval Morrisseau, the famed Canadian Ojibway artist.

Barb Cranmer is a member of the 'Namgis First Nation of Alert Bay, of the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw Nation of British Columbia. *Laxwesa Wa - Strength of the River* (1995) was made by her Nimpkish Winds Productions company in association with the NFB's Studio One. Other NFB film directing credits include *'Qátuwas - People Gathering Together* (1997) and *T'lina: The Rendering of Wealth* (1999).

Annie Faziér Henry is a filmmaker, writer, composer and musician of Blackfoot, Sioux and French heritage. Her other NFB films include *Totem Talk* (1998), *Legends sx̱wex̱wxiy'am: The Story of Siwash Rock* (1999), *To Return: The John Walkus Story* (2000), and *Spirit of the Game* (2003), a documentary on the 2002 North American Indigenous Games.

Bobby Kenuajuak was born in Puvirnituq, northern Quebec, and studied filmmaking in Montreal. He is the first Inuk (Inuit) to win the Aboriginal Filmmakers competition held by the NFB's French-language program. *My Village in Nunavik,* his first film, was produced for this program. Kenuajuak is now a television producer in Puvirnituq, employed by Taqramiut Nipingat Inc (TNI), "Voice of the North," the Inuit language communications network of northern Quebec.

Alanis Obomsawin, of Abenaki First Nation ancestry, is one of Canada's most distinguished documentary filmmakers, the recipient of many honours. She is both an inspiration and mentor to many young Aboriginal filmmakers, having made more than 20 films on Native issues in a career spanning more than three decades. In addition to *Kanehsatake,* her films include *Mother of Many Children* (1971), *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), *Cry from the Diary of a Metis Child* (1986), *Is the Crown at war with us?* (2002) and *Our Nationhood* (2003).

Daniel Prouty is a filmmaker of Ojibway and non-Native heritage. *For Angela,* his first professional film, won the Canada Award at Canada's prestigious 1995 Gemini Awards. Prouty's other NFB films include *First Nation Blue* (1996), another award-winner, and *Band-Aid* (1999).

Drew Hayden Taylor is a celebrated Ojibway playwright, screenwriter and essayist from the Curve Lake First Nation in Ontario. He is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Funny You Don't Look Like One: Reflections from a Blue-Eyed Ojibway* (1996), and *Furious Observations of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway: Funny, You Don't Look Like One Three* (2003), which includes an amusing commentary on the making of *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod.*

Loretta Todd is an accomplished writer, cultural critic, and filmmaker of Cree, Metis, Iroquois and Scottish

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ancestry. She wrote dramatic scripts and produced educational television programs for the Native community before directing her first NFB film, the much-praised documentary *The Learning Path* (1991). Her other NFB films include *Forgotten Warriors* (1997) and *Kainayssini Imanistaisiwa: The People Go On* (2003).

Steve Van Denzen hails from the Sagkeeng Ojibway First Nation in Manitoba. In the course of his varied film career he has served as an actor, director and cultural advisor on numerous Aboriginal films and videos. *The Strange Case of Bunny Weequod* was co-produced by Cool Native Productions and the NFB.

Allan J. Ryan
In a varied career Dr. Ryan has worked as a graphic designer, singer-songwriter, recording artist, television satirist and professor of Native Studies, Anthropology and Art History. He is the author of *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, winner of an American Book Award for its contribution to multicultural literature. Dr. Ryan is currently an Associate Professor in the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, and holds the position of New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture. In 2002, he introduced
a course on Canadian Aboriginal cinema. His e-mail address is <allan_ryan@carleton.ca>. His website is <**www.trickstershift.com**>.

Selected Supplementary Resources

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