How 'Indians' are read: The representation of aboriginality in films by Native and non-Native directors (Kevin Costner, Bruce McDonald, Alanis Obomsawin, Doug Cuthand, Vicki Covington).

Jean-Paul. Restoule
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd

Recommended Citation

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6” x 9” black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600
NOTE TO USERS

The original manuscript received by UMI contains pages with slanted print. Pages were microfilmed as received.

This reproduction is the best copy available

UMI
HOW 'INDIANS' ARE READ:
THE REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINALITY IN FILMS
BY NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE DIRECTORS

by

Jean-Paul Restoule

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of Communication Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1997

©1997 Jean-Paul Restoule
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

L’auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L’auteur conserve la propriété du droit d’auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-30998-3
Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of Aboriginal people in popular film. Using cultural studies concepts, films by non-Native directors were compared to films by Native directors. The films *Dances With Wolves* and *Dance Me Outside* were analyzed as non-Native films and compared to the Native-directed *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, and *Sentencing Circles: Traditional Justice Reborn*. The objective was to explore *how* the films differed. The thesis makes an original contribution in that there is very little research applying cultural studies concepts specifically to Aboriginals in film. No studies were located that did so from an Anishinaabae perspective.

Not surprisingly, it was found that more complex meanings regarding cultural identity are to be found in Native-produced films. Factors enabling these different meanings included the use of contemporary settings and contemporary issues, the use of Native people speaking for themselves and the advantage of having creative control over the finished product. Where several of these factors are missing, a more simplistic portrayal of the First Nations emerges.

The thesis concludes that the American domination of film distribution in Canada and the United States limits the choices of Native filmmakers seeking an audience for their work. Thus, the simplistic representation of Aboriginal people will continue to dominate the non-Native public consciousness.
...Then a small voice spoke.

"I will bring up Earth or die trying," said the tiny Muskrat.

She was not as strong or as swift as the others, but she was determined...
This thesis is dedicated to the people of the Dokis reserve.

All my relations.
Acknowledgements

Foremost, I thank Dr. Marlene Cuthbert, for her enduring wisdom and faith. Her many insightful suggestions, clarifications, additions, and corrections to the thesis have been invaluable. I am especially grateful for the opportunities she gave me to try out material in this thesis in the classroom. Many students contributed ideas which encouraged me to look at the films in different ways.

My other co-advisor, Dr. Bernhard Harder, was very enthusiastic about the thesis and provided me with numerous sources and ideas. In fact, this thesis grew out of a paper written for his course which he suggested I expand into a full-length thesis. I thank him for his support and his encouragement, as well as the great freedom he provided me in my work.

Professor James Linton went beyond the call of duty in his role as a second reader. His many suggestions in the earliest stages of thesis development improved the final product immensely. I especially appreciate his sense of humour, which allowed me to put a proper perspective on everything. It is because of his tutelage that I believe the purpose of film is to help the sheep.

I am grateful to Dr. Barry Adam for his insightful comments at the proposal stage, which encouraged me to take greater care in my statements. But most importantly, his compliments gave me greater confidence in my work.

I must thank Beverly A. Restoule and Christine Dokis, my education counsellors from the Dokis reserve, whose enthusiasm I found very encouraging throughout my university instruction. Without the financial assistance provided by the Dokis Education Program, I would not have been able to attend university.

Elizabeth Chamberlain, education counsellor at the Turtle Island Aboriginal Education Centre, helped me select an outside reader and lent her sincere encouragement throughout the thesis’ development.
Dr. Kai Hildebrandt suggested my mock proposal, presented in his graduate seminar course, had great potential to become a full-fledged proposal. Indeed, it became the basis for the actual thesis. I credit him for inspiring me with the confidence to develop the project fully.

I am indebted to Sandy Van Zetten for demystifying not only the technology of the fax machine and photocopier (which sometimes behaves quite mysteriously), but also the tangled web of departmental administrative policies. Often she had already anticipated and taken care of such problems before I even realized they existed. I must also thank Ann Gallant, who got more than her fair share of physical exercise opening doors for me all over Lambton Tower, as well as a mental workout answering all my questions.

Professor and departmental technician Cal Moore has helped me in many ways over the years. I must thank him for loaning me one of the department's aging computers, which was used for drafting many early versions of the thesis.

I must also thank Dr. Irvin Goldman, who provided valuable comments and criticisms of work undertaken in his graduate seminars. These papers became the theoretical grounding of this thesis. I am also grateful to Dr. Stanley Cunningham, whose comments were helpful when revising a paper I presented in his graduate seminar. This work was subsequently incorporated into the Oka section of this thesis.

I appreciate the patience of my parents and Tara's grandparents, who allowed themselves to be guinea pigs in the early stages of theoretical development. I'm sure they no longer want to watch movies with me, especially when they are asked to explain their reasons for interpretation, for hours on end.

Finally, I thank Tara. For everything.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### I. INTRODUCTION
- Cultural Identity and Film 3
- The Issue of Representation 5
- Theoretical Framework 7
- The Issue of Ideology 9

### II. STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIANS
- Exploration Myths 19
- The Government Problem – Policy 24
- Literature 26
- Film 27

### III. NATIVE PEOPLES IN NON-NATIVE FILMS
- Cultural Appropriation 34
- Why *Dances With Wolves* 35
- Social Trends 36
- Critical Analysis 37
- Dominant Specularity 44
- What’s with all this dancing anyway? 47
- Conclusions 52

### IV. NATIVE PEOPLES IN NATIVE FILMS
- The Oka Crisis 54
- Alanis Obomsawin 60
- Critical Analysis 61
- The Meaning of Warrior 66
- Cross-Cultural Differences 69
- Sentencing Circles – Traditional Justice Reborn 77
- Critical Analysis 78
- Conclusions 86
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 90
   Non-Native Films About Native People 90
   Native Films About Native People 91
   The Indian Problem: Finding Film Funding 92
   Recommendations for Future Study 95
   Future Filmmaking 97

   References 101

   Vita Auctoris 109
I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this thesis is to look at how meanings of Aboriginality are created and reproduced in film. A main concern was how cinematic meanings of Aboriginality differ when a film’s director is Aboriginal. Therefore I analyzed films about Aboriginal life produced by non-Native people and compared them to films about Aboriginal life by Native people. The assumption operating behind this choice was that communication within a culture can rely on a greater depth of meaning and shared signs than communication across cultures. This variable also provided for the expectation that a more complex representation of Aboriginal life would manifest itself in films made by an Aboriginal person. It was believed by this author that complex portrayals would offer more varied discourses and thus greater potential for openness in Aboriginal issues, whereas simplistic representations would close down meanings and maintain hegemony.

An original goal was to compare films and categorize them based on their intended target audience. However, preliminary research revealed that there were very few films made exclusively, or even primarily, for Native people that were accessible* to the researcher. In addition, when discussing the issue of representation, it is the director’s cultural knowledge that has more relevance than the intended target audience. Indeed, Native-directed films that were designed for Native audiences did not differ greatly in content from those films designed for non-Native audiences. Native directors who were surveyed admitted that they thought it was more important to reach a greater audience than solely the Native population (D. Cuthand, personal communication, February 24, 1997; N. Chicoine, National Film Board, personal communication, August 30, 1996). Classifying films by their intended target audience was a moot point. Hence,

*For clarification on this point, please see my recommendations for further study.
it was decided that the most effective way to study the representation of Aboriginality would be to compare the films by Native directors to those of non-Native directors.

When making films about the First Nations, there are several differences in approach. The main goal of this thesis was to sort out how these films differ. It was found that Native-made films communicate at two levels: at an explicit code understandable to both Native and non-Native audiences alike; and at a co-cultural code that communicates Aboriginal meanings to those particular members who are part of the culture or have some understanding of the different worldview of the First Nations. This different code operates on a natural level: it is not deliberate. It is part of the 'common sense' view of the Aboriginal world, and finds a way into the film without the specific guidance of the filmmaker. Despite the greatest efforts of the non-Native filmmaker to incorporate a Native vision into a sympathetic film, more often than not, there is something simplistic or misguided about it.

The following analysis uses some theories of cultural studies to analyze four films, two by non-Native directors and two by Native directors. The main goal is to find differences in the films and to explain those differences. The guiding principle was an ethical consideration of the people being represented. Most important was whether the film representation was harmful or helpful to people of the First Nations. An historical background discusses the role of various media in controlling and colonizing First Nations people. From European contact to film in the 1990s, how the First Nations were portrayed in communication media influenced how they were treated in real life. In the early nineties, there was much celebration of the sensitive and accurate depictions of Native people in film. What is most alarming about this trend is that the films in question often did nothing to challenge the fate of many of the First Nations in their contemporary context. This thesis sought to critique these films while searching for existing alternative portrayals.
Cultural Identity and Film

Native Americans have been the subject of many films since the beginnings of cinema. However, their prominence as film subjects changed significantly in the early 1990s when film portrayals attempted to be more politically correct, or more culturally sensitive. Leading the way was the 1990 film *Dances With Wolves*, the unexpected success of which seemed to inspire several other Native-themed movies which critics hailed as "accurate," "sympathetic," or "revisionist." Examples include *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, *Black Robe*, *Thunderheart*, and *Geronimo: An American Legend*, as well as the children-oriented *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*. Sympathetic or not, the deeper question is whether these film stories actually help or hurt the people they portray.

When a minority culture is represented, the identity of that culture is at stake. Because many people often do not have direct and frequent contact with members of the First Nations, their knowledge of us is often composed of mediated information. When we are portrayed simplistically in media, people having no other source of information about First Nations people may be influenced to think of us as primitive, backwards, or stupid. Even more tragic are instances when Native people accept the images they see or assign some amount of truth to them. 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. Certainly, if it were possible for Native people to be present at every project involving ‘Indians,’ some of these problems might be addressed. However, many films about First Nations people do not involve any Native people at the most crucial stages of the decision-making process. The stories, settings, and characters are chosen before there are consultations concerning cultural accuracy. Given that there are limited resources available for the Native people, the major media players gain control in the type and frequency and availability of the messages. The defined "place"
for Indian people, both in time and space, are pre-set in the minds of the more influential major media players. Unfortunately, those who control the means of producing these images, control the mediated identity of the represented culture.

Cultural identity is an issue that is growing in importance in a world where many ethnic groups have no borders to call their own. While a key defining feature of cultural identity in the past was based on language and national political borders, the signifiers of identity have since become more complex and varied. Colonial governments try to limit the borders of the indigenous populations they have supplanted through channels of legality and military might. Whereas the material struggles between colonial powers and indigenous peoples are acted out in courts of law and in bunkers on reserve lands, the ideological supports for such actions circulate in a number of cultural sites, significantly in the mass media. News reports, children's programs, and major motion pictures all contain images of Aboriginal people. These images can affect in direct material ways the people they depict. Discourses that encourage or support the destruction of Aboriginal peoples are encoded into filmic representations. Of course, discourses that encourage Aboriginal resistance are circulated too.

One of the key issues involved in such a study is racial representation. The images of Native culture that are seen in movies help to create, reproduce and sustain cultural ideas about what it means to be Indian. These ideas and images have an impact on how non-Native people see Indians as well as how Indians see themselves. These attitudes are at play at certain points in history when media attention brings a First Nations issue to the minds and hearts of the North American public. These ideas and images influence policy decisions and voter opinion that affects Native people. To use an overly simplified example, when Native people are continuously portrayed as juvenile or primitive, it is only natural to assume that they should be dealt with as children in courts of law and in government affairs. Conversely, a culture having control over the
means of production and depiction of its own identity will produce less disparaging or
patronizing images of itself.

The Issue of Representation

This thesis is not concerned with issues of "accuracy" so much as it is concerned
with the complexity of the text. Although accuracy is a factor that can determine
whether an image is stereotypical, the term "representation" does not limit discussion to
whether a tribe is wearing the appropriate type of feathers or not. Certainly, it must be
noted that many filmgoers are not able to see the problem of different nations being
mixed and matched in the movies, but that is not the most important ideological code
operating in cinematic representation of the First Nations. Indeed, the main concern is
how the First Nations together as a whole are treated, what discourses are circulated in
the topic area of indigenous political awareness, and whether there is a plurality of
perspectives presented from each filmed Native community in question.

Approving of particular images as more culturally accurate than others is
inappropriate for this study, as accuracy is difficult to determine (Shohat & Stam, 1994,
p. 214). Take the example of the "drunk Indian," appearing in countless films. Since the
element of a drunk Indian can be found in reality, it is not inaccurate to portray an Indian
as a drunk. However, it may be simplistic to reinforce such a stereotype, especially if
there is no attempt within the film to explain the cause of the drunkenness, or to
contextualize it. Critical analysis should move beyond considering simply the accuracy
of an image. Rather, the main concern should be whether the representations are
complex or stereotypical, contextualized or isolated. This distinction is important, since
the kinds of imagery that can be categorized as stereotypical often have a referent in
actual reality.
Rather than critiquing accuracy, I concerned myself with which discourses were evident and which discourses were ignored or downplayed. The characters in film are not real people. They can be thought of as merely bodies which speak discourses (Stam, 1991, p. 252). Following the Bakhtinian approach advocated by Stam (1991; Shohat & Stam, 1994), this thesis will see characters not as referents to “real” people, but as the purveyors of discourses. They are set in opposition with one another so that the discourses may clash and find resonance with audience members. Even characters based on real people when put into film become fictional signifiers that refer to histories of discourse spoken in a particular social formation at a certain point in history. It is this approach that allows documentary films to be compared with fictional films. Indeed, even real people speaking face to face, unmediated, take on the attributes of signs which speak discourses. It is as though everything has been spoken and new generations continue the discourses until certain discourses win out. Again, the closing down of some meanings and the proliferation of others through mass media can limit the number of discourses considered viable, often working in the interests of the currently privileged social formation (in terms of class, gender and race). Identifying the discourses and the ideologies presented in the texts is a strategy for avoiding the messy analysis that comes from comparing fictional film representation with reality, the trap that is difficult to escape when criticizing accuracy. Stam (1991) elaborates:

Less important than a film’s “accuracy” is that it relay the voices and perspectives – I emphasize the plural – of the community or communities in question. If an identification with a community perspective occurs, the question of “positive” images falls back into its rightful place as a subordinate issue (p. 256).

This thesis avoids the question of positive and negative portrayals, and looks rather for complexity, diversity and articulation of indigenous voices.

The portrayal of First Nations in films is not a trivial matter. Film has a way of naturalizing ideology so that political discourses are presented in a format that engages us
in pleasure (Fiske, 1987; S. Hall, 1981). There are many ways that this harms First Nations peoples. Firstly, such films can erase Indians from contemporary politics by presenting their concerns and power as essentially a topic of a different historical era (Churchill, 1992; Friar & Friar, 1972). Thus, when Indian struggles appear in the media, a common discourse is that Indians do not live realistically in the present and have not moved into this century. Movies that depict only historical conflicts support these discourses.

Also, the Indian justification for such struggles are often not reported within the context of the Native perspective. At Kanehsatake, the Great Law of Peace was often cited by many of the Mohawks as their justification for confrontation against a common enemy (See Akwesasne Notes throughout 1990). But the Mohawks were typically judged in terms of Canadian legality, and called outlaws (Winter, 1992). To look at First Nations without seeing their reasons for action is something we are used to in movies. The Indians are often seen from outside their own cultural group so that an Eurocentric interpretation of Indian action dominates the screen (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Native themed movies would be quite different if we saw how the Indians came to a decision that supported their action. Thus, instead of judging Indian action by European standards they would be judged by Indian standards. Extending such a shift in perception to the way treaties are interpreted would radically alter the borders of Turtle Island.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural studies is a particularly useful framework for analyzing the possible meanings of Aboriginality within texts. One characteristic of cultural studies is that it lends itself to critical analysis. Cultural studies is a general term encompassing multidisciplinary work in late capitalist societies that encourages multiperspectival, multidiscursive and multicultural intellectual work (Kellner, 1995). Kellner (1995)
writes that a cultural studies analysis should include a political economy analysis of the
production of cultural texts, a textual analysis of the media piece or event, and an account
of the audience reception and use of the cultural text studied (p. 3). Cultural studies
proponents and adherents shy away from closing down the parameters of what counts as
cultural studies. (S. Hall, 1996). Despite the fact that cultural studies is opposed to
closing options, and imposing one methodology, there are characteristics which
distinguish cultural studies from other forms of analysis.

One particular concern of cultural studies is that it is critical. Littlejohn (1992)
divides knowledge development into three methods: those that are mainly by discovery,
by interpretation, and by criticism (p. 12). Cultural studies is a critical knowledge.
Therefore, a main concern is the distribution of power in society, with an attempt to
understand how power is diffused at the site of culture. Cultural studies tends to look at
the margins of society to understand the ideologies of the centre (Marchetti, 1991). By
looking at the marginal position of Canada’s Aboriginal population and their
representation in film, we can understand how Canada’s dominance is maintained
ideologically through cultural artifacts. in this case, film.

Cultural studies in the seventies went through two major transformations.
Whereas the initial concern was to fight classism and its institutional supports in
literature and television, new challenges and upcoming scholars added the concerns of
gender and race to the agenda (Hall, 1996, p. 268). They sought to answer in myriad
ways how unequal power relations between the genders and among races were
maintained in society. Their challenges paved the way for the use of semiotics,
psychoanalysis and ethnography as the main tools of the cultural studies practitioner.

Indeed, the use of whatever methods and theories work has allowed practitioners
a freedom rare in most traditional disciplines. But that is not to say that cultural studies
is not theoretically grounded. Rather, quite the opposite is true. An extremely wide
variety of theories are employed in the area of cultural studies. Some of the major
scholars have synthesized various theories from the disciplines of literary criticism, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy into cohesive studies of power relations at the site of culture. Thus, for this study, the concepts of discourse, narrativity, intertextuality, and subjectivity will be employed to dissect Native film and its relation to the treatment of the Native peoples in our society.

Cultural studies is appropriate for this thesis because it is a body of theories that sees its subjects as active and empowered. Looking for a theory of power in society, cultural studies employs Gramsci’s consensual model. This model sees the state as being ruled by hegemony, a system where the ruling class interests align and can rule by winning the consent of the ruled. Some cultural studies theorists suggest that the ruled can resist domination by refusing to consent. Cultural studies analysis emphasizes that media contain ideologies which maintain hegemony. Subjects who question hegemonic discourse in media are resisting ideologically. Becoming conscious of hegemony is the first step toward political change. Thus, cultural studies practitioners study popular media pieces to examine the workings of hegemony and also study the social groups watching both hegemonic and subversive texts to see how they both consent to and resist hegemony. This thesis identifies the hegemonic discourses on the topic of relations between First Nations and Canadian government which circulate in popular media representations. It examines alternative media pieces to find the existence of challenges to the common narrative about Native reality. Although this will not achieve a real sense of what is being resisted or accepted in the area of indigenous politics, it can at least give an idea of what is being disseminated.

The Issue of Ideology

Ideology is a term which has so many varying and contradictory definitions and connotations that it requires some clarification for this paper. Eagleton (1991) has found
no less than seventeen different definitions in the literature of social theorists. But as
varied and confusing as ideology theory is, it still seems to retain some common
characteristics.

Ideology is almost always tied to questions of epistemology and thought. And
secondly, ideology in an everyday sense retains a negative conception or critical
component. No one likes to think of their own thought as ideological. Indeed, ideology
theories without a critical component are essentially useless (Larrain, 1979). Some
theorists conceive of ideology simply as belief systems. In this sense, everyone’s belief
system is an ideology. To regard ideology as synonymous with culture renders ideology
useless. Larrain (1979) criticizes such a view as failing to distinguish ideology from
other intellectual and cultural products. But there is one sense which the “neutral”
conception of ideology shares with critical conceptions, and that is in its functions.

Eagleton (1991) finds six functions commonly attributed to ideology. These are:
to unify a group, call a group to action, rationalize the social order, legitimate the actions
of a group, universalize conceptions of the social order, and naturalize the social order.
No matter what axiological properties the theorist ascribes to ideology, these functions
are always present.

Ideology was first employed by French Enlightenment thinkers to characterize a
new society based on rational principles. They coined this new science ideology.
Napoleon, disgusted with these men of ideas for not being men of action, blamed them
for the failure of his empire and branded them “Ideologues” (Plamenatz, 1970, p. 15).
His use of the world ideology in a negative sense stuck, mostly because the grandfather
of ideology, Karl Marx (1970) adopted the same rhetorical strategy in denouncing the
Young Hegelians in The German Ideology. He criticized these thinkers because their
theorizing did not change the state of the world in actuality. In later writings, Marx
changed his concept of ideology but retained its negative connotations. Thompson
(1990) notes at least three definitions of ideology in the writings of Marx. Indeed, part of
the reason for today's confusion about the term's meaning is directly related to Marx's continual modification of the definition of ideology. One theorist criticized Marx's writings on ideology as careless because of this tendency to equivocate (Plamenatz, 1970, p. 20).

Prior to Marx, ideology was used to refer to some form of faulty cognition. Marx elaborated on this characterization to perceive ideology as a social product of historically necessary social contradictions (Larrain, 1979). Marx combined two seemingly opposed strategies to explain ideology: the philosophy of consciousness and scientific rationalism. Marx's theory displays an ontological idealism from the former and a mechanical materialism from the latter. What this combination results in is a social theory which posits an active subject in a historically concrete situation. As Marx writes: "material reality is historically made by men (sic) and therefore susceptible to change by their practice" (Larrain, 1979, p.35).

Consciousness, according to Marx, is a social product. Ideology is a type of consciousness: false consciousness. Material activity, the transformation of nature by humankind, produces contradictory relations. Distorted representations about these relations unite consciousness and reality, thus legitimating class structure and the whole social structure. Therefore, ideology may be characterized as the concealing of contradictions. It naturalizes the order of things as if it were in the interests of all society. Because it promotes the status quo, this phenomenon works in favour of the ruling class. As the ruling class do not produce ideology consciously, ideology is therefore an objective phenomenon, occurring as part of the process, but not intentionally produced.

Larrain (1979) finds two main directions that neo-Marxists tend to focus on in the theory of ideology. These are the positivist stream and the historicist stream. The positivist approach stresses the base-superstructure idea in Marx's writing and the historicist perspective studies the relationship between theory and practice. Lenin and Gramsci fit the historicist mold.
Lenin introduced the idea of multiple ideologies in conflict. There were positive ideologies and negative ideologies. This idea as it became articulated through Gramsci became influential in the area of cultural studies.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony includes ideology but is not reducible to it. Gramsci offers two explanations of hegemony. The first characterizes hegemony as the balance between coercion and consent. The second definition is "the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (Eagleton, 1991, p.112). According to Gramsci, ideology is practised, that is, it is lived socially rather than being merely a system of ideas. In this sense, ideology becomes material and pervades all aspects of cultural life, as this passage demonstrates:

The press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it [the ideological structure]: libraries, schools, associations, and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets (Gramsci, 1985, p.389).

Struggle takes place not only in political sites but in the entire cultural arena. This is because dominant power in the modern state is diffused through several institutions and activities. Unlike the Bolsheviks, one can not seize power in a direct confrontation with the state. The site of struggle is in culture. For an example of how politics is diffused throughout culture, one only has to look at popular social movements in the twentieth century. Touraine has studied social movements and shown how they transcend political parties and fight for control over historicity (Lechte, 1995). Social movements in this light would seem to fit in with Gramsci's notion of cultural struggle. Gramsci's conception of ideology works as hegemony in place of coercion.

Gramsci sees two types of ideology (Larrain, 1979, p.81). Historically organic ideology is a "conception of the world." This ideology is necessary to a given structure. In conflict with the necessary ideology is the arbitrary or willed ideology. These ideologies, because they are most conscious of themselves, were considered by Gramsci
to be superior to the others. S. Hall’s (1980: 1981) ideas concerning ideology (1980; 1981) reflect Gramscianism. They became quite influential in the area of cultural studies and are employed in the film analyses that follow. However, many cultural studies theorists have moved away from the analysis of ideology and economic struggle into the realm of pleasure and semiotic struggle (Harris, 1992, p.167).

Ideology has been conceived of as ideas and also as behaviour, but there is a third way of conceiving of ideology, and that is as discourse. The advantages of this conception are clear. Semiotics used the theory of signs to explain how material reality is linked with the realm of ideas. Signs are material entities but they deal with meanings which are a conscious, or ideal, process. Discourse theory studies how ideology is encoded into signs and sign systems. Discourses examine the area where power and meanings intersect. Voloshinov said “without signs there is no ideology” (in Eagleton, 1991, p.194). As Eagleton (1991) makes clear:

Language itself is a relatively autonomous system, shared by worker and bourgeois, man and woman, idealist, and materialist alike; but precisely because it forms the common basis of all discursive formations, it becomes the medium of ideological conflict (p. 196).

Social interests compete at the level of the sign. Voloshinov (1973) characterized this competition as a multiplicity of accents. However, in the case of ideology, an attempt is made to close down the many forms of signification, and fix one meaning as definitive. Through the necessary use of language we construct our world. But certain groups attain positions of greater power and, consequently, greater capacity to control the meanings in a given social and historical context. Indeed, meanings are used to attain and maintain power in different settings. Through speaking, one changes the world. As Austin (1962) has written, speaking is a way of acting. Each action is an expression of power. It intervenes in the way of the world and, depending on the speaker, can have more or less of an effect.
Fiske (1996) has utilized discourse theories in his analysis of popular media. He writes that discourses have three dimensions. A discourse has

a topic or area of social experience to which its sensemaking is applied; a social position from which this sense is made and whose interests it promotes; and a repertoire of words, images and practices by which meanings are circulated and power applied (Fiske, 1995, p. 3).

Any attempt to make sense of the world is to exert power over it, and the social circulation of that sense is to exert power over others (Fiske, 1995, p. 3).

Media portrayals that give prominence or preference to discourses that are antithetical to First Nations survival serve to legitimate and sustain relations of domination in the interests of colonialism. These discourses must be critiqued and challenged in order to make people aware of the embedded Eurocentrism in popular entertainment as well as to open up the possibility for alternative discourses that encourage and support fair living conditions and mutual respect for different Nations and ethnicities.

As Fiske (1995) makes clear, discourses of race are often deflected or consumed into other discourses to remove white racism from the topic area (p. 38). Racism is always interwoven with other axes of power (Fiske, 1995, p.37; also Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 22; Marchetti, 1991). Racist power can be exerted invisibly and silently if coded within one of these other axes of intersection. One strategy is that of recoding (Fiske, 1995, p. 39). Aboriginal peoples are often the poorest people in Canadian society (Frideres, 1993, p. 162), but rather than deal with the racial questions these statistics raise, Canadian institutions prefer to discuss the issue within the discourse of poverty and economics. Thus, the issue is turned into one of class, and in a “free” labour market economy, a meritocracy as Fiske terms it (1995, p. 45), the poor are thought to be poor because of their lack of effort or ability, essentially hiding the ways in which racial power maintains these unequal relations. The discourse of race is recoded in the discourse of
economics which erases the identity of the people involved, treating individuals as abstract entities.

The intersection of discourses can work to code racism into other topic areas. For example, the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people making up the impoverished class of society can lend support to those who believe that Indians are inferior. Appealing to the notion that it is a free country and anyone can get a job, the high numbers of unemployed Aboriginal people make it seem that they can not succeed where all things are otherwise equal. This hides the fact that race is a factor contributing to inequality.

Aboriginal people are kept in a position of subordination by their supposed inferiority, but it is merely difference from the norms and practices of Eurocentric society that becomes wrongfully encoded as inferiority. The problem is that Eurocentrism is often unnamed. It is simply assumed to be the natural order. Barthes (1972) has studied the way in which ideology (which he calls myth) transforms history into nature. He “resented seeing nature and history confused at every turn, and...wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which...is hidden there” (p.11). Barthes characterizes myth as a second order semiological system. This means that a sign in the first system becomes a mere signifier in the second. This smoothes over history, transforming it into nature. The very effectivity of myth is that it does not hide speech, it naturalizes it. Barthes introduces the idea of ex-nomination in his essay “Myth today.” Meaning flows from the bourgeoisie until naming is unnecessary. In passing from reality to representation, the bourgeoisie has ex-nominated itself. And that which can not be named becomes difficult to resist and attack. So it is with whiteness in cinema.

The ex-nomination of Eurocentrism serves to maintain racial relations of power which in turn accords lower stature to non-white peoples. The invisibility of whiteness, its assumed naturalness, makes it easier for the status quo to escape responsibility. Thus,
those who are non-White are thought to be inferior and abnormal in essence when the reality is that the definition of their otherness is a construction from the position of whiteness (Fiske, 1995, p.44-45). As White (1995) observed, the perspective on film that people get from books, reviews and so on are usually from White people, but since that fact is never specified, the particular experiences, politics, and biases of a White person’s responses to film are mistaken for common sense. Consequently, one hears about a film that is a “Black movie” but it makes no sense to say that a film is a “White movie” since that is the way American films are assumed to be (p. 253). The outsiders are often aware that they are outside and they construct their identity in relation to their difference. Today, Aboriginal identity is a co-construction of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants at particular points in history. Aboriginal people create their identity from White myths as much as Aboriginal myths (Langton, 1994).

Shohat (1991; Shohat & Stam, 1994) has devised a methodology which allows the film audience to see the representation of race speaking through whiteness. This she terms “inferential ethnic presences,” or “the various ways in which ethnic cultures penetrate the screen without always literally being represented by ethnic and racial themes or even characters” (1991, p. 223). Thus, music, dancing, symbols and landscapes can communicate ethnicity although the narrative and characters do not explicitly appear “ethnic.”

Cultures can express their marginality through “neighboring others” (Shohat, 1991, p. 230). Indians, therefore, can read their oppression from movies about the Black experience and vice versa. Arthur Penn is quoted as having said in 1968 that the film he was working on, although explicitly representing the Battle of Little Bighorn, was an analogy to the experience of the present day “Negro” (White, 1995, p. 1).

Shohat’s method of reading ethnicity from texts requires the concept of the open text. Seeking out and identifying the dominant discourses present in open texts is an important part of cultural studies. Both Fiske (1987) and Eco (1979) argue that all texts
are “open,” meaning there is potential for viewers to make resistant readings. Accordingly, it is important that the dominant ideologies encoded into films depicting Aboriginal people are sought and identified in the thesis and those moments when texts open themselves up to aberrant readings are pointed out. In analyzing the ideologies embedded in each of these texts individually, the concepts of intertextuality, narrativity, and discourse will be used.

Thompson (1990) has advised others in the study of ideology to “give a central role to the nature and impact of mass communication, although mass communication is not the only site of ideology” (p.264). This is particularly important as the development of mass communication “greatly expands the scope for the operation of ideology in modern societies, for it enables symbolic forms to be transmitted to extended and potentially vast audiences which are dispersed in time and space” (p.266). In order to decipher the ideology in media messages, the audience’s own appropriation and social context must be considered (Thompson, 1990).

The discourses of Aboriginality have been set into film by the dominant group in society for many years. Aboriginal control of media representations of Aboriginal peoples will provide a greater diversity of representations. Hand in hand with this diversity is greater control over the cultural identity portrayed in films about Aboriginal life. Instead of the mythmaking that has so pervaded American and Canadian cinema in the past, the First Nations in film will finally appear relevant, contemporary, alive and most importantly, real. The end goal of the thesis is to critique texts that employ strategies to close down meanings of Aboriginality and try to control First Nations identity. Consequently, the thesis encourages and supports the texts that provide a greater number of liberating possibilities of what it is to be a member of the First Nations in North America in the late twentieth century.
II. STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIANS

Stereotypes have historically developed into a useful method for quickly conveying ideas through film (S. Hall, 1981). They are popularly accepted and therefore financially viable in a commercial film industry that thrives on conservatism and fears radical change (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995). Mainstream films often rely on stereotypically based and historically motivated representations of Indianness (Bataille & Silet, 1980; Francis, 1992; Friar & Friar, 1972). This simplistic approach to portraying First Nations cultures and peoples helps to promote ideologies which favour the dominant culture's continued exploitation of Native land and resources to the detriment of Native lives.

Many of the film stereotypes and representations of the First Peoples discussed in later sections have an origin. This origin does not begin with contact in 1492 but was, rather, the legacy of European myths, legends, and philosophies applied to the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (what was renamed North America). The reason it is necessary to study these origins is because some of the earliest writings and conceptions of the Native peoples were often written without seeing or meeting an Indian at all. Those who did have some contact judged the people by European standards. These standards were not only completely out of place in the so-called 'New World' but were also being challenged constantly by members of the Old. Those challenging the Europe they lived in would use Indian people as support for their radical philosophies. One case in point is Rousseau's coining of the term "noble savage," to point out the problems of the aristocracy and its dissolution from a state of nature that was conveniently idealized (Zinn, 1992).

The main point to be made in this section is that the ideas most people have about Indians are based on what Europeans have said, written and filmed about them. Often, these depictions and representations tell us more about the Europeans and their concerns
than they do about the First Nations. Several problems arise from this phenomenon. First, the colonization of the First Nations and their resources continues to be supported by these myths (Churchill, 1992; 1994). Second, the assimilation and genocide of the First Nations in both past and present is supported by simplistic notions of who we are. It doesn’t take an Elder to figure out that there is no reason to treat a people as autonomous, independent or sovereign when they are popularly portrayed as simple, violent and/or uncivilized (Deloria, 1988). In fact, it was and is this kind of representation which justifies missions, residential schools, land appropriation, higher rates of incarceration and other forms of oppression. Third, the identities of the First Nations are in danger of being lost through mass media depictions which present to both European North Americans and the First Nations ideas about what ‘Indians’ are. Not only are these depictions powerful to peoples who have never met an ‘Indian’ before; they are powerful to those Natives growing up who do not often see themselves represented on television and in the movies. A typical effect of not seeing oneself represented in media is the thought that one is abnormal (hooks, 1992, p. 5). It also makes one think of oneself as a secondary citizen. Not being seen in the news makes one feel unimportant, neglected. In rare moments of representation when these cultures are reduced to appearing stupid, simple, violent or savage, these portrayals can make a person feel worthless. In some cases, they can make a person resentful of the culture that produces these images.

**Exploration Myths**

Upon contact with the new world, European explorers in search of new trade routes came across people that defied all their previous experience. The Indians, being unexplainable by traditional thought, threatened the comfortable world view of the European.
The natives posed serious challenges to traditional authority; that of
Aristotle and the ancients, the Bible, and the Church fathers. These
people of the New World seemed to have no definite place in the

Tales about the Indians were mainly treated sensationally, because the Europeans found
them to be a curiosity. Artists would depict the new people as hairy. It was thought that
they resembled the "Wild Man" of European folklore (Dickason, 1984). Much like Santa
Claus is described to others in our culture, the Wild Man was a myth promulgated in
Europe in the fifteenth century. Wanting to believe that such creatures were found in
America, artists made pictures of the Indians depicting them like these fictional beasts.
Ironically, certain First Nations feared excessively hairy beasts, and these fears were the
source of the myths of Bigfoot and Sasquatch (Dickason, 1984, p. 83). It should be
added, however, that some members of Western Coast nations claim to have really seen
Sasquatch; it may be too soon to call these creatures 'mythical.'

Europeans used the term savage to refer to those people discovered in the New
World. Dickason (1984) tells us that the term savage (or sauvage, salvage) originally
meant "living in a forested area" (p.63). As applied to the indigenes, it came to mean
closer to the beast than social and civilized man (p. 63). This is mainly because any
perceived differences between the European and the First Nations were coded to
represent the lack of civilization in the Native. But the fact of the matter is that the
differences were merely differences, and often the application of European standards and
norms to First Nations customs was not only inappropriate, but they were often applied
inaccurately.

One example used to connote savagery was the clothing of the First Nations. As
Dickason (1984) explains, to the Europeans of the time, dress signified status. The more
clothing one wore, the higher the status one was accorded. This was a product of
Church doctrine that decreed the notion of shame. Clothing was to be worn to avoid
temptation and the possibility of sin. To not be covered was considered shameful.
Shame, it was thought, separated man from animal. As the new people seemed to feel no shame for their lack of dress, the Europeans assumed they must have a lower standard of morality. This supposed lack of morality was used as an argument that these people were not human. If Indians are conceived as not being people then there is no need for legal or moral restraint in dealing with them (Deloria, 1980, p. 50). This attitude was to affect religious and political policy.

“Savagery” was also indicative of dirtiness, illiteracy and cruelty. Alexander Mackenzie equated uncleanness with savagery, focusing on how close to the earth the Indians lived (Duchemin, 1990, pp. 66-67). Although the Indians bathed more regularly than Europeans, they were still thought of as filthy. Bathing, to Europeans of the time, was linked to the concept of pleasure and not hygiene (Dickason, 1984, p. 69). Not only does this characterization miss the fact that Indians were not dirty, it also mistakenly codes Indian bathing behaviour as hedonistic.

Writing was not associated with the Native Americans by the Europeans. In Europe where literacy was primarily a skill possessed by those who could afford to be educated, being able to read connoted higher class. Despite the burning of hundreds of indigenous books in Central America, the explorers still accorded lower stature to the indigenes because they thought they could not read or write.

Savage also connoted cruelty. Indians were linked to cannibalistic behaviour and other acts considered barbaric. Of course, the Europeans were no strangers to cruelty, as the Inquisition had devised many interesting methods of torture to inflict on people (Churchill, 1994). It is clear that the European could not see the Indians as merely different from a cultural standpoint. As Dickason (1984) observed, “It was not so much lack of reason or even retrogression that made them savages, but rather that they were not like Europeans” (p. 66). Indeed, many ideas about their biological differences were put forth. MacDonald (1990) sums up the early nineteenth century dispute over the inherent nature of aboriginal peoples quite well. The question on European minds was:
... were they ordinary human beings who lacked only education and Christian conversion to become fully civilized, or were they survivors of an early stage of human development, incapable of improvement and true belief, and destined to disappear from the Earth (p. 93).

Early theories included the idea that Indians were actually white and that their skin changed colour because of all the oils and paints they put on their bodies (Dickason, 1984, p. 146). The French thought that interbreeding would revert the race back to their proper whiteness (Dickason, 1984, p. 146).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a popular theory explaining the origins of the American Indians drew from the Biblical story of Noah. It was believed that the Indians might have been descendants of Noah who crossed the isthmus between Russia and Alaska. The further they got in time and space from the origin the more they degenerated (Bentley, 1990, p. 81). A long line of papal edicts using this logic supported the idea that the Indians indeed were human. Because they were human and were so far from the origin, the Indians were thought to require conversion to Christianity. Native children were sent back to France to be educated in the French manner to convert them to Christianity. The uselessness of this endeavour is especially apparent. When they were placed back in their culture they reverted to the ways of their community (Dickason, 1984, p. 218).

But for all the attempts to characterize the Native peoples as savage the most binding ‘proof’ for Europeans was in descriptions of their behaviour. The problem with these descriptions is that Europeans did not see Indian behaviour as merely a reaction to European provocation. Deloria (1980) observes that Indians are savages in the eyes of Europeans only when they resist exploitation. Equality is achieved by adopting white culture and religion which entails the extinction of those characteristics that make an Indian an Indian (Deloria, 1980, p. 51). Duchemin (1990) examined the notes of Alexander Mackenzie and found that the explorer attributed the hostility, contempt and lack of respect the Indians showed him to their fickle nature. Mackenzie would exploit
Native people to work twelve hour days for him as guides and when they deserted his company, accused them of laziness, capriciousness, disloyalty, and an independence bordering on irrationality. These descriptions as written down served to universalize and dehistoricize the characteristics of the Indians Mackenzie met. That is, he attributed these characteristics to all groups, not distinguishing among individuals, and wrote blanketing statements such as “this is the way they are” (Duchemin, 1990, p. 61). These accounts were treated as evidence in the development of social theories. As Duchemin (1990) testifies:

Eventually, ideas of the kind we have observed here were incorporated in theories of ‘scientific racism,’ which declared the Indians, with indigenous peoples all over the globe to be both culturally and biologically an inferior species (p. 69).

The Enlightenment period saw the rise of a social development theory given credence by A. R. J. Turgot in France and Adam Smith in England. It was thought that cultures developed through four stages starting with the hunting/savage stage, progressing to the herding/barbaric stage, the farming/agricultural stage and finally the trading/commercial stage. Reaching the agricultural stage was thought to be the greatest leap forward because self-sufficiency gave way to the excess that allowed for leisure, trade and prosperity. A second tenet was that the commercial stage brought civility, convenience, patriotism, and arts, but also luxury and vice (Bentley, 1990, p. 77). Alexander Mackenzie adhered to this theory when he described the Native people of the West Coast as primitive and savage (Duchemin, 1990, p. 65). This idea of savagery is preserved by the first two stages of this paradigm. But the theory also leads logically to a second conception, that of the noble savage.

The ‘noble savage’ stereotype is essentially a reworking of the garden of Eden myth. Indians were thought to inhabit a world that resembled the golden age before temptation (Dickason, 1984, p. 81). The Indian as noble savage is free of the vices that plague civilized humankind because they live in a state of simplicity. Indians were and
are used as a point of comparison to critique European life. Petrone (1990) says that both the myth of the savage and "le bon sauvage" are self-serving images for Europeans, "ideological weapons in the Indians' subjugation that obscured their true identity" (p. 2). Indians who are portrayed as heroes or geniuses are not truly Indian but earn this role because they display superiority in white-valued skills and characteristics (MacDonald, 1990, p. 96). Indians represented in literature as well as history textbooks were portrayed as good when they lived in harmony with nature, displayed simplicity, hospitality, wisdom, military alliance, Christian conversion, or acceptance of White domination (MacDonald, 1990, p. 93). So when the First Nations are compliant with non-Native action or exhibit traits esteemed in European society, then they are considered good. It is a case of the European admiring the Indian not for their difference but for their similarity to Europeans. Indeed, Francis (1992) writes that admired Indians (such as Pauline Johnson) were made famous by non-Natives (p. 142). Part of their appeal, and helping them to remain in vogue with non-Native elites, was the fact that these Indian celebrities did not challenge the values of mainstream Canadian society.

The Government Problem -- Policy

Whether viewed as noble or bloodthirsty savages, the practice of viewing the First Nations generically has led to continuing problems. The very term 'Indian' is an example of the problem. All the First Nations of what is now called America were lumped under the generic term 'Indian' and today can identify with each other as 'Indians' since the experience of dealing with the Europeans shares many similarities across the continent. Indeed, to be part of the political process in the United States, Canada and Mexico, Indians must band together. But when solutions are proposed by state governments, a blanket solution is made problematic by the distinct needs arising out of differences from nation to nation (Deloria, 1980, pp. 52-53). This is but one of the
developments of the so-called "Indian problem." Various manifestations of the "Indian problem" over the centuries are an indicator of the non-Native culture’s concerns. Utter (1993) has traced the changes in American Indian policy over time and characterized the various policies as how the United States can best

...develop trade,...obtain land for national expansion,...remove tribes from settled areas,...conquer them,...establish and keep them on reservation lands away from society,...take their reservation lands away,...absorb them within American society so they lose their culture,...reorganize them for renewed government,...terminate their self-government,...establish opportunities for tribes to determine their futures themselves (p. 26)

The Canadian government’s historical approach is not much different (Frideres, 1993). MacDonald (1990) suggests that Canadian sentiment toward Indians changed after Confederation. Indians, originally thought to be a race that would die out, acquired the status of a problem requiring a solution (p. 105). As the variation and contradictory objectives show, policy reflects the changing interests and needs of the dominant society, not the Indians for (or against) whom the policies are drafted. This only makes sense as the government was formed by the newcomers to represent the newcomers.

In addition, many policies were based on the ethnological accounts of explorers. By accumulating ethnographic information on Native peoples,

...remote or "savage" nations could better be understood; one result of this was that their behaviour could be anticipated, policies could be formulated for dealing with them, and they could be subjected, more effectively, to whatever other agenda Europeans had in store for them (Duchemin, 1990, p. 59).

At one point in history it was most pressing to have the land settled by non-Native people in the expansion of empire. Naturally, a policy that allows settlers to deal with Native peoples with whatever means they deem fit supports this goal. Later, when it was convenient for the government to move Native peoples away from areas that they wanted to use for their own benefit, the reserve system was established, moving Indians to territory which would appear to have no use. Later, when resources such as uranium or a
possible hydroelectric dam are found to interfere with reserve lands, the government alters policy to allow for the exploitation of the resources on the reserves. One of the main reasons Aboriginal self-government is discussed at all in the 1990s is because it could save the non-Native government money in a time when their main concern is appearing to cut down on funding and reducing deficit spending. The Indian Act is not an act benefiting Indians, but, rather, a policy that reflects the concerns of the non-Native government at the time of drafting.

**Literature**

Like government policy, literature, too, borrows from ethnological knowledge, which, as shown above, leaves much to be desired. Being based on little or no direct experience with Native peoples, early literature produced stereotypical portrayals that were foils for white heroic deeds. Francis (1992) observes that Indians in textbooks are demonized in order to make Canadians into heroes. Indians are presented as naive, superstitious, treacherous warriors, and either as disappearing or non-existent (p. 160). These same themes pervade fictional literature.

Monkman (1981) shows how the Indians in White literature are merely foils for White culture. Indians are savage when opposed to White control, orthodox Christianity, and ordered landscapes (as opposed to what she calls “nomadic disorder”). When they are valued, it is for their simplicity: vital spontaneity, natural religion, and harmony with nature. In both cases, they are seen as uncivilized in Monkman’s terms. Civilization in this sense is constituted by the norms of Europeans. Indeed, the Indians in Canadian literature that are regarded as heroes are either mediators between red and white cultures, allies of the whites, or those who “stand above their tribe in dignity” (Monkman, 1981). Indians in literature are more often symbolic than realistic.
Johnston (1987) explains that Indians in literature are not merely ignorant portrayals of Indian life, although they sometimes appear to be. The problem is a matter of signification. As Johnston (1987) explains: “a moral danger persists of reading symbolic figures...as if they were statistical norms, or realist figures...as if they were moral simplifications” (pp. 64-65).

Since Native characters have been used primarily as a means of justifying, or testing, or exploring, or challenging the values of the white society by providing contrasting alternative values, readers need the means to tell when they are not learning something about Native Peoples, so that they may be more confident when they are learning something (Johnston, 1987, p. 52).

Film

Although it is a problem that Native people used in symbolic roles are misread as referents to reality, it is more of a problem in film than literature. In film, the problems are not limited to the mistaking of symbolic for real (which can and does happen). Rather, the problem is in how the people are portrayed visually. Different nations’ customs are mixed and matched. Clothing never worn by any nations are invented for the purposes of the film (Bataille & Silet, 1980). Movie audiences mistake these depictions for authentic Indian dances and garb. But film has its apologists too.

O’Connor’s (1980) views resemble Johnston’s (1987) in that portrayals of Indians in movies are seen as not wholly ignorant. Various considerations about what makes a financially successful film alter the way in which Indians are portrayed. How entertaining the film is to the viewer, and how non-political it must be to ensure its entertainment factor is not lost, are both decisions which are made when making a film about Indians. One example O’Connor (1980) gives is how dramatic considerations cause films to focus on spectacle so that battles are portrayed rather than peaceful day to day life (p. 12). The viewer must realize that these considerations outweigh the
authenticity of the culture being portrayed. The main goal of Hollywood is to entertain, and if a person’s expectations are violated, then the goal of entertainment has been derailed (O’Connor, 1980, p. 8). These filmic considerations are the unintentional cause of the Indian stereotypes in motion pictures (O’Connor, 1980, p. 8). But whether or not these representations are intentional, the resulting stereotypes are harmful. They are not only harming the particular nation being portrayed but all the First Nations. A faulty representation of one Nation is generalized to all the Nations, since all Indians are assumed to exhibit the same harmful stereotypical traits. The problem is that movie audiences do not see a Sioux, or an Apache representation; they see an Indian (Deloria, 1980).

But Hollywood’s desire to please the audience and avoid challenging them too much has led to the strategies Friar & Friar (1972) coyly labelled the “If it makes money, make it again” and “If it works, use it again” philosophies (p. 78). Paying attention to audience desires is not always a negative thing. In the late sixties, producers discovered that the major movie audience was younger and more educated. An attempt to appeal to this demography would explain the change in theme and time in pictures featuring Indian subject matter during this period (O’Connor, 1980, p. 12). Films such as Soldier Blue and Little Big Man were more sympathetic than past portrayals. Despite these obvious outside factors, the problem of Indians being defined by dominant culture’s use and view of them remained.

One case in point is how Indian themes in film are often interpreted to be at the service of political allegory. Price (1980) found Indians in film prior to the 1940s to be victims of a patriotic nation-building phase in American history. The main portrayals of Indians were as villains to the pioneers attempting to establish a new nation. With the advent of the second world war, Indians ceased to be villains in films as Germans, Italians and Japanese took their place (Price, 1980). O’Connor (1980) disagrees with Price. Movies in the forties continued to use the Indian as a device for raising faith in
American military might in World War II (O’Connor, 1980, p. 14). French (1980) views Cheyenne Autumn as an allegory for the German extermination camps in World War II. He also points out the more obvious parallels to Vietnam’s My Lai massacre that occur in Little Big Man and Soldier Blue. Churchill (1994) would argue that the parallels are more than symbolic, that in fact, the forced migration of the Cherokee (and other nations) to reservation lands is very much the same action Hitler ordered against Jews, Gypsies, Homosexuals and others. Churchill (1994) finds that the mass extermination of large numbers of indigenous people of the Americas outnumbers the exterminated in the German concentration camps. So these films could be seen as more than a comment on present day conflicts but are an attempt to show that these actions, deemed right when Indians are involved, are wrong when countries other than the States are involved in similar atrocities.

One problem with Indians being used as purely symbolic in film is that next to a white character with emotional development, the Indians appear to be mere props. Johnston’s (1987) warnings about the Indian in literature apply equally to filmic representation:

The symbolic use of Indians by white authors is not in itself racist, but the use of anomalous symbolic Indian figures in a realist context is in danger of being racist since they are separated from the humanity of the other characters and obliged to carry an intolerable burden of meaning (p. 65).

In film, however, the problems are amplified. Films reach greater audiences than books and leave little for the viewer to imagine visually. Thus, misleading and simplistic film portrayals cause more damage. Whereas books have individual authors who rely on personal knowledge and imagination when writing their books, films are group efforts and it is harder to assign blame. Knowledge about customs, clothing and other matters pertaining to the First Nations is often derived from previous films that were wrong in the first place. When films are presented in the form of realism, the viewer of the film will

29
often take away what they see of Indian culture as authentic or the way that Indians really are or were.

Problematic Indian representation in film is nothing new. Criticism of Indian stereotypes dates back to the 1910s with the journal *Moving Picture World* advocating depictions of a more accurate and educational manner (Bataille & Silet, 1980). As popular White actors tended to play the main Indian roles, stereotyping set in. Having no direct knowledge of the culture they were portraying, non-Natives brought their own assumptions to the role (Bataille & Silet, 1980, p. 40). Rice (1980) has commented that strategies such as using non-Indians in Indian roles “are self-defeating in that they are an admission that the issues themselves are not enough to interest the paying public. The portrayal of social justice...must be buttressed by production values” (p. 148).

In addition to the problem of having non-Natives in Native roles, often the sets and costumes were simply thought to be interchangeable no matter what nation was being portrayed. Many film sets and costumes were based on paintings made in the nineteenth century. It was a prevalent feeling among many of the artists of the time that they had to capture this race in art before they vanished forever (Francis, 1992). The most popular artists of this genre focused nearly entirely on Plains Indians. As a result, Hollywood took all Indians to be Plains Indians when researching how to dress their actors (L. E. Williams in O’Connor, 1980, p. ix). Customs and clothing which never would have appeared in the practices of the same group nevertheless surfaced in Hollywood pictures, leading to a mentality Churchill (1992) dubbed the “seen one Indian, seen ‘em all” effect (p. 236).

Perhaps the biggest problem with Hollywood films depicting Indians is the narrow focus of attention to a very short span of history. As Churchill (1992) elucidates, a 25 000 year history is compressed into a span of merely four centuries, especially heavy on the latter half of the nineteenth century. He denounces the lack of pre-European contact settings for films but is more critical of the lack of contemporary settings for
Indians in film. Indeed, the narrow focus on the mid to late nineteenth century as a setting for Indian stories implies that there are no Indians left, and that there are no problems or issues that demand attention in the present.

Even attempts at sympathetic portrayals result in the same harmful representations (Churchill, 1992). Brown (1988) found that films by non-Aboriginal directors depicting Aboriginal people tended to limit the movement of Aboriginal characters, suggesting that they have a clearly defined place in society which should not be breached. Three themes were common to these films. One was the theme of Aboriginal Defeat. This theme suggests that Aboriginal people can not live in European society. The second theme, that of the individual journey, implied that “some intelligent and sensitive Europeans can make an individual journey towards Aboriginal society/culture” (p. 485). The third theme, the return journey, suggests that “Europeans in the bush are out of place but may learn to live in it with the help of Aborigines” (p. 486). The key finding is that Europeans in film are given more privileged movement of space. They can, on an individual basis, become more like Aboriginals, but Aboriginals in European society are doomed to fail or must return to their rightful place, the bush (p. 487).

Shohat (1991) finds the assignment of “place” to ethnic characters is endemic in American film. Marginalized groups were often only seen in musical numbers, dance segments and in the role of entertainers, while the “realistic” narrative development is reserved for the white characters (p. 235). Characters that are identifiably members of marginalized cultures do not evolve in film narratives while the white protagonists evolve teleologically by the film’s end (p. 235). These findings suggest that ethnic peoples are depicted in films as having a defined role or place in society that should not be breached. It might be added that early depictions of the First Nations placed them in the role of villains, and as barriers to American progress.
Whereas Brown’s study suggests that films by non-Natives limit or simplify Aboriginal identity, Langton (1994) argues that meanings of Aboriginality are co-constructed by White myths and Aboriginal myths in an intersubjective intercultural dialogue. The result is that no one knows what “Aboriginality” is but they do know what it is that stories tell us “Aboriginality” is and what films tell us “Aboriginality” is. Non-Native people having no contact with Aboriginal persons in real life often accept the myths of stories and films. The challenge is to allow Aboriginal people to work in film with non-Aboriginals so as to contest the field or background which contributes to ideas of “Aboriginality” (Langton, 1994).

Productions where Natives are in a position of some creative control are often devoid of the above simplifications and are more difficult to fit into such categories (Brown, 1988; Prins, 1989). Brown (1988) found that in three of the films he analyzed, the “racial register” was relatively absent. These films were peculiar, however, in having Aboriginal creative input. The limiting movement Brown detected in other films about Aboriginals since 1955 was not present in films with Aboriginal creative input. Writing from an anthropological perspective, Prins (1989) found that cultures representing themselves tended to produce documentaries that stir audiences into taking sides with the indigenous peoples on some issue of injustice or detrimental government policy (p. 87). They have evolved from being represented as “objects” of study into active participants in controlling the flow of information about themselves (p. 87). Native participation in producing films “contributes to the empowerment of indigenous peoples committed to struggle for cultural survival in the modern world system” (Prins, 1989, p. 88).

However, the limited availability and low profile of Aboriginal productions is evidence of the economic constraints imposed on these filmmakers. Weatherford (1992) finds that the independent media world has “provided a venue for a multiplicity of visions of Native American reality” (p. 64). This only makes sense, as independent media are better able to provide underrepresented viewpoints. The short documentary
has become the genre of choice for many Aboriginal filmmakers, often because the cost is lower than for a full length fictional feature drama. Also, several Native directors working in Canada have received their funding from the National Film Board of Canada, an agency allocating over seventy percent of its resources to documentaries. As more and more Native people are given opportunities to make films about their experiences, greater will be the diversity of representation of the First Nations. The First Nations films are locally produced and tend to be very culturally specific. In comparison with the film industries of the United States, however, the First Nations appear to have more in common with each other than with the films produced about them by others.
III. NATIVE PEOPLES IN NON-NATIVE FILMS

In this section, a cultural studies analysis of Dances With Wolves reveals that the sensitive approach to the representation of Native peoples is not necessarily a positive phenomenon. Among the problems are the setting of the film’s action in the past, erasing the Native reality from contemporary concerns, the villainization of one tribe and the sanctification of another, and finally the unwillingness to abandon the convention of a non-Native narrator and main character. Another film by a non-Native director, Dance Me Outside, is contrasted with Dances With Wolves. The film is considered an improvement over Kevin Costner’s vision in several ways, but unfortunately, because of its Canadian origin, it is argued that the film does not reach a broad enough audience to make an effective impact.

Cultural Appropriation

The huge critical and popular success of Dances With Wolves has seen in its wake countless attempts to cash in on the western genre. This revival has included a trend of “revisionist” or more “sensitive” portrayals of Indians. Although the gains of Dances With Wolves should not be overlooked, there were still many problems with the way in which the Sioux in the film were handled. Making positive stereotypes to replace negative ones does not erase the problem of simplicity. Though Indians are treated on the surface in a positive way, this new sensitivity is not an attempt on the part of Hollywood to apologize for previous offensive depiction of Aboriginal peoples. Rather, the studios have discovered that this new approach to Indian themes is marketable and profitable. As Rieff (1993) has observed, multiculturalism’s silent partner is the discovery that minorities are the new consumers and minority themes are salable to more general audiences too. Indeed, White (1995) has found an increase in minority themes
since the general population accepted the "ethnic stories" of Purple Rain and The Color Purple.

The problem that arises with minority stories being sold to the public is that minority culture is being turned into profit for the benefit of the already systemically privileged group. This process is better known as cultural appropriation. What is particularly deplorable about this practice is that it harms the group being represented in that they have no control over their cultural traditions. If Indian stories are going to be told properly, then it is necessary to have Indians in positions of creative control. Native peoples must become directors, producers, and writers of their own stories. The anthropologist Prins (1989) has confirmed that when Native people control production, their concerns are better addressed and better expressed. This is true not only in the case of documentaries, but also in the realm of the commercial motion picture.

**Why Dances With Wolves**

*Dances With Wolves* was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, this film has been hailed by many critics as a new way of telling the story of the American Old West. The fact that it tried to use "authentic" Lakota dialect and employed "real" Natives to play the roles of the Indian characters were firsts in Hollywood. For this reason alone, *Dances With Wolves* is an important film. In conjunction with these achievements was a great deal of critical praise for the "authenticity" of the Indians. The language, dress, and culture were thoroughly researched to provide the most accurate picture possible according to director Kevin Costner and screenwriter Michael Blake. These claims are another reason to give the film some scrutiny. The revisionist history that the film presented was welcomed by the Hollywood establishment, which bestowed seven Oscars on the film including Best Picture and Best Director. It seemed that Hollywood was patting itself on the back for finally making a picture where the Indians were not all
bloodthirsty villains, a legacy haunting Hollywood since its earliest studio pictures. Yet another reason to study this film is that it was a popular success, earning $184.2 million at the U.S. box office, more than ten times its $18 million dollar budget (Internet Movie Database, 1997a). This popularity helped revive the western as a financially viable genre in Hollywood once again. It is most likely the impetus for the countless Indian themed movies to follow in the 1990s. In short, Indians were becoming a hot film commodity and *Dances With Wolves* was at the centre of this trend in Indian movies in the last decade of the twentieth century.

**Social Trends**

It must be asked what conditions in the cultural environment made it possible for Indians to become so popular in 1989. Some trends of the 1980s included the acceptance of masculine sensitivity, and the rise of New Age sensibilities. Books hawking “Indian wisdom” and “Indian ceremonies” went hand in hand with a revival in naturalism. Perhaps this desire to live like the noble savage was the driving motive to see this film. The new perspective on Indians was that they lived in harmony with nature and one could learn from their example by appropriating their ceremonies and getting in touch with one’s “inner selves.” Environmentalism was a buzz word and the “Indian as conservationist” was one stereotype particularly in vogue (Francis, 1992). America was becoming more aware of its multicultural make-up and films more and more began to recognize this factor. The success of *Purple Rain* and *The Color Purple* which addressed the black co-culture in the US initiated a greater acceptance of “multicultural movies” in the mid-eighties (White, 1995). Certainly, it was time in the late eighties for a sensitive Indian film.
Critical Analysis

The main drawing power of *Dances With Wolves* was Kevin Costner. Churchill (1992) has noted that Hollywood depictions of Native Americans often resort to the device of using a white character as the narrator and main character. He laments that there is yet to be a major motion picture “which deals with native reality through native eyes” (p. 236). The star of previous blockbusters *Field of Dreams* and *Bull Durham*, Costner was the main reason people flocked to this film. It was a chance to see their warm sensitive hero for nearly three hours. The cultural climate made film audiences eager for Costner’s sensitive masculinity. It was also favourable for the revisionist western where people could enjoy the thrills of a traditional western with a politically correct spin on the Indians to assuage the guilt of Indian representation in westerns of the past.

The narrative of *Dances With Wolves* follows the story of Lieutenant John Dunbar as he heads out west to “see the frontier before it is gone.” He encounters the Sioux nation, and through a series of encounters comes to live with them. He is adopted into their culture and given the Sioux name Dances With Wolves. He, in effect, adopts a mostly “Indian” way of life, rejecting much of the signifiers of his former self, and in the end rides away from the inevitable doom that he knows Americans will bring to the Sioux. It is essentially the story of Dunbar. It is not a story about the Sioux and what happens to them. Of course, if it were, it could not expect to draw many moviegoers to the box office. The draw is Kevin Costner and it is he and his character’s story that people came to see.

Critics were divided on *Dances With Wolves*. Those who loved it tended to focus on the new standards the film ushered in for using Native languages and casts (*Wagamese*, 1991). Those who hated it often had bones to pick with the “authenticity” of some manner of history whether it be the true nature of Indian wars (*Sarf*, 1991),
Indians themselves (Kael, 1994), or the portrayal of Indian culture and customs (Churchill, 1992). Although some of these critics' area of expertise was in film aesthetics, they still felt confident enough to discuss the representation of Indians from a sociological standpoint. The commonality these reviewers share is the placing of value on authenticity. It is assumed that authenticity is something to be strived for, a goal worthy of attainment. Many of these critics in passing judgement on the film focused on whether the fictional characters adhered to the dress and customs of the people that were being represented. But as mentioned earlier, the difficulty of making film refer to reality is so great that it may be pointless to even attempt this goal. It may be more fruitful to examine what ideologies the film provides and what openings there are for indigenous voices to be heard (Stam, 1991). This method begins by recognizing that the problem these critics want to point out is that the fictional characters are easily mistaken for real life Indians because the film is presented in the form of realism.

Realism is a construction: it is not reality but a form. Realism is a particularly powerful form to use as a device for naturalizing ideology. Realism invites the viewer to accept the position of Dunbar/Dances With Wolves and what he represents. The dominant specularity of this film is clearly that of an enlightened white North American of the late twentieth century. Indians were mistreated but there was nothing that could be done about it. This film continues the age-old effort of justifying, rationalizing and explaining the past as though it were inevitable. Contemporary concerns are ignored as though they were irrelevant.

Although Dunbar at one point in the movie is said to have, "turned Injun," he can never truly lose his whiteness. An underlying theme of the film is that of cultural identity. What is it that makes one an Indian? It would appear that dress, language, names and technology are identity signifiers. But changing these signifiers alone does not make one an Indian. It is much more complex than that. Dunbar becoming Dances With Wolves does not help us understand Indian issues. Positive stereotypes replace
negative stereotypes without any noticeable change to the people who are truly being represented. Instead of being portrayed as savages, they are portrayed as exotic, noble, "genial versions of [white people]" (Kael, 1994, p. 1245). A better understanding of the concerns of the First Nations is not acquired by watching this film.

The first message extracted from the movie is a common one when a white person is in the lead role. Usually the effect of such a narrative device is that white characters will have full and uninhibited movement of space (Brown, 1988). The Native people will appear unable to occupy the white world and, thus, will appear simple. Their "place" in society will be suggested by a narrative that follows the white character. As Brown (1988) would expect, the Sioux can not join European society, supporting his thesis that Aboriginals in film narratives must either revert to Aboriginal culture or fail at merging with Europeans. Dunbar, however, is given privileged movement of space. He moves toward Aboriginal culture on an individual basis but with the ability to return to his culture when he desires to return. Of course, in the film, Dunbar refuses to return to his culture of origin but it does not mean that he has left it entirely. One sure sign that Dunbar does not fully enter the Indian world is that he conveniently falls in love with and marries a white woman that the Sioux have adopted. Not only does this handy plot device make it simple for Dunbar and the Sioux to talk to each other since they have a translator, but it also allows the touchy subject of interracial sex to be avoided. Thus, Dunbar by not having sex with an Indian displays one more characteristic of remaining firmly entrenched in the white world. He has moved into the world of the Sioux, but at the same time, effectively maintains his distance from them. He continues to straddle both worlds, the European and the Native. This feat is not possible among any of the Native people in the film. Although they learn how to use guns with only a few hours training (when Dunbar shows the Sioux his stockpile of guns on the eve of a battle with the Pawnee), the Sioux are largely unable to comprehend the coming Europeans. But Dunbar rarely has problems understanding the Sioux.
Indeed, Dunbar is often the one who solves the Sioux’s problems for them. Anxious about the lack of buffalo, the Sioux are surprised when Dunbar informs them that the buffalo have come back. Aside from questioning the logic of a Nation who make the buffalo their life not being able to track them or hear them stampeding in the night, there are some other problems with Dunbar’s position in the buffalo hunt. Having never hunted buffalo before, Dunbar travels into the thick of the herd and shoots one down. He then “saves” a young Sioux from certain death by buffalo trampling by shooting the buffalo moments before it reaches the young brave. One Elder viewing the film commented that Dunbar should not have intruded on the young Sioux, Smiles a Lot, because it was rightfully the Sioux’s kill. If Dunbar did indeed violate the code among Sioux regarding whose kill the buffalo was, it was not dealt with in the narrative. Indeed, back at the camp, Dunbar’s story is told again and again and he is treated for the first time as a friend and hero.

The problem with this scene is that Dunbar takes precedence over the Sioux on a subject that should really be their domain. That is to say, the people who have been living off the buffalo for generations are unable to detect the presence of buffalo but Dunbar can. They are unable to kill the buffalo with the ease and skill that Dunbar is able to deploy. The problem is not one of realism or accuracy. If that were the case, then Kicking Bird, the medicine man, would not have accompanied the warriors on the hunt. The problem is that the narrative presents the European as having privileged knowledge over a subject area that is rightfully the Sioux’s. The effect this portrayal has is a defence of white dominion over resources since they know better what to do with them. It would appear that the Native peoples require someone to solve their problems for them. This is especially evident in the scene where the Sioux battle the Pawnee.

We learn that the Pawnee are “pressing the Sioux hard.” The Sioux are on the defensive which makes them the good guys. Now, how about portraying them as on the defensive against the US? The Pawnee are used in this film so that an old fashioned
Western shootout can take place without any moral implications. What is most offensive is the idea that the Sioux could not fight their own battles. Dunbar once again saves the day as he rides back to the fort and teaches the Sioux how to use firearms overnight. What would they do without Dunbar? Not only does it seem that the Indians need a European to solve their problems, but it seems that they need European technology to solve their problems too. This is the second time that Dunbar uses white technology to save the Sioux. He pulled out his rifle during the buffalo hunt much to the awe of the Sioux there. What might have added a level of complexity to this film is if Dunbar learned to use some Native technology to get by. Not only does the narrative suggest that the impending white domination was inevitable, but that the technology of the European was more highly evolved and inevitable in the same way. So we see once again that the discourse of white domination wins out through the narrative. White technology saves the Sioux from themselves and from other “savage Indians.”

When the Pawnee come to fight the Sioux, it is not the first time we have seen them committing violent acts. They were the brutal murderers of Timmons who transported Dunbar to his remote post. Despite the portrayal of Timmons as a brutish pig, burping and farting his way across the frontier, he moans with his dying breath, “Don’t hurt my mules!” This last request is a cry for sympathy as we learn that he is not entirely a bad person. It makes the Pawnee appear absolutely barbaric when they ignore him and take his scalp without a word. Later, in a flashback to Stands With A Fist’s childhood, we see that her family was brutally killed by the same Pawnee. In every shot of the Pawnee, they are portrayed as savage in a number of ways. First, they wear more menacing war paint than the Sioux in an obvious technique to portray one nation as the good guys and the other as the bad guys. Secondly, they rarely speak on screen. This has the effect of distancing us from them because they remain mysterious. They are not accorded humanity in the same way the Sioux are. Third, they are always depicted committing acts of violence, to code them as the bad guys and as worthy of being killed.
Certainly the ultimate irony is that this “pro-Native” film can have the audience cheering as Dunbar and others pump Pawnees full of lead like in the westerns of long ago. The question is why are the Sioux noble savages, and the Pawnee bloodthirsty savages? Certainly the Pawnee were not all bad, just as the Sioux were not angels in respect to the Pawnee. Indeed, in the time period in which *Dances With Wolves* takes place, the Sioux were occupying Pawnee territory, driving them out of what is now Nebraska (Sarf, 1991, pp. 68-69). Yet, Costner and Blake divide the good and the bad simply down cultural lines. Sioux, good; Pawnee, bad.

Using Brown’s (1988) thesis, Dunbar fits into the second theme: the European who is able to make an individual journey towards Aboriginal culture. He adopts the dress of the Sioux, learns Lakota, and lives in a tipi. Although he doesn’t really “turn Injun,” certainly Dunbar is not welcomed by the army upon his return. But this is because he is dressed like an Indian and refuses to speak English to the officers. Of course they would treat him the way they do. He has violated the codes of the army, giving away weapons, and abandoning his post. This is even before he starts thinking he is an Indian. Portraying on film the way in which the First Nations were treated historically is apparently not enough to make people feel remorse. Rather, audiences are expected to feel sympathy for Natives because of the treatment toward Dunbar dressed as a Native. Certainly, because this film was expected to reach mainly a white audience, the main object of sympathy was made to be Costner’s Dunbar. He is favoured both by the narrative, and racially, as the hero. One is supposed to see the racism of the Europeans in their treatment of Dunbar’s character. That he is treated this way because he looks Indian is played to provoke pity and possibly shame. However, because we watch with the dominant specularity of a twentieth century politically correct discourse, we find ourselves to be above the officers. Set in the past, the film distances viewers from contemporary forms of oppression, genocide and racism. Because we have the dominant specularity of a contemporary discourse, we assume ourselves to be above these men,
that they are products of their time, and as a race, we have all evolved. The reality is that
the strategies and techniques of oppression have changed and even when our sympathies
are with the Natives, there is little that we do about it.

In fact, leaving the theatre, the viewer may feel sympathy for the First Nations but
feel bad for the past and see it as ancient history. That was the horrible reality of
European/Aboriginal relations in the nineteenth century, but as the narrative makes
explicitly clear: in numbers like the stars, the white man will come. His domination is
inevitable and there’s nowhere to go to escape the certain migration. Indeed, the
narrative closes with the totally unquestioned fact of impending domination. Perhaps
from our standpoint in history it is unchangeable, but it was by no means inevitable. The
difference is this: what did happen is unchangeable today. It is impossible to alter the
course of events in the past. However, it is another thing entirely to suggest that what
happened in the past was inevitable from any point within the past. That is to say, the
character of Dunbar speaks that the impending domination was inevitable before he
could know that it was so. He is speaking in the 1870s as though he lived in the 1990s.
That many people really did believe in that time period that Indians must be conquered
and removed from the land at all costs is a discourse one would expect to be spoken in
the movie. But coming from the character of Dunbar, the most sympathetic of characters
to the Sioux, to talk of the white man’s domination as inevitable seems incredible. That
the movie ends with Dunbar stating that their way of life would die forever is even more
problematic. It supports the stereotype of the vanishing race and erases the existence of
the First Nations today from any filmgoer’s consciousness.

This tidy conclusion fails to question the unjust treatment of Native North
Americans in the past. Rather than question the systematic destruction of 98% of the
Native American population since European contact (Churchill, 1995), the narrative
suggests that this conflict was inevitable. Certainly, the cultures could have had councils
in the manner of the Five Nations, and later Six Nations confederacy. But clearly, the
Europeans were not interested in peace. And this narrative, despite being called by some writers "revisionist" actually leaves the past unquestioned, effectively justifying it. In addition to leaving past genocide and injustice unquestioned, the viewer is not moved to draw connections to today's Aboriginal peoples and their problems and intercultural conflicts today.

Indeed, many of Hollywood's treatments of films with Native people set their stories in the past, leaving the question of today's problems and struggles undiscussed. One has only to look at *Pocahontas*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and *Black Robe* to see some key patterns emerge. The main stars of these films are not Native. The Indians are from the past and modern conflicts and struggles are not mentioned. One anomaly, *Thunderheart*, is set in the 1970s. Still retaining a non-Native star (who is said to be half Indian), the film deals loosely with real events, but instead of dealing with Native conflicts, turns the story into a conspiracy story where the people at the top are not to be trusted, erasing the racial tensions and contradictions of Indian policy. Certainly a documentary of the real events plaguing Pine Ridge in the 1970s such as *Incident at Oglala* makes a more intriguing and complex film which brings to light the injustice and hypocrisy in Indian America better than *Thunderheart*.

**Dominant Specularity**

Many of the American characters in *Dances With Wolves* are meant to be laughed at. Usually they are the officers or other members of the army who, unlike Dunbar, are racist simpletons. The viewer's dominant specularity of late twentieth century white middle class looks down on these simpletons with an air of superiority. One reason is because in 1990, many people have an enlightened (or at least think they do) sense of the past and prefer to think that society has eliminated much of its racism. People like to
believe that they live in a society where everyone is equal. Thus, the acts of the men in *Dances With Wolves* make modern viewers look innocent by comparison. This technique effectively removes the guilt one may feel about the treatment of Indians in the past because the individuals are not portrayed as calculating perpetrators of genocide, but simply as stupid. The killing of millions of Indians was often calculated, planned, deliberated, conscious and the result of much thought and argument (Churchill, 1994). There was philosophical support for putting Indians in a lower position than “normal” human beings. Eurocentrism led many great thinkers, by all accounts intelligent people, to fail to see Indians as equals (Dickason, 1984). Costner does us a disservice by refusing to acknowledge the ideology that was typical of most Americans of the time. Theories of inferiority based on race to the exclusion of other variables secured genocidal acts, without any thought devoted to realizing that the creators of the standards just might have an edge on superiority. The “jokes” in *Dances With Wolves* don’t really show the ideologies that led to the destruction of so many lives.

Also, many ideologies that would have shown the collectivist nature of the Sioux culture were left out. The Sioux end up looking like what critic Pauline Kael (1994) called “little genial versions of [white people]” (p. 1245). Indeed, the tribe seems to be made up of individualists, each playing a typecast role from previous movies, rather than the roles that would constitute typical life on the Plains. Kicking Bird is said to be a medicine man, yet he accompanies the tribe on a hunt. Thus, even when the writers try to ascribe roles to the Indians, they do not follow them through faithfully.

A useful device to justify colonialism is to teach North Americans that the Indians who lived here before Europeans arrived were technologically backward, fierce war-mongers without religion or government (Churchill, 1992). The concept of evolution applied to societies encouraged the act of land appropriation. It was believed that Indians were not evolved highly enough to control nature, and required the more highly evolved white man to help them (Deloria, 1988). The fact of the matter is that
Indian people felt no need to assert control over the earth. The earth both figuratively and literally was the place from whence all creation was formed (Wagamese, 1996). And since the seizure of land was the basis of the conquest, reclaiming that land is a key to regaining traditional identities. As Wearne (1994) illustrates,

"a plot of land is for most indigenous people a symbol of their right to live - the place where they grow the subsistence crops that ensure their survival...land is also identity, and inheritance of land makes the vital link to ancestors whose spirits dictate so many customs and traditions (p. 15)."

When the earth is referred to as Mother it is because all life is thought to spring from her. In this sense we are all related. And you don’t treat your relations in abusive ways (Wagamese, 1996).

Others have argued that First Nations devastated their environment in many ways before the white man arrived (Sarf, 1991) so that the white man is not the only polluter of the environment. Obviously, we can not entrust the land to any one nation or people. Since we all share it, the responsibility is everyone’s. But what fictions like Dances With Wolves promote is the idea that the Indians must move over for whites, that they can not possibly challenge the invasion of the whites. Whites are superior technologically, and by their ingenuity, inherit the right to do with the land what they will. It is misleading to put out a film in the 1990s that is so ignorant of the many uprisings of the indigenous nations of the Americas. It is a film that suggests that it is impossible to resist European domination even as Indians are taking up arms, setting up blockades, petitioning the United Nations for protection of human rights, and negotiating new constitutions. To present the ideology that it was inevitable that the Sioux be driven from their land neglects the fact that the war is not over. The Sioux, and other nations, are constantly battling for recognition of greater rights, of land claims and new legal interpretations of treaties.

The closure that the narrative of Dances With Wolves provides for history erases the present from any serious consideration or rendering. One has only to think of Steven
Spielberg's Schindler's List, and Spike Lee's Malcolm X to see how these directors chose a point in history and attempted to link them to today's movements in their conclusions (White, 1995). In contrast, Dances With Wolves leaves no connection to the present. To give Costner credit, we could assume that he left us with the dominant specularity to contrast his ending with the presence of indigenous groups and their struggles today. This would require the viewer to utilize the codes of irony in deciphering the words Dunbar and the Sioux speak to each other. But such a reading is not suggested by the three hours preceding it. In addition, how can one expect Costner to treat the audience as thoughtful, and capable of making complex connections, when he decided to portray the Sioux and Pawnee simplistically as good and evil, respectively.

What's with all this dancing anyway?

One recent film by a non-Native director that seems to defy many of the above trends is the 1994 release Dance Me Outside. The setting is contemporary and the cast is largely Native American. Dance Me Outside, based on several short stories by W. P. Kinsella, and directed by Canadian Bruce MacDonald, tells the story of how a reserve community is affected by the rape and murder of one of their members by a white man. While the reserve has their revenge on the white rapist and killer, they also have their fun with another white man who is introduced to the reserve for the first time when he visits his wife's family.

Obviously a key theme is the relations between Natives and non-Natives. But where Dances With Wolves told the story from the white perspective, this story begins and ends on the reserve. The narrator, Silas Crow, is one story away from entering a mechanic school in Toronto. His friend, Frank Fencepost, is also putting off school until he writes the mandatory story required for admittance. In the meantime, the two are content to get into fights at the local bar and hang out with their girlfriends. Their routine
is shattered after the discovery that Little Margaret Wolfchild has been raped and killed by a white punk named Clarence Gaskell. The people of the reserve cope in different ways. Coyote stops reading and gets into more fights. Poppy leaves for Toronto and finds work as a waitress. Sadie Maracle, Silas’ girlfriend, stops seeing Silas and immerses herself in Native issues. Her main concern is in seeking justice for the death of Margaret through politicians, the legal system and the press. Everyone on the reserve is angry that Clarence receives a light sentence of two years for manslaughter.

There is a subplot involving another white man and his effect on the community. He is Robert McVey, the husband of Silas’ sister, Illianna. Because of Robert’s low sperm count, Illianna can not conceive, which means pressure from her mother, Ma Crow, who wants grandchildren. Mad Etta devises a scheme to make everyone happy. She arranges for Gooch, Illianna’s ex-boyfriend, to impregnate Illianna, so that Ma Crow can have grandchildren. Silas and Frank hold a phony namegiving ceremony for Robert to keep him occupied while the plan is being carried out.

Director Bruce MacDonald should be praised for a number of advances. First of all, Native actors are hired to play Native characters. Secondly, the setting is contemporary. Thirdly, natives are finally portrayed with a sense of humour. Each of these ideas will be explored in turn.

Costner chose to have Native people play the Native characters of Dances With Wolves. McDonald continues this trend in Dance Me Outside but there is an important difference. The Native actors are the main characters. This provides a very different orientation for the viewer. The ‘rez’ is the accepted norm and the white people who come in are the outsiders. It is basically a reversal of the situation Native characters usually occupy in films. Bruce McDonald has cast Native actors in his other films where the story is not specifically about Native people. This has an effect of portraying Native people as “normal,” sadly not the case in most films. Natives in film are often treated as mysterious and exotic. Representation such as this has the unfortunate consequence of
associating Native people with the European idea of the “primitive” (Shohat/Stam, 1994). Thankfully, Graham Greene, who played Kicking Bird in Dances With Wolves, does not have to play exclusively ‘Indian’ roles. He appeared in Die Hard With a Vengeance where his obvious Native characteristics were not integral to the role he played. Greene played a police officer in New York, not working on a “Native” case. He was simply representative of the multicultural quality of the police department and of the city. Roles like these increase the presence of the First Nations in popular culture without reducing them to a definable place in society.

A particular problem with film portrayals of Native people is that they are symbolically annihilated from the present. Dance Me Outside gives the story a contemporary setting and deals with white ignorance of Native reality. One reviewer of the film found it problematic that the reserve seemed entirely cut off from the rest of civilization. Most reserves are isolated geographically, and this can be a good thing in some cases. However, the main characters, Frank and Silas, don’t seem to know particularly what is going on anywhere but on the rez (a carryover from the stories of Kinsella, although McDonald should be given credit for improving Silas’ grammar for the film version). We hear that they are trying to get into college in Toronto but keep putting off the entrance essay. The essay that allows them to “escape” the reserve is the story of the film’s events. It is as though they want to escape the reserve but do not really want to get away badly enough to actually do some work.

But the isolation of the reserve does not isolate the characters from various forms of racism. At the bar named Blue Quills Hall, white patrons look for any excuse to fight with Native people. Clarence jumps on the hood of Silas’ truck to make whooping sounds with his hand over his mouth, an action resented by Silas and his friends. Later another patron calls Gooch a “wagonburner” in an attempt to instigate a fight. The most obvious form of the racism comes from the rape and murder of Little Margaret. Clarence Gaskell is sentenced to two years for manslaughter. Robert’s white lawyer friends won’t
do anything to help get a longer sentence or an appeal. Sadie gets nowhere through legal channels and political lobbying. The greatest irony is when Clarence is killed, police officers threaten to charge Silas, Frank, and his brothers for first degree murder.

Ignorance is rampant too. Silas and Frank think they are supporting Native issues by trashing the car outside the bingo hall that they mistakenly believe belongs to the feds. And finally, Ililianna’s husband is guilty not of racism so much as ignorance. He wants to make a good impression when visiting the reserve, but actually fails when he is a little too protective of his car. His attempts to make a good impression actually make him an easy target for the reserve residents especially when the boys take him on a phony namegiving ceremony.

This scene in particular causes some Anishinaubaek to become upset. Frank and Silas stage a false namegiving ceremony where Robert chooses the animal “wolverine” to represent him. He is made to wear a ridiculous “honorary war headdress” and drink a “ceremonial brew” in the “ceremonial clearing” before undressing and doing an absurd dance covered in special paint. One Native viewer took offence at this scene because he felt that it belittled a sacred ceremony, treating it much too lightly (mentioned by M. J. Miller, professor at Brock University, personal communication, January 1996).

But there is another way of interpreting this scene which uses the rich history of Native practical jokes played on non-Native anthropologists and archaeologists. D. H. Taylor (1996) writes about a person who is shocked to find out that a farcical story invented in his youth, in order to fool a visiting archaeologist, actually surfaced in an academic book of Native legends (p. 85). Many folk tales and legends are invented on the spot to play tricks on academics and tourists. Even within the film, the character Frank says, “we’ll give him an Indian name. He’ll like that. Remember that developer they did an honorary chief ceremony on?” Certainly, the characters are not belittling the cultural traditions. At one point, Frank suggested they waste Robert’s time in a sweat lodge. Silas does not even deliberate a tenth of a second before firmly stating, “Out of
the question." It seems clear that Silas and Frank themselves revere traditions. And although they allow Robert to believe he is having a naming ceremony, it resembles little of a typical naming ceremony for the Anishinaubae. A real naming ceremony is one that thrusts responsibility on all the people involved. A parent must approach the person they want to have name their child. This person accepts the responsibility seriously, for it is a great honour, and it also means great obligations for the namer toward the child. The namer will become practically a second father to the child later in life. Robert did not ask to have a name chosen for him. And even if he did, Silas would have to take many days, weeks or even months to realize the proper name for Robert. Only then would the ceremony begin.

The namegiving scene is evidence of the film’s attempt to incorporate humour, the kind of humour typically found on reserves and typically used by Native people to cope with life. Perhaps the use of Native humour is the greatest achievement of Dance Me Outside. Many representations of Native life have left out this most important element. Indeed, not only the humour but the subtle ways of suggesting actions are evident too. For example, Mad Etta says to Frank, "that’s quite a story. Perhaps you should write that down." This is her subtle way of telling Frank that he could get into mechanic school with the very story he told her. Ma Crow also uses Indian subtlety in telling her daughter she approved of her trip to Paris by saying, "Next time you come back, bring me a baby....and something from France." This is typical of a culture that does not condone telling people what to do or how to do things. Suggestions often work better than commands.

The problem with Dance Me Outside, is one that afflicts most Canadian films — reaching a sizeable audience. Canadian films in general fare poorly across the continent, largely because American studios control distribution and can afford to produce and promote the types of films that people seem to want to see. Large budget fictional films reach the greatest number of theatres. The Canadian marketplace is too small to support
domestic production, and is often treated by American studios as merely an extension of their domestic market. One consequence is that English language films from Canada must break into the U.S. market to break even, requiring a great part of funding from an American distributor to ensure a release in the U.S. Unfortunately, American distributors would sooner promote an American film with known stars (Kelman, 1977, p. 136).

Another result of the small Canadian market is that Canadian feature films are very reliant on public financing (Ord, 1995, p. 153). *Dance Me Outside* required the financial assistance of Telefilm Canada, the Ontario Film Development Corporation, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Ontario Film Investment Program. Both the above factors encourage the support of productions that are smaller, cheaper versions of American style films. Canadian films that do make it into the American market often are relegated to the art house cinemas and do not reach a broad audience. The above two reasons explain *Dance Me Outside*’s small gross at the American box office of $304 852 (Internet movie database, 1997b). Compare this amount to *Dances With Wolves*’ gross of nearly $200 million. Obviously the gains of McDonald’s film are neither reaching nor being appreciated by the larger public.

**Conclusions**

Despite the shortcomings, there are a number of real achievements in *Dances With Wolves*. To attempt using an Aboriginal language for so much screen time is an accomplishment. However, it will truly be noteworthy when the actors speak a language that is their original tongue instead of merely learning phonetic sounds and repeating them, as the actors of *Dances With Wolves* did. Indeed, the Lakota spoken by the men in the film is a source of humour to actual Lakota speakers who recognize it as a female dialect. The use of Native actors and actresses in the roles of Native people is an admirable feat, although long overdue. That such a large budget was invested in a film
with Native themes is worthy of accolades. However, these feats are somewhat subdued by the fact that the budget was largely due to Costner’s ability to attract audiences.

The story was not really Native themed: it was about Costner’s search for the noble savage. It was a story that asked us to find Natives funny if they’re Sioux, scary if they’re not, and most of all to direct most of our affections and emotions to the important person in the plot: Lieutenant John Dunbar. The racism of the dominant culture is not exposed except when directed at Dunbar. The ending suggests that the Sioux will meet their end when the rest of the White world moves west and forces them off their land. There is no suggestion that the Sioux and other Nations are survivors and are still fighting this “inevitable” conquest today. The concluding message of Dances With Wolves ignores imperialism’s new face in the 1990s without any parallels or hints that we should be concerned for these people in their modern environment. Unfortunately, the real breakthroughs of this film are overshadowed by the continuing presentation of hegemonic colonial discourse within the narrative of the film.

In the future, an attempt must be made to have more complex characterization for the Aboriginal players. These films should focus on portraying contemporary Native issues. Dance Me Outside, despite its inclusion of Native main characters in contemporary settings, is atypical of non-Native films about Natives. Not only was this representation not the norm, but it failed to reach an extensive audience. This is typical of Canadian films in general, a fact that compounds the barriers for First Nations filmmakers living within Canada. Without access to the kinds of funding necessary to mount a first class fictional dramatic production, one way that many Indian directors address contemporary concerns is through the use of documentary, an example of which is explored in the next chapter.
IV. NATIVE PEOPLES IN NATIVE FILMS

In this section, two films are analyzed. The first, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* is analyzed from a cultural studies perspective. It is argued that the film, although produced for a general audience, has additional symbols for Native people as a result of the cultural background of the director. This point is further explored by examining *Sentencing Circles -- Traditional Justice Reborn*, an independent film by Doug Cuthand. The sentencing circle is read as a sign which contains several meanings that are at the roots of traditional First Nations knowledge systems. This different worldview is also the basis for the action filmed in *Kanehsatake*. The film is counter-hegemonic, radically different from the focus of many news outlets covering the Oka crisis of 1990. The event is portrayed with dramatic difference because the film’s director approached the material from a Native worldview.

The Oka Crisis

The Canadian media turned its attention to Oka when a police raid on a Mohawk blockade in Kanesatake, near the village of Oka, Quebec, resulted in the shooting death of an officer. Although the blockade was originally intended to prevent the expansion of Oka’s golf course, many other issues come to the fore. This battle with the municipality of Oka, and the provincial police, was nothing sudden. The Mohawks of the area had been protesting the loss of their land to white developers and settlers for over two hundred and seventy years.

In 1717, the Governor of New France granted the priests of the Seminary of St. Sulpice the seigneury on the Lake of Two Mountains as a Catholic mission for the
The Native Americans of the area believed the land had been set aside for
them, and settled there four years later, but their appeals for recognition of their property
rights were rejected. Claims for the seigneur lands were petitioned in 1781, 1788, 1794,
1802, 1818, 1828, 1839, 1848, 1869, and on into modern times with either the colonial
powers or Canadian politicians denying them the land. Even today, the Mohawks are
denied land claims because the federal land claims process stipulates that the tribe must
prove that they occupied the land since “time immemorial.” The proof which they
provide are clay pipes and pottery shards of their ancestors found in the forests beside the
lake. Some archaeologists have dated the pottery shards to be thousands of years old.

The Indians living during the 1500s in the area disputed were probably St.
Lawrence Iroquians named so by Jacques Cartier. In the late 1500s, it is presumed that
Mohawks drove out the St. Lawrence Iroquians as they moved north to gain control of the
fur trade. Some of the defeated may have been absorbed through inter-marriage and
adoption, which would mean some of the Mohawks today could possibly have links to
the earliest known inhabitants of the region.

The land was turned over to the Sulpicians for the use and benefit of the Indians
of the mission, on the express condition that title would revert to the Crown if the Indians
vacated the mission. Indians were allowed to use the land but could sell neither the land
nor the wood, nor the crops and hay without the director’s approval. With every petition
the Indians made to have property rights recognized, the priests would argue that without
their tutelage, the “savages” would return to their “slothful and apathetic ways” (York &
Pinder, 1991, p.87). The priests had great power and influence which allowed them to
strike down the Indian’s petitions continually.

*I used York & Pinder (1991) and Frideres (1993) for the historical background which
appears on pp. 54-58.
The Mohawks often consider King George III’s Royal Proclamation of 1763 as a kind of charter of their land rights. It stated that Indians were to be protected in their lands unless those lands were formally surrendered to the Crown. Mohawk reserves were recognized by the courts in Akwesasne and Kahnawake, giving hope to the Natives of the Lake of Two Mountains seigneurly. But these hopes were relinquished when the matter was settled in 1840. In that year, the government passed an act confirming the seigneurly’s titles, in reward for the Sulpicians helping the British quash the Rebellion of 1837-38. The Ordinance of 1840 effectively destroyed any chance of the Native people gaining legal recognition for their land claim.

Tensions over the use of land continued into the twentieth century. In a final attempt to end the land dispute, the federal government purchased from the Sulpicians the lands that the Mohawks were still occupying. The lots became Crown lands, not a reserve, and were scattered throughout the town of Oka, as well as the farm lands west of the town. It totalled about four square kilometres, only one percent of the original seigneurly. It did not include the Commons, which the Mohawks considered to be the most important piece of land in the area. This land was appropriated by the town two years later under authorization of the province of Quebec.

Claims continued to be submitted by the Kanesatake Mohawks for the original Lake of Two Mountains seigneurly but were struck down because the Natives could not prove that they had occupied the land since “time immemorial.” As these claims went through the courts, the municipality of Oka built on disputed land without consulting the Mohawks. Mohawks were not consulted about a marina project, a planned hotel-resort complex, new housing developments, nor the proposed Oka Golf Club expansion.

It was the exclusion of the Mohawks from the council meeting where the expansion was discussed that eventually led to the standoff in the summer of 1990. Oka mayor Jean Ouellette knew that the Mohawks would not accept the proposal to build in the woods, because in 1988, there was tension between the town and the Mohawks when
Mohawks prevented municipal workers from pruning trees in the forest. Ouellette also knew that the government and the courts had consistently denied the Mohawks any claim to the land for the past one hundred fifty years. He felt he was on safe ground when he approved the expansion project.

Many non-Native residents were opposed to the expansion too. Due to the lack of an environmental assessment of the expansion plan, and the fact that Oka’s voters were not even consulted about the plan before it was adopted, nearly nine hundred people signed a petition to stop the project. Mohawks protested the project through marches and demonstrations. Still, the town of Oka voted to proceed with the golf course in March, 1990. On March 10, 1990, a camp was set up in the Pines to monitor the forest and alert the community if any construction was attempted. Members of the camp also barricaded a dirt road leading to the forest. The Mohawks refused to leave the Pines until the golf club’s expansion plans were abandoned.

The municipality sought an injunction and called in the Surete du Quebec to enforce it. A meeting among the province, municipality, Band Council and Longhouse members held in the Pines prevented an impending raid on the camp by the police. The Mohawks rejected the offer of the municipality because it left them in a disadvantaged position. They refused to negotiate further unless the federal government was present.

A second injunction was served at the end of June, but the barricades still remained. Two days before the police assault on the barricades, Quebec Minister of Native Affairs, John Ciaccia, urged Ouellette to suspend the golf course development. The next day, Ouellette asked the Surete du Quebec to enforce the injunction. Early in the morning on July 11, about one hundred police attacked the blockade using assault rifles, tear gas, and concussion grenades. In the brief skirmish, Corporal Marcel Lemay was shot. He later died in the hospital. Controversy arose over who shot Lemay, with the police insisting that it was the Mohawks, while the Mohawks were not sure whether Lemay shot himself by accident, or was killed by friendly fire.
In a display of support, Mohawks from Kahnawake, south of Montreal, blocked access to the Mercier Bridge. This blockade gave the Mohawks more bargaining power, and forced the provincial government to get serious when listening to the demands of this disenfranchised group. The rest of the summer was a story of negotiations constantly struck down by the province or the Natives, and the same proposals resubmitted only to be rejected again. As the standoff continued, residents of Chateauguay became increasingly vocal and upset about the blockade of the bridge. They burned effigies of Mohawks, and became violent toward both police officers and Native people.

Eventually, the army was called in to resolve the standoff. The blockade of the Mercier Bridge was peacefully dismantled. Without this major bargaining tool, the Mohawks at Kanesatake were left powerless to negotiate. The army moved in on the Kanesatake Mohawks, forcing them to hole up in the Treatment Centre nearby. The Mohawks would later burn their weapons and documents, and return to the village where many were then taken into custody. Trials for various Native people involved were set for the following year.

The Oka crisis was covered by national media nearly every day of the 78 day period, from the point that the Surete du Quebec attempted unsuccessfully to impose an injunction to the day that the Mohawks wilfully left the treatment centre and were taken into custody by police and army troops. Of course, to Canadian eyes, this was the length of the conflict. But the issue surrounding Oka was much longer in the eyes of the Mohawk nation. The Pines were defended in town hall meetings, and through protests and petitions for months before the injunction. It was the death of Corporal Marcel Lemay during the 90 second exchange of gunfire on July 11, 1990 that led to the immense national attention to the conflict. Of course, the Kahnawake show of support by taking the Mercier Bridge also caused headlines and gave the Mohawks much needed bargaining leverage. The inconvenience that the closed bridge imposed on Chateauguay residents led to new conflicts and greater news coverage. The conflict brought to light
many of the issues in Aboriginal/Canadian relations. The issues of land claims, racism, treaties, sovereignty, and self-government all became more salient to the greater Canadian public as a result of the news coverage.

But the potential for greater understanding was swept away by the desire of the media to sensationalize the event. Trying to provide up-to-the-minute news was challenging when not much was happening. Reporters speculated on the potential arsenal of weaponry the Native people possessed behind the lines. The government press conferences were often left unquestioned as to their truth or falsity. In some cases, government positions were accepted and legitimized through repetition. For example, Mulroney called the Warrior Society a "gang of terrorists," a phrase repeated without question in news stories and headlines by such "objective" authorities as Peter Mansbridge. When the federal government finally became involved, Mulroney capitalized on the sensationalism by fuelling the fire of the conflict. The agenda became how armed were the rebels, how did they get their arms, whether they were "illegals," whether they were involved in criminal activity. The agenda became less focused on the land at issue and more and more on rumours of the dangerous potential of the Warriors to disrupt Canadian society illegally.

Indeed, Canadian opinion outside of Montreal seemed at the beginning of the conflict to be with the Natives. That developers would raze a graveyard to make way for an extension of a golf course seemed unfair even to non-Natives. When the deeper history of the land is made explicit, the case seems even more unjust. But that history did not become a focus for the media. As the conflict dragged on, new issues were introduced by the federal government to win over the public. Reports on how many tax dollars it was costing to have the army in the area were released. The army speculated about the powderkeg that was the Mohawk resistance, and these suggestive but ungrounded assumptions were reported unquestioningly by the media. The idea that the group protecting the Pines was largely made up of American war vets was circulated.
More and more, the government resumed control of the news agenda, making it possible to quash the resistance and remove the spotlight from Canada's unfortunate history of relations with its indigenous inhabitants.

**Alanis Obomsawin**

Alanis Obomsawin, an Abenaki woman, used National Film Board of Canada equipment to document the lives of the people behind the lines. The theme of injustice toward Aboriginal peoples recurs in her work as a filmmaker. In 1967, she was asked to advise on a film project about Aboriginal people. She then started directing her own films. After working for the National Film Board for several years, she became the only full-time Aboriginal director at the studio. When the occupation of the Pines erupted into violence, Obomsawin rushed to the site and the next day, brought a film crew to begin the documentation of what would become an important and empowering event in First Nations history.

The film, entitled *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, was well received at a number of film festivals by both critics and the popular audience alike. Her style of sparse narration and involvement with the people she documents gives the film a very subjective feel. The film is the voice of the Mohawk men and women involved in the standoff, telling the story of how Mohawks have resisted for three hundred years, resorting to arms only in 1990. It also gives voice to the many non-Native people inadvertently affected by the racism and physical trauma that surfaced because of the event. Obomsawin questioned the meanings that the Canadian news media circulated during the event, providing a different social and historical context from which the standoff could be read.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this text is that it is made by Alanis Obomsawin. An Abenaki born in New Hampshire and raised on the Odanak reservation
near Montreal until she was nine, her perspective on the crisis is in line with many of the Mohawks and thus, this documentary serves as a counter-hegemonic text. Not content to tell the story of Kanehsatake as though it were a "two-sided" conflict, she prefers to show the humanity of the warriors, the children, the life behind the barricades, and the history of the domination of their land. This conflict was about land and, in Native struggles, the land is not merely property. The land is alive and it is the basis of the inherent right to recognized sovereignty of many of the First Nations. That this land was occupied by the First Nations from time immemorial is the basis for their inherent recognition as sovereign Nations. The documentary genre is an effective form for explaining this history and showing how the battle manifested itself to the Mohawks involved.

**Critical Analysis**

The primary code viewers will use, in making meaning from *Kanehsatake*, is its genre. The viewer will most likely see the film as a documentary and frame the film in relation to how they approach other documentaries. Because one often associates truth and validity with a documentary (as opposed to a fictional film), Obomsawin's text will be assumed to be real or factual. Utilizing the concept of intertextuality, most viewers will bring to bear their knowledge of the event from previous news coverage, comparing and contrasting what they see in the text with the meanings gleaned from previous texts.

However, there is a tendency for Canadian audiences to resist the meanings of *Kanehsatake*. The film has been pejoratively labelled as "biased," and "only representative of the Mohawk side of the issue." These discourses support the official line which the mainstream Canadian media tended to accept uncritically from Ottawa. *Kanehsatake* was neither "neutral" nor "objective," nor did it pretend to be. But Obomsawin did not hide any footage or shy away from any outbreaks of violence. To argue that the text did not present the Canadian government's view or the army's
perspective is irrelevant. Obomsawin’s goal was to show life for the Mohawks behind
the lines. The purveyors of these meanings were interpreting the text from their own
particular meanings of “documentary,” which presupposed that a documentary is a
“neutral” and “objective” reporting of an event. But there are other styles of
documentary filmmaking which arrive at a truth by displaying one perspective of an
event. Obomsawin does not try to entice the viewer to the Mohawk side by being
distantly observant. She engages directly with the Mohawk perspective, letting it present
itself to the viewer, leaving the viewer to make their own understanding of the text.

This style of presentation fits well with elements of First Nations cultures.
Specifically, in many First Nations cultures, one principle of education is that the learner
takes an understanding from a lesson that is right for them at that time. The lesson may
have many things to teach but the learner only takes with them what they are ready for at
that time. There are so many images that one can focus on in the text, Kanehsatake, that
it makes sense to characterize what each viewer takes with them as indigenous learning.
Perhaps on one viewing it is enough to learn that Mohawk people have a different
orientation to interpreting the world. On another viewing, perhaps the focus will be on
the execution of racist actions. In any case, there are lessons contained in the film that
are presented from the Mohawk view. That the orientation or speaking position of this
text is non-White is never concealed by Obomsawin.

Indeed, the title of the film provides an effect of anchorage, which positions the
viewer’s sympathies with the Mohawks (Barthes, 1977). Employing the Mohawk name
Kanehsatake, rather than Oka, places the conflict and the orientation of the viewer to the
Native side rather than the European side. The title refuses to use the term “crisis.” The
Canadian government preferred to view the event as a crisis because it connotes
negativity: a threat to the stability of Canadian norms in society. A crisis must be
addressed quickly. It usually refers to a sudden occurrence, such as a tornado or
hurricane. As such, any response by the army sounds reasonable in that “they are
responding to a crisis,” in the same way they would respond to a disaster in nature. So the term crisis also connotes a natural disaster and an unexpected one. The connotations of unexpectedness divorce the event from any historical setting. Despite the Mohawks’ constant petitioning of the federal government for land, the government treats the event as an isolated circumstance. The rationale for choosing the subtitle “270 Years of Resistance” is twofold: to put the event into an historical context and to situate the Natives on the defensive. They are resisting rather than aggressing.

Effectively rehistoricizing and deconstructing the naturalization of the event through the title and choice of genre, Obomsawin then exposes the contradiction at the heart of all government/Aboriginal conflicts. That is, the opposing views the cultures have for the land on which they live. The opening shots of the film emphasize the age and scale of the forest through various shots of the Pines. Their size commands awe from the viewer. Shot against the sky, the trees seem untouchable, endless in height. The history of such trees reflects the sense of history and timelessness that is to be associated with European-Native relations. It is another strategy for associating the events of 1990 with a past. The camera pans from the golf course, through the Pines to a tombstone. Again, the history is emphasized.

Time and time again, signs are negotiated in terms counter to the dominant position in Canadian society. Take the example of the coverage of the peace camp in the film. Here, native sympathizers appeal to the cultural values of freedom, democracy, and human rights. But they do so on the side of those who defend the land. Here, law and order, as signified by the police car, is associated with evil in that it imprisons those who speak the discourses of democracy. Obomsawin’s text renegotiates the dominant myth of the police as a defender of the public. Injustice becomes the higher order signified in this scene.

The helicopter in the movie which constantly flies overhead can be read as a sign. Although normally the helicopter might signify power, as height often connotes power in
North American society, the position of the camera on the ground, and the comments of
the Mohawks position it more as a mere annoyance. It passes overhead with a humming
sound not unlike an insect or pesky fly. As it flies by in an attempt to harass, a warrior
comments: “War is annoying.” The intimidation loses its power through the casual
humour, a shrugging of the shoulders of the intended victim as it were. However, the
helicopter was one of many tactics on the part of the Canadian army to wage
psychological warfare on the Mohawks. The helicopter also evokes the idea of an
invasion of privacy. This reading is made possible by the representational code of
shooting from the ground. From this perspective the viewer feels as if they are being
intruded upon, and because North American culture values a right to privacy so strongly,
the viewer is positioned once again to side with the Mohawk.

Of even more interest is the use of the term “war” by the warrior. Certainly, the
government did not want the event to appear to be a war. It was called a “crisis” or a
“criminal activity” or “act of terrorism,” but never a “war.” These tactics are similar to
American president Johnson’s use of the term “Vietnam conflict” which angered many
Americans who said, “Why doesn’t he just call it what it is, a war?” (Wagamense, 1996, p.
31). But of course, it is a war. When two sides oppose each other in this manner with
the use of force, specifically weapons, they are in a state of war. The First Nations
constantly feel as though each intrusion onto Native land and resources is an act of war.
Taking land occupied by another nation is an invasion. This sign more than any other
shows that the nation Canada does not consider the First Nations as nations. This refusal
to grant nationhood to peoples who consider themselves nations was the cause of many
breakdowns in the talks and conferences covered in Kanesatake.

There is a shot during the negotiations when the camera pans over both the
Quebec flag and the Mohawk flag. These flags, through their close proximity, lend each
other their signifieds. Let me make this more explicit. Quebec is a legitimately
recognized province with a clearly distinct identity (although many Quebeccois would
prefer to have this distinct identity more literally recognized by a new constitution). It is a province with laws and powers so unique that it nearly has its own sovereignty. The province and its power are recognized widely and are symbolized by the Quebec flag. Allowing the Mohawk flag to be positioned beside it gives the same force of nationhood to it. All the symbols that the Quebec flag stands for (nation, power, identity, distinct society, government) are lent to the Mohawk flag by its being placed beside it. When their flag flies beside the Quebec flag, it shares the same signifieds. Thus, the Mohawks are accorded nationhood, sovereignty, self-determination. This is why one of the terms of negotiation for the Mohawks was to have outside observers. Aside from embarrassing Canada internationally and making sure that independent voices saw the agreement as fair, it would imply that the Mohawks had nation status (York & Pindera, 1991).

A further sign of the Mohawks having their own distinct cultures is Ellen Gabriel’s use of Mohawk language at the negotiations. The flag, and the use of aboriginal language, both signify their culture as being significantly different from Canada. Thus, any appeal to Canadian laws and rules makes no sense since they consider themselves a separate nation with a different constitution (Frideres, 1993). The Kaicnerekowah or “Great Law of Peace” is the constitution the Mohawks follow and it provides a different code of behaviour. For example, the term, “Warrior,” is described in the film as meaning “the men.” One warrior using the code name “Wizard” says in the film that when the women say it is time to defend our mother, then we go, and we are warriors. The women have a role as keepers of the earth or what Wizard calls “our mother.” Thus, it is the women, who, sensing that our mother needs protection, assign the men to their prescribed task: to go as warriors to the defence of our mother. In this sense, they are literally defending their ancestors, another one of the men’s duties. Another definition for the warrior is Hodskengehdah, which means “all the men who carry the bones, the burden of their ancestors, the ancient ones on their backs” (Onondaga Council, 1990). The ancestors have all been buried in the earth. To defend
“our mother” is to defend the place where the ancestors lie. To disturb the resting place of the people is an action beyond disrespect; it is an act of war. This is according to their constitution, the Great Law of Peace, and not only does it code the actions of the Warrior differently than the Canadian legal system, but it also provides a different code for social customs (Alfred, 1995).

The Meaning of Warrior

The Canadian news media, during the conflict, appropriated the meaning of the Warrior identity. The Warrior Society of the Mohawk nation was portrayed as a military group without the support of their own people. Whereas the Canadian idea of “warrior,” even in terms of Indian warrior, has to do with warfare and fighting, in the Guyanahgowah (also known as the Great Law of Peace, or sometimes, the Iroquois constitution), “warrior” is actually the English translation of the word Hodskengehdah, which means “all the men who carry the bones, the burden of their ancestors, the ancient ones on their backs” (Onondaga Council, 1990). The Mohawks generally accepted Hodskengehdah, they just argued over whether they ought to be using the white man’s weapons (Jake Thomas Speaks, 1990). So the denunciation of “warrior” was a denunciation of the Canadian appropriation of the meaning of this role in Mohawk culture. Indeed, Valaskakis (1992) points out that the Mohawk “warrior” was largely a construction of the Canadian media, bearing little resemblance to the meaning of “warrior” to the Mohawk people of Kahnawake, Kanesatake and Akwesasne. In Mohawk culture, “warrior” is not an entirely accurate translation of a noble concept. The European conception of “warrior” sees only the external or physical signifiers and not the cultural knowledge underpinning and guiding the notion of “warrior.” Indeed, the warrior has a place in the Guyanahgowah with delineated roles and responsibilities. This meaning is quite the opposite to mere renegades without law and order.
Perhaps the greatest difference between Canadian news coverage and the documentary is the amount of historical and cultural context used in the film in comparison with the *Globe and Mail*, for example. A sense of history boiled below the surface of the entire film. There are constant references to the Great Law of Peace. There is a conscious and deliberate use of the term “nation” when referring to the Mohawks in the documentary. There was little mention of nationhood in the mainstream (read Canadian and white) news media. This had the effect of depicting the Mohawks as a type of municipality at best, a terrorist group at worst.

Indeed, “terrorists” was a term Mulroney used to describe the Warrior Society. This was an attempt to appropriate the meaning of warrior in Mohawk society to make it offensive to the members of Canadian society by misrepresenting it. Read in its historical context and in relation to the Great Law of Peace, the role of the warrior is more spiritual than militant. In relying on the codes of the Great Law, Mohawks have a different set of evidence and morals than Canadians.

By Picard’s (1993) standards, the Warrior Society might be considered terrorists. But to the Mohawks, they are “the men,” as in the definition given above. Threats to the land require the Hodskengehdah to protect her from invasion. Thus a different social reality is in operation. The people quoted in the *Globe and Mail* construct their meanings of the Warrior Society intertextually by events that are familiar to them as Canadians of European origin. Thus, the Hodskengehdah are coded as “terrorists,” “armed rebels,” or a “militant fringe group.” But within the documentary, the Mohawks are assuming the responsibilities laid out for them as the men of the nation are sometimes called upon to do. Within the Great Law of Peace, the spiritual and cultural principles of Power, Peace and Righteousness are to be balanced within the individual and sovereign nations. The Warrior longhouse, in their interpretation of the Great Law, emphasizes power over and above peace and righteousness (Alfred, 1995). So, despite their insistence upon the teachings of the Kaienerekowah, their unique interpretation is one of imbalance. There
are other Longhouses that emphasize the spiritual over the political, such as the Five Nations Longhouse (Alfred, 1995). The rich text that is the Iroquois constitution is still a site of contested meaning, much as the American constitution is endlessly interpreted anew by the Supreme Court in light of changes in society.

The Mohawk owned and operated monthly paper, Akwesasne Notes, at the time of the crisis, devoted much of their writing to the interpretation of the Great Law of Peace by different factions within the reserve communities of Kanesatake, Kahnawake, and Akwesasne. This is not to say that the Warrior Society or Longhouse is wrong by either Canadian standards or Mohawk standards. As Kanesatake shows, the evidence for their right to perform such actions is derived from a text that holds great power and meaning within their cultural group. That this element was largely missing from the Canadian press shows how cultural background changes the “truth” of a situation. It was certainly much easier to portray the Warriors as a “faction” who were breaking the laws of Canadian society without the unanimous support of the people.

One commentary from Akwesasne Notes asked: “What if Canada were asked to justify its actions according to Mohawk law?” Indeed, this would be a very different court. The Kainenerekowah disallows outsiders to use Mohawk land or resources without the unanimous consent of the Six Nations of the Confederacy. In the months and years preceding the expansion of the golf course, members of the Mohawk nation disagreed vocally to the impending “development” of the Pines through demonstrations, marches and vigils, in an obvious affront to unanimous agreement. Continued action on the part of developers entailed the breaking of the Mohawk peace. According to the Great Law, the next stage is the requirement of settlement through negotiation. However, the federal government avoided the issue for most of the summer of 1990 and even met with criticism from the Globe and Mail for being absent from the bargaining table. The unwillingness to negotiate, according to the Kainenerekowah, is a just cause for physical removal of the invading nation from Six Nations land. Utilizing the Kainenerekowah
rather than the Criminal Code presents a radically different framework for interpreting the situation and certainly for how the press might report events in Oka.

**Cross-Cultural Differences**

But it was not just the image of the Warrior that was coded differently by each culture. It was also the image of the women. For example, Ellen Gabriel relates the initial raid on the blockade by the police as one that frightened the police because the women went first to confront them. According to Canadian social codes, men are the leaders, and the aggressive ones. But in the Mohawks’ social code, the women are the defenders of the land and it is they who must confront others aggressively and lead the people when it is time. This clashing of codes confused the police who had to postpone the raid an hour to figure out how to deal with this unexpected cultural difference (York & Pinder, 1991). The Mohawks were undaunted since they had to deal with the white codes for centuries, while their codes were ignored for the most part.

The differences between the two cultures is apparent even in paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The paintings are used in the film when narrating the history of the region and the conflicts over the land. In one painting depicting negotiation between the Mohawks and the French, the French are sitting at a table and the Mohawks on the ground. The table and chairs have been brought outside specifically for this purpose. The French sit in a perfectly straight line at the table. The Mohawks sit on the ground, in a huge circle. Thus, the primacy of the circle in Mohawk culture is depicted in such a simple activity as sitting down. The circle becomes a fundamental concept in explaining the nature of things. History is not viewed as teleological or linear, but rather as recurring and timeless. These principles are the ones that are brought to bear when discussing the land. The Mohawks in their circular perspective see the land as timeless and constantly providing for their needs. The French see the land in linear
terms, deciding what can be done with it today to improve conditions tomorrow. Such fundamentally different approaches to the land question make it impossible for any satisfying resolution to be reached. Nothing could be more evident as this picture dates from centuries before the current attempts to negotiate a land settlement.

The idea of the circle is portrayed in an even more contemporary context when the peace camp is filmed. There, a group of men sit in a circle around a drum singing. The drum is circular, and the rhythm is continuous and constant, rarely straying from its heartbeat-like connotations.

At the negotiations, a close-up of a Mohawk negotiator’s finger reveals a ring with the icon of a turtle. It is a reminder of the primary place land holds in Mohawk life. The turtle on the ring represents the turtle that the earth was built upon in Native creation stories (Gill & Sullivan, 1992).

One ironic sign is the picture of a Native man, drumming at the peace camp, while wearing a Washington Redskins cap. Many Indian people have often worn sports logos that depict Indian images to display their Aboriginal heritage. This is probably because clothing with these images is easily accessible. However, sports teams bearing derogatory names and images of the First Nations demonstrate the institutionalized racism that the Mohawks are up against. This racism is made especially explicit when the Chateauguay residents burn effigies of Mohawk warriors. The police demonstrate their racism when they threaten a man and his child with guns, only realizing later that he is, in fact, not a Native person. The arbitrariness of this racism is revealed in this segment as the police instantly change their tune upon discovering the captives are white. It also demonstrates how Native people are not easily reduced into conceptual boxes that differentiate them from everyone else. The police could not tell non-Native from Native just by looking. “Native” is not so easily coded by dress and appearance alone.

The passing from resistance to capture is usually demarcated by a boundary ritual of surrender. In the closing moments of the stand-off, the Mohawks denied any boundary
ritual, completely surprising the army. They did not signify surrender by raising their arms in the air or flying a white flag. These actions did not contain connotations of cowardliness and submission. In addition, the Mohawks wanted to show that they had freedom of movement; that they were not trapped in the treatment centre but chose to reside there. It was important for them to walk out of the compound on their terms of their free will. Walking down the hill, over the army barricades, and onto the road, the Mohawks were taken into custody by the police and the army. Because the Mohawks were unarmed and unaggressive, the amount of aggression and force the police and army used to subdue the protesters appeared excessive.

Certainly one aspect of this documentary that was not seen in news coverage was the practice of Aboriginal spirituality and counselling. Obomsawin, in an interview, declared her beliefs,

that the stand-off ended without too much blood being spilled because “three spiritual leaders, Oneida from the Iroquois confederacy, came to Kanesatake. They were wonderful. They had spiritual ceremonies; they did special medicine; they did counselling. I don’t know what would have happened if they had not come” (Alioff, 1993, p. 6).

The importance of Native spirituality may not be possible to capture on film but the spiritual component is very much alive in contemporary followers of traditional Native culture. It is the backbone of many major decisions and events. To take away the smudges, the drums, the prayers and the council of Elders is to eliminate the heart of the conflict, at least on the Native side. The philosophy underpinning the entire claim to the land, and the philosophy which assigns the roles and responsibilities to the men and to the women, is fundamentally spiritual. Where a Native director is calling the shots on a picture, there is more sensitivity to the spiritual traditions. There is an awareness that spirituality guides behaviour and is not merely a token for proceedings. Many of the white negotiators could not understand the reason for the presence of several medicine men and Elders. They expect an individual to represent all the people and sit down and
come to an agreement. Obomsawin is able to show the traditional approach to negotiations with compassion and understanding, especially because for her, "there is no line between the professional and the personal" (Alihoff, 1993, p. 6). Indeed this is reflected in the way that she conducts her interviews with the participants in the film. She sits beside them, and within the shot. She is not detached from her subjects. She shows her emotions. She cries. She is with the people who are the subject of the film.

To display the smudging and the drum prominently is to show that the conflict was not about land as property, but about land as a part of the people. The land is part of their identity; their ancestors reside in the land, not spiritually, but materially. The taking of the land is to take away a part of their identity. To reclaim their identity through spiritual practices is to strengthen it and to show that it exists, that they are powerful, not as a lobby group, but as a nation with cultural identity. Every smudge, every drum, every song was a display of their transcending 270 years of resistance to remain vibrant and alive in an open display of cultural pride.

In 1990 news coverage, interviews with First Nations people were bracketed by sound bites from Canadian leaders in positions of authority. Often, the First Nations were presented as a voice counter to the government. This effect was made possible by the way stories were framed and written. Often the newsmaker was a member of the Canadian or Quebec government, or representative of the army. The Mohawk voice was presented in reply or in response to the first official. Of course, the first voice presented is subconsciously accorded more weight. It also allows the elected official line to be the viewpoint that sets the agenda. What is important is not what the Mohawks want, but what the officials are saying is important. Essentially, the news media allowed the government to shape the limits of speakable discourse. The Mohawks are only reported insofar as their statements have relevance to the breaking news of what the government has to say. Thus, the discourses that were circulated most prominently and the questions that were raised were limited to the legality of the Mohawk actions. The federal
government avoided the discourses of land claims and of treaty rights and promises. They effectively shifted the spoken discourses to questions of the use of weapons, immigration, smuggling, and citizenship. These were effective tactics in depicting the Mohawks as the aggressors in the conflict. It also fed on cultural stereotypes to produce backlash against an uprising which, in the early days, had the support of many Canadians. The Mohawks were reported to have a large arsenal of weapons. Time was spent speculating on where the weapons came from rather than the legitimacy of their claim to the land in question. So long as the government could control the discourse and its flow, they could avoid embarrassing questions about their treatment of the Aboriginal peoples since confederation.

But whereas there was some sympathy for the Mohawks in this case, it was often not extrapolated into other Nations’ land claims. For Kanehsatake, it was ridiculous because it was “all for a golf course.” Would it have made it any better if it were all for a new highway? Or for a new pulp and paper mill? Or logging company? Or mining company? Uranium company? The fact of the matter is that the news media paid attention to this stand-off because a white police officer was killed in the raid, and then thousands of white commuters were inconvenienced by the blocking of the Mercier Bridge. When the facts came out Canadians asked, “is it worth the bloodshed just for a golf course?” Although their sympathies and hearts may have honestly been with the First Nations on this issue, would it remain with them in all the other cases of injustice, of wrongful taking of land, breaking of promises?

But even if the conflict brought many people to side with the Natives for just this issue, the perspective underlying the actions of the Mohawks was underreported. Obomsawin’s film addressed this lack of coverage by allowing the Natives involved in the conflict to talk about why they were there. In each case it had more to do with cultural identity and preservation of Native values and traditions than with anger over the proposed golf course. That it was a golf course didn’t matter. That it was a wrongful
intrusion into the Pines did. When the news media found the actions of the Surete du Quebec ridiculous or excessive, it was often for reasons that would make sense from a Canadian cultural standpoint. It was cited that the Mohawks resisted civilly or that the land, by Canadian law, was still held in trust for them by the Sulpicians and the province had no right to intrude. The judgements were based totally on Canadian standards. The indigenous outlook was not presented to support the actions of the Mohawks. Obomsawin’s film, while admittedly presenting the validity of the Mohawks’ actions in Canadian terms, also presented the Mohawk reasons, perhaps even according more weight to them.

Some Canadians found it difficult to accept the Mohawk way of making decisions and delegating responsibilities. Statements circulated in the media that the Mohawks shouldn’t apply Indian traditions to modern life. Questions were voiced such as, “why don’t they live like Canadians and follow the Canadian laws?” There was the assumption that Indians surrendered to Canada a long time ago and now must live by Canadian laws. The film makes clear that First Nations assume a different relationship with Canada. The Mohawks, for example, refer to the Two Row Wampum which represents the relationship between the two nations as one of non-interference with each other. Thus, it follows that they will not observe Canadian laws to the letter. The Kaienerekowah is the Mohawk constitution and if their action is supported by the Canadian constitution then that is a different matter.

There is also some resistance to the film from Canadians who say that the film is biased. Of course it is biased. But so was the news coverage of the crisis. Whether the reporter intended the news to be biased or not, the news turned out to have a bias. This could not be avoided. Certain sources make themselves more available to the news media. The government, realizing it was being widely criticized for its avoidance of the issue at Kanehsatake, made spokespeople available with statements on a regular basis. They then controlled the flow of news in and out of the area by making it difficult for
journalists to get to the Mohawks to report the news. Certainly, the news held a bias. Obomsawin recognizes her bias and displays it. She is aware that she is on the side of the Mohawks and makes no attempt to disguise her interests. Her bias allows for a new truth to be presented. The popular news media treated truth as a current development between two sides. The documentary *Kanehsatake* presented the truth as historical with many levels of complexity. The history of the diminishing land base of the Iroquois Confederacy is presented in the film to show that this conflict was 270 years old and was not forgotten by the people who fought further encroachment.

One effective counter-hegemonic strategy of this text is its questioning of traditional Canadian newsgathering. Although dealing specifically with the events surrounding the Oka crisis, Obomsawin's film challenges many of the typical techniques of the news which impede the reporting of indigenous issues. In particular, one sees the way in which the newsmakers, specifically the institutions of the army and the government, can control the way in which news is reported and disseminated. This is done in many ways: controlling the agenda, controlling access to news sources, controlling the news that is reported, controlling the viewpoints, controlling the "official line" and adhering to one face-saving statement in spite of the truth or falsity of their statements.

Not only is this text counter-hegemonic in its exposure of how the news of Oka was reported, it also presents indigenous discourses without framing them as reactionary, or merely as responses to Canadian discourses. It does not frame these discourses around the Canadian "norm," nor does it present them as alternative. *Kanehsatake* actually presents indigenous perspectives/discourses without requiring any filtration through a white star. It is because Obomsawin can not separate her "self" from her work that these indigenous voices are revealed and spoken. The discourses are presented in and of themselves, with a history of thousands of years of cultural tradition standing behind each statement. Indeed, these Longhouse traditions and cultural traditions of the
Guyanahgowah are presented as “normal” and having a history older than the ideas upon which Canada is based. Indigenous identity is affirmed in the face of Canadian oppression.

This text is counter-hegemonic in its reaffirmation of cultural symbols that have been appropriated by the Canadian mainstream. The warrior identity in particular is one symbol which this text completely challenges, allowing the warriors themselves to show their philosophy of humanism through their words and actions. When the warriors speak for themselves, their role is shown to have a completely different basis in Mohawk culture than the meaning the Canadian news media unquestioningly ascribed to them.

The films directed by Native people sometimes focus on signs and symbols that most non-Native people would not recognize as significant. Unless the audience members have knowledge of the cultural background, the importance of particular actions and articles filmed will be unacknowledged. Many Native people know the European codes and cultural conventions. This is because they have to in order to survive within the dominant culture. But many Native people know in addition to dominant cultural codes, different conventions that are based in their own culture and they may even know cultural codes of other First Nations. Indeed, it is typical of many co-cultures that the knowledge of the dominant codes and conventions operates side by side with the codes and conventions of their own cultural group (Orbe, 1997, p. 230). Without having participated in the culture or without having read about the cultural references, non-Natives can easily miss the significance of some of these signs.

The terms high context and low context (E. T. Hall, 1976) are useful to describe this situation. The Native made productions can generally be said to be communicating in high context, while the non-Native films are operating on a low context code. These terms describe the amount of background information that is required for a cultural member to understand a message. It is assumed that high context cultures change little over time because of the value they place on maintaining tradition and history.
Therefore, a member of a high context culture is able to assume a shared background with other members and requires less explicit details in communicative acts. A low context transaction requires little cultural information outside of the message itself. All the important information is communicated explicitly. A high context message requires a greater degree of cultural information from outside the message for the message to make any sense.

The Native symbols in the film are largely high context. They are assumed by the members of the Native culture but require non-Natives to have more information than is provided in the message in order to understand the true significance. One example is the protester who touches the Canadian army tank with a coup stick in *Kanehsatake*. Many Native people laugh when they see the soldier, oblivious to the whole significance of the object and the action, pulling the stick out of the tank’s cannon. There is a high context to this communicative act. It requires knowledge of the coup stick, and how it represents a pre-European contact form of battle in the Americas. Battles were won and lost by “courting coup.” Merely being touched by the coup stick could cause a nation to lose a war. There are several other implications and meanings which could take years to understand, even more to explain. The film, *Sentencing Circles -- Traditional Justice Reborn*, serves as an example of how Native people might interpret a film with Aboriginal cultural signs more deeply than non-Native people who are unable to make similar interpretations without sharing the same cultural knowledge.

**Sentencing Circles -- Traditional Justice Reborn**

This section explores how an independently produced film by a Native person communicates more to Native audiences than to non-Native audiences. This is largely due to the fact that the Aboriginal codes are often inserted in the film simply by common sense assumptions on the part of Native producers. Because these signs and symbols
need not be explicitly discussed for First Nations cultures to understand their significance, they can be characterized as being high context cultures. Thus, films about Natives when produced by Natives often communicate in high context codes even when the audience can be more general. These concepts will be elucidated using examples from the film, *Sentencing Circles: Traditional Justice Reborn*. The sentencing circle will be read as a sign that represents many of the core values of the Peigan and Metis, who are the focus of the film, as well as other First Nations in general.

**Critical Analysis**

*Sentencing Circles -- Traditional Justice Reborn* was made in 1995 for Canadian television by Doug Cuthand and Vicki Covington. It aired on CFCN in Calgary and on CFRN in Edmonton as well as the Saskatchewan public television network SCN. It takes us into an actual sentencing circle taking place on a Peigan reserve in Alberta. This part of the video gives the viewer insight into the process and the participants, their roles and responsibilities. Secondly, the video discusses a landmark in Canadian legal history, the first urban sentencing circle for a Metis man.

In the future it may be that more and more offenders will request a traditional sentencing circle. Although this system of justice may appear to be a challenge to the Canadian legal system, it actually is an aid. The Canadian legal system puts a high value on efficiency, dealing with as many cases as possible. One unfortunate result of this approach to justice is that many offenders, particularly Aboriginal offenders, commit more crimes after serving their jail sentence. One problem is that the offender is allowed to escape the community that would make sure he carried out some form of reparation. The circle tries to address the offender's problems from every possible angle, so that there are no repeat offences. Not only does this ease the burden on the Canadian system, but it eases the burden of many communities that are disrupted by one member's
consistent problems with the law. In an Aboriginal community, when a person gets into trouble, the community members who are responsible for teaching that offender feel that they are at fault too.

This video successfully exhibits the cultural differences between Aboriginal and Canadian cultures. Many films about Native peoples made by non-Natives focus on the differences between the cultures. These differences, instead of being explained and learned from, become the motive for conflict and action. Because they are different, Indians in fictional films are portrayed as villains, as closer to nature, and as indecipherable to Europeans. But *Sentencing Circles*, because of its documentary form, presents the differences more clearly than any fictional film. It also suggests that differences make it impossible for Aboriginals to succeed because of structures that were not made to fit their world view.

No matter how sympathetic non-Native directors are toward the peoples of the First Nations, it always seems as though Native people become secondary characters in these films. Native characters range from being “mere props” to “Indians who happen to be people.” Will Sampson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is an example of the “mere prop Indian.” The Sioux in *Dances With Wolves* have been categorized (critically) as “genial versions of us;” us meaning non-Native people (Kael, 1994, p. 1245). This is because a non-Native director can not have the level of understanding that comes from being part of the culture.

Like *Kanehsatake*, *Sentencing Circles: Traditional Justice Reborn* is a documentary. Whereas the subject matter of *Kanehsatake* was familiar to many Canadians, the thousand year old tradition of the sentencing circle is not. This is not to say that the issue of traditional aboriginal justice is of no importance to the general Canadian audience. It is now being offered to the Canadian public by members of the First Nations. Reg Crow Shoe, Director of Development, Olden River Cultural Centre, says in the film: “Circle structure decision making process has been here for thousands of
years. And we don’t want to say we claim it or we own it. It’s a mechanism that was
given to us by Creator.” The purpose of renewing the tradition of sentencing circles is to
address the disproportionate rate of Aboriginals incarcerated in Canadian prisons by
attempting to eliminate repeat offenders. Since a large number of those incarcerated are
repeat offenders, sentencing circles have actually reduced the number of inmates by

Sentencing circles place the highest importance on the health of the community.
When a member of the community strays from the good, the participants of a sentencing
circle work to heal that offender. Since sentencing circles do not stress retribution and
punishment as a central goal, they appear to some Canadians to be a circumvention of the
justice system. There will be an uproar from Canadians who believe that Aboriginal
offenders are being treated with kid gloves. But this video attempts to educate Canadians
about the process. For certain communities and certain individual cases, it actually is an
improvement over the Canadian justice system. Anyone who sees this video will
understand the process of the sentencing circle. But, reading deeply into the sentencing
circle, it is possible to elucidate what makes Native peoples different from non-Native
peoples in a general sense.

Reg Crow Shoe observes, “there is a holistic Peigan traditional philosophical
worldview. One example that we are looking at is the sentencing circle.” Essentially,
the sentencing circle is a sign from which the Peigan culture can be read. There are
many things that the sentencing circle tells us about the Peigan and about other First
Nations more generally. What the sentencing circle represents can be contrasted with
Canadian culture to show some of the key differences between the two cultures. The
sentencing circle represents and stresses healing over punishment, the local over the
centralized, tradition over new customs, consensus over adversarial approaches to law
and politics, Aboriginal involvement over no involvement, the community over the
individual, responsibilities over rights, and process over product. Each is examined in turn.

First of all, the sentencing circle stresses healing. Caring is a part of the sentencing circle which is often absent in the Canadian courts. This is evident in the way that the sentencing circle does not only find a way to punish the individual offender, but also provides a course of action for the accused in future conflicts. Counselling from elders may be part of the sentence. Apologies to the victim(s) and their family are often part of the sentence. The point is not to discuss the guilt or innocence of the accused. To be thought deserving of accusation is guilt enough. For the structure to be applied and for the participants to meet, the accused must have already admitted to his (or her) actions. The point is to heal that member of the community who has strayed and make them a contributing member of the community again. Maurice Little Wolf, a Peigan Elder, points out in the film that the structure of the circle is proof that “we do care” and this message is one that Aboriginal offenders do not hear from the Canadian courts.

Not only is a course of action for future conflicts discussed, but also any other factors relating to the person’s criminal behaviour. If they abuse drugs or alcohol, a treatment program might be part of the sentence. Indeed, the sentencing circle treats the accused as though they were victims themselves. As Nora Rich, a Metis Elder, says in the film about one offender tried by a sentencing circle: “Ivan is a victim himself. The system has failed Ivan.” The system has failed Ivan because he has repeated his criminal ways. If the system really worked, Ivan would not have been arrested again. The system does not put any faith into Ivan so he does not give back to the system. But when people turn out for the sentencing circle to tell Ivan that they care, he finally has someone to whom to be responsible. If Ivan commits another crime, he knows that he is not only letting himself down, but also all the people who turned out for his sentencing.

The reason the community turns out is because they feel responsibility for the offender’s actions. This is an important difference between traditional Aboriginal culture
and Canadian culture. The First Nations peoples are defined by their role in the community and in their clan and do not necessarily put their individuality ahead of these communitarian roles. The community is aware too of how the individual’s actions reflect back on the community. When an individual does wrong, the community is slandered. People won’t be talking about not being able to trust Ivan, but rather not being able to trust Indians. Also, each member has a role in the raising of children. When the children do bad things, each member responsible for that child will feel that they are partly to blame. So when an Aboriginal commits a crime, each person responsible for that person feels they have failed and must correct the problem. This sharing of responsibility also makes it possible for the offender to feel like s/he is not alone in solving his/her problem. The offender learns right from the day of sentencing that there is a support system in place consisting of several people who really care that his/her life is put on track again.

Indeed, it is the process of reaching a sentence that is of fundamental importance to the healing of all involved. The product or sentence is less important than the process of arriving at the sentence. First, Ivan finds out that there are people who care because they show up and tell him so. This is important for giving the accused a sense of self-worth. Secondly, the offender finally realizes guilt because he is made to face the victim throughout the process and must address the victim and the victim’s family. Ivan said that when he attended the circle it was the first time he even considered the victims of his crimes. Diana, the victim of Ivan’s crime, made Ivan feel sorry for all his victims, not just her. Having her address him and tell him how she felt made him finally realize that all his victims had feelings like this and he had never once given any thought to them. So the healing is ultimately possible because the offender finally internalizes the pain others have felt because of his actions. The guilt is internalized in the sentencing circle. In the courtroom, the structure of the room enables an offender to avoid the victim’s face. The participants address the judge and not the offender directly. The judge is someone who may not ever be seen again by the offender, and may not even
remember the offender, should s/he return. It is the structure and the process of the sentencing circle which leads to this guilt, shame, empathy and understanding.

The victims too feel a sense of healing from the process of the sentencing circle. They see first-hand how the problem will be addressed and dealt with appropriately. The sentencing circle deals with the problem with the aim of preventing any future relapses into crime. Many victims have stated that they were very satisfied with the result of a sentencing circle (Ross, 1996, pp. 174-176). One victim said that "...she was grateful to have had the chance to express her feelings directly to the offender so he could come to know just how much he had terrified her" (Ross, 1996, p. 174). Ross (1996) reports of another victim:

'We are no longer enemies' she told the offender after mediation. She experienced all the negative emotions connected with victimization. But she credits mediation with empowering her and bringing home closure. With mediation she, unlike many who stay victims for life, was able to put the incident behind her and move forward (p. 176).

The statements of these victims testify to the importance of healing within the circle sentencing process. Not only does the circle address the offenders' needs, but it also has certain empowering effects for the victims who participate. The experiences of these victims should put to rest any criticisms from people who think that the sentencing circle is merely a device to allow Aboriginals to get off without retribution for their crimes. Such people believe that the sentencing circle provides a double standard of justice for Aboriginals. The reality is that there already exists a double standard, one that gets Aboriginals into jail more often than should be. Also, several groups are trying to make sentencing circles available to anyone, Native or non-Native.

The sentencing circle is based upon the very important traditional value of balance which is located in the natural world. What western science calls the interdependence of all living things, food chains and cycles, were well understood by
Native people. Indeed, the idea of balance comes out of the way Nature seeks to balance itself in all of its miraculous ways. When there are too many wolves to sustain the deer population some wolves die off. The deer become plentiful, so plentiful that the wolf population picks up again and controls the number of deer. This system was in balance, and thus, the Native people sought to maintain that balance as that was how they thought it was meant to be (Wagamese, 1996).

So, too, is the sentencing circle based upon balance. Everyone participating gives an opinion about the situation. The offender addresses the victim and the victim addresses the offender. Both these parties have their families present to speak. The police, Elders, and other community members also have their say. Everyone who is affected has a chance to speak, and this provides a balance of opinions and of information with which to make the sentence.

That everyone has the opportunity to speak and be involved is a defining difference between the First Nations and Canada. This involvement in the judicial process is also what is lacking in Canadian courts for Aboriginals. The lack of involvement in procedures involving their people is the cause of many of the struggles for indigenous peoples. They want involvement in their own education, government, resources and justice. That they are not granted any say in the decisions that affect their life is the cause of many of the social problems that are endemic in Indian country. Reclaiming the use of traditional justice is one step toward reclaiming sovereignty over the other cultural traditions that were taken away to the detriment of their cultures and of the lives of thousands of First Peoples. Perhaps this is why there is some resistance from legal powers and governmental powers in Canada to the idea of sentencing circles. This is but one step toward greater independence and sovereignty, something the Canadian government, either consciously or not, has been denying the Aboriginal people for centuries.
What this trend indicates is that the government's centralized and hierarchically organized legal system is losing control over the territories. Because a sentencing circle must be performed locally by members of the community there is no way to impose central power over the decisions made. There are no appeals, no Supreme Court. Decisions can be made locally and imposed locally. Thus, the central powers lose their grip as they can not rule from afar and can not overturn verdicts and change sentences. It is one foothold lost and it is feared that soon more will follow.

The idea of consensus was mentioned in the discussion of Kanehsatake. Although there wasn't complete consensus among the Mohawks in regards to methods, there was consensus that the land must be defended. Consensus was the primary goal among the traditional Mohawks. This goal of community consensus is more pronounced in the sentencing circle. Everyone must agree to the sentence. Compare this with the justice system of the Canadian culture. Essentially, one judge or one jury decides on a verdict. The idea of a jury is similar to the idea of the sentencing circle in that it requires unanimity. However, it is very different in that it leaves out the main actors from the decision. The idea of a jury of the accused's peers is realized in the sentencing circle. Aboriginals are present in larger numbers and the family is involved. How much closer can it get to being a jury of one's peers? The idea of consensus requires much patience, thought, deliberation, and oratory skill. Because it involves the community to a greater degree, justice can be said to have truly been served. Justice is realized when nobody disagrees with the terms of the sentence.

The emphasis on responsibility over rights is another key aspect of First Nations cultures. Canadian law allows the individual rights and freedoms. The law is basically a set of limits on individual freedoms to protect the freedoms of others. In Aboriginal cultures, the individual is important in so far as s/he fulfills his/her obligations to the community. Everyone has a place within the community and should perform her/his role accordingly. There is a network of obligations and connections that are important to the
survival of the community as a whole and it is these obligations that are crucial to sustaining the life of the people and the culture into which they were born and wish to continue to uphold.

In conclusion, the sentencing circle as a sign provides insight into several of the key values of First Nations cultures. Sentencing circles stress the importance of community over the individual, the necessity of maintaining balance, consensus, and local and historical traditions. Sentencing circles also reveal the importance of asserting Aboriginal involvement in matters of justice and matters of governance more generally. These key values were present in Kanehsatake as well but appear more clearly in Sentencing Circles because the subject matter is much less dramatic and shocking.

The idea of community involvement that is so fundamental to the process of the sentencing circle is actively utilized in a compilation of short videos called Elder Voices.

**Conclusions**

It is important that fundamentally Native stories be told by a Native person. In the case of Kanehsatake, Alanis Obomsawin’s direction allowed specifically Native symbols to manifest themselves. In contrast to the mainstream media portrayals of the events at Oka, Kanehsatake goes behind the scenes to provide an in-depth look at the people involved at the centre of the struggle. It does not merely show the simplified “warrior as paramilitary terrorist” context that the public was used to from news coverage. Rather, it showed how the struggle for the land affected Native families who chose to defend the Pines from development. This story is an important one and it is important that it be told by a Native for two reasons. For one, it provided an account of the events that differed substantially from what the Canadian public had been previously exposed to and was presented in easily explainable terms and images for the general audience. Furthermore, it validated the experience of the Native people at Kanehsatake.
It provided them with a documentation of the events, and an outlet that would faithfully represent the Native sides of the story. Although the story could be enjoyed by everyone who saw it, Native people could read or interpret additional signs not always obvious to the general audience because of the high context of intercultural communication. It may not have been Obomsawin's intent to tell the story this way, but it allowed Native people additional cues with which to identify more readily with her presentation.

**Sentencing Circles** is an instructional tool for Native and non-Native people alike. It presents an approach to justice that is in some cases better for Aboriginal communities than the Canadian court system. The video presents the information in a format that makes it easy for anyone to understand. In this way general audiences are educated about the process. But the video can have a deeper resonance for Native people. This video can expose Native people to traditions they may not be familiar with, leading to greater self-government. The video could be a starting point for learning how to implement or get involved with other aspects of reclaiming cultural knowledge and self-government.

Native people across the land became more united during the summer of 1990. The Oka crisis instilled pride in many Native communities. The methods at Oka inspired other communities to make similar demands and similar actions of protest. This event gave many communities the confidence that something can be done and is possible. **Sentencing Circles** too has the power to lead Native people to greater exploration of cultural traditions for the good of the community. Finally, a brief note on **Elder Voices** provides insight into how communities gain a sense of confidence and ability in telling their own stories through video.

**Elder Voices** consists of ten short video documentaries from nine different communities in Ontario (Toronto is represented twice). The Ontario chapter of Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance (AFVAA) markets the compilation of the ten videos while each community promotes and distributes its own short video. People from each community were guided through the production process, given a team for shooting
and consultation from the script development stage to the editing process. More important than the end product was the process of introducing the communities to video.

Warren Arcan, Artistic Director with the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, explains the importance of the project:

AFVAA’s marketing not just the videos, but the process, which was very much concerned with giving the communities a sense of “Yes I can.” The theory was to introduce them to video, something that could give them the pleasure of self-identification, that can be economically viable, and that contributes in a real and lasting way to the growth and health of the community (cited in Lickers, 1996, p. 6).

The end result included communities as diverse as Toronto, Sioux Lookout, Ottawa and Moose Factory all filming what is representative of Aboriginal culture in their own words and from their own local experiences. The topics of the videos vary considerably. Healing centres, sweat ceremonies. Ojibwe language, urban elders, rap groups, what home means, falling in love, and sacred places are all discussed. The end result is a picture of everyday life in Aboriginal Ontario.

The project is inspiring in that it gave the communities involved some control over the process of filmmaking. The amount of pride each of the participants exhibits in each short spills over to the viewer. The landscape in each video feels welcoming and familiar as though the viewer has been invited to visit. Perhaps that is the most characteristically Native point of the video. Like Native people everywhere, the door is always open. It’s not guaranteed that much will happen, but then again there are always surprises - a smiling child, a laugh over the translation of an Ojibwe word into English, new insight into the sweat ceremony, or a look at the mounds. A notable aspect of this video is that there is no dramatic conflict or confrontation involved.

Just as the process of justice was of fundamental importance in Sentencing Circles, the process of filmmaking was the goal of Elder Voices. The product was treated as secondary because the goal was to inspire confidence and subjectivity in
Native communities. The final goal was to have Native people tell their own stories about themselves. In this way, there are no problems in representation because the filmmakers are representing only their own perspective. There is no attempt to speak for others.
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis sought to examine some differences in the treatment of Aboriginal themes in films by Native and non-Native directors. Obviously, cultural factors play an important role in determining the differences in representation. Perhaps of even greater importance is the role that economic factors play in determining the type of films produced and the size of the audience for these films.

Non-Native Films About Native People

A number of the problems that critics have found with non-Native films about Native themes continue to be replicated. The majority of non-Native films produced in the 1990s are still set in the past. What is required are more contemporary settings. People carry stereotypes of contemporary Native people, whether it be as the “welfare bum,” “Indian giver,” “whiners and complainers” as well as numerous others. It does not matter how many sympathetic portrayals there are if they are all set in the past. Failing to deal with contemporary Native issues allows more contemporary stereotypes to prevail.

Although many modern portrayals attempt to be more sympathetic where Aboriginal characters are concerned, several weaknesses remain. Many modern films attempt to address the importance of Native spirituality. This is most definitely a step forward since understanding Native spirituality is important to understanding the culture. Unfortunately, these portrayals sometimes suffer from displaying the spirituality as overly emphasized mysticism rather than part of a holistic worldview. The result is that Indian characters are reduced to a mystic role or spiritual role which makes only certain individuals appear to follow traditions (Deloria, 1994).

Perhaps the most encouraging trend since the release of Dances With Wolves is in casting. The fact that Aboriginal actors are hired for Aboriginal character roles must be
applauded. In the early days of filmmaking, Native actors were avoided because, ironically, they did not know how to act Indian enough (Vestal, 1980). Obviously, the non-Native filmmakers had preconceived notions of how Indians were supposed to appear and behave. Finally, Native people can bring particularly Native characteristics and traits to their roles. In this way, even a film which is flawed fundamentally can allow the Native actors to inject a Native feel to the foils and “speak through” the pervading whiteness of the film (Shohat & Stam, 1994). A case in point is Thunderheart, which relies on a white narrator to solve the problems of a North Dakota reserve. The many supporting roles are filled by Native actors. It is their presence which makes one sense that there is something deeper in each of these characters than in the silly conspiracy thriller plot. One wonders what kind of movie might have been made if one of the Native characters were the protagonist and the story revolved around his/her life instead of the foreign (to the reservation) FBI agent.

Native Films About Native People

Native filmmakers often do not have the resources to, first of all, make a costly fictional film, and secondly, pay for distribution on a large scale. Expensive productions are usually reserved solely for non-Natives for a general audience. One exceptional instance is the New Zealand film, Once Were Warriors, which was successful, both economically and aesthetically, in bringing contemporary indigenous culture to the screen in all its joy and pain. For the most part, Aboriginal filmmakers must content themselves with documentaries made locally and cheaply. These films are successful in bringing to light Aboriginal traditions and cultural beliefs and their significance to survival in contemporary conditions. Unfortunately, they are not as successful in finding an audience.
Native filmmakers often try to inform and educate with their films. In Kanehsatake, Sentencing Circles and Elder Voices, the focus was on giving information about particular cultural events, from the most spectacular to the most mundane. Kanehsatake reached far more people for two main reasons: the fact that the National Film Board of Canada was the distributor and because of the notoriety of the subject matter. Sentencing Circles is a much more obscure video, although it did achieve some air time on regional television. Where Kanehsatake touched on several broad First Nations issues as they related to the Oka crisis, Sentencing Circles dealt with a very particular topic: the sentencing circle as an alternative to traditional Canadian justice for Aboriginal peoples. Elder Voices dealt with several issues, all of them related to how Aboriginal culture is maintained in specific local areas within late twentieth century Ontario.

When a filmmaker is Native, the focus tends to be on only one Nation and this focus tends to be explicitly stated. Kanehsatake was about the Mohawk; Sentencing Circles about the Peigan and the Metis; each video segment in the compilation Elder Voices is about one nation such as the Anishinaubae, Mohawk or Cree. Even when several different Aboriginal cultures can relate to the experiences of one another, there is no attempt made to generalize.

The Indian Problem: Finding Film Funding

Although there are several avenues of public funding available to the Native filmmaker living in Canada to pursue in financing a film, the amount of money available for Native films is much less than for non-Native American filmmakers. The majority of high profile Native films are produced through the National Film Board of Canada, the closest thing Canada has to a studio system. The N.F.B. has mandated that a certain
amount of funding be available for women directors and First Nations projects. If not for this valuable resource, the films of Gil Cardinal, Loretta Todd, Alanis Obomsawin, and others would probably not have reached as many people as they have. The other effect of working under the N.F.B. is the focus on documentaries. Seventy-one percent of N.F.B. funding went toward financing documentaries in the early 1990s (Department of Canadian Heritage, 1996). Even though the N.F.B. has a well-deserved international reputation for the quality of its documentaries, the sad reality is that documentaries do not get wide distribution in North American theatres.

Unfortunately, most would-be First Nations directors and producers are unable to obtain creative control of large budget fictional films. In addition to this problem, for the First Nations to make films in Canada, there are a whole new set of obstacles. The small Canadian marketplace and American domination of that market result in a dependence upon public financing and securing American distributors. Both these factors encourage the support of productions that are smaller, cheaper versions of American-style films. Thus, many Aboriginal productions that would be made in Canada have little chance of reaching a large audience.

The amount and the source of funding affects the film made in several ways. Aboriginals often can not afford to mount a feature length fictional production. This in turn affects the potential audience. Fictional films reach greater numbers of theatres and audiences than most documentaries. Also, studio-backed fictional features from the United States dominate the theatres of North America. Given the difficulty involved in trying to penetrate the American-dominated film market, it is not surprising that many publicly funded films fail. This in turn leads to attacks on the funding agencies for wasting taxpayer money. The N.F.B. was recently criticized for not finding enough avenues of exhibition for its products, and was given the recommendation that they consider potential sources of exhibition before greenlighting a project (Department of
Canadian Heritage, 1996). This is a considerable change in operations for the National Film Board.

One possible source of exhibition for the N.F.B.'s films will be Canada's expanding selection of specialty television channels. Indeed, Canadian television is showcasing more Aboriginal programming than ever as CBC's recent success with North of 60 has led the broadcaster to showcase more Aboriginal drama in prime time: Four Directions, and The Rez (based on McDonald's version of Kinsella's Dance Me Outside). TVO and Vision-TV have also devoted prime time to Aboriginal programs. The two part dramatic mini-series, Grand Avenue, dealing with Aboriginal people in a contemporary urban setting, garnered HBO's highest ratings in over a year (Bissley, 1996). These gains, it is hoped, will lead to greater opportunities for Native filmmakers to tell stories about Native culture to greater audiences. It is still the unfortunate reality that Native-made productions about Native people are not seen in the same numbers as non-Native films about Native people. Obviously, the representation of Native people that most people are getting is the creation of non-Native people. Given the problems stated above, it is preferable for Native people to represent themselves.

Certainly the most empowering aspect of Native made video is how it has encouraged communities to become more participatory in filmmaking. Not only do communities learn that it is possible to represent themselves in the manner they want but they learn that costs are not necessarily prohibitive. This is especially the case with the video, Elder Voices: A Compilation. The Aboriginal Film and Video Arts Alliance provided video equipment and acted as counsellors so that ten different communities could each make a short video about their reality. Ranging anywhere from three to ten minutes in length, these videos depict communities that have great pride in their cultural heritage. It is a collection of stories that are empowering for the makers in two ways. First, they learn that the skills and tools of filmmaking are accessible to them. These videos give them the sense of confidence required to undertake further filmmaking in the
community. The second way in which these films are empowering is that they enable the community to affirm their traditions proudly. It is also empowering for the Native viewer who can see the wealth and diversity of the cultural traditions of just one area - the province of Ontario. It demonstrates how the cultural traditions are as vital in the present time as at any point in history.

One problem is that these videos are currently hard to find.* The people who are already searching for these representations are the ones finding them. So while these videos are important and worthwhile because they empower the communities involved in making them, the people who most need to see them are not typically exposed to them.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

Cultural studies was an effective method for studying Aboriginal representation. Problems encountered were related to the films available for study, rather than the methods. It was difficult to adequately compare documentary films with films which contain a linear narrative structure. Unfortunately, there are not enough fictional feature length dramas made by Native people. Although the documentary form is effective in opening up the possibilities for greater complexity and variation in Native perspectives, it is not as effective in reaching a large mainstream audience. If Native writers were given greater opportunities to tell effective stories with Native perspectives in a linear narrative structure, then perhaps the general audience would find Native viewpoints more accessible.

This paper originally attempted to break down the films by their intended target audience. This approach was abandoned because it was not particularly useful. The problem is that filmmakers do not set out with definable ethnic limits to their audience

---

*There are a number of videos available from V-tape. See Lickers (1996) in the references for more information.
(N. Chicoine, NFB, personal communication, August 30, 1996). Indeed, many of the Native filmmakers were attempting to educate non-Natives about the concerns and cultures of the First Nations. Doug Cuthand (personal communication, February 24, 1997) stated that his goal was to allow Native people to provide their stories directly to Canadian audiences. Indeed, that is the point of *Sentencing Circles, Kanehsatake*, and most Native-made N.F.B. films. It is also a fundamental value among Native people to share and this includes traditions and lifeways. If a non-Native person proves their sincerity in being interested in learning about the culture, they will not be turned away. Likewise, the films are not meant to preclude a non-Native viewership.

However, there may be a different set of codes and sign systems operating in the interpretation and decoding of a film. Aboriginal audiences are quite capable of detecting lies and dishonourable intentions in televised government speeches and government produced documents. This awareness is probably in operation when watching films too. It would be interesting to study the ways in which Native-produced texts are interpreted and decoded. Lickers (1996) has written that when the actor playing Tonto was required to say some lines in Mohawk, he would say something sarcastic to the Lone Ranger (p. 2). Obviously, to the general audience it was just Tonto “speaking Indian.” But to those who spoke Mohawk, an entirely different message was coming across. A future study could examine other opportunities for opening up the text to indigenous codes of interpretation, testing these theories with Native and non-Native audiences.

Certainly the most important addition to this study would be an audience ethnography. An audience study would give an indication of how these videos are interpreted by different subjects and how these subjectivities influence the use of these films. Audience ethnographies could be separated along the lines of what would constitute a “general” audience and a primarily “Native” audience. This research would benefit from further division of the Native audience into groups reflecting the level of
indigenous awareness among the members. Because of the fragmented nature of the context in which many Aboriginals grow up, many Native people know very little about their cultural traditions and this could affect their interpretations of film representation. Should such a study be undertaken, Wagamese (1996) has some categories that may prove useful. Natives could be characterized as “traditional,” “transitional,” or “non-practicing” (p. 17). Although these terms were coined somewhat humourously, they are representative of a scale of awareness which does exist among First Nations members.

Wherever possible, an attempt should be made to get input from Elders on many questions regarding film. What traditions benefit from filmic treatment? What traditions should not be filmed? Are powerful artefacts shown on film merely symbols of power or are they still power? Does filming traditions and ceremonies interrupt the rightful place of the Elder to teach these traditions to the youth or is it an acceptable way to introduce the culture to the disenfranchised? All these questions need to be explored.

It seems that Native people use film primarily to inform and educate the non-Native population. For this reason, a study of why Natives make films would be instructive.

**Future Filmmaking**

Certainly the best way for Native people to counter non-Native representation of Aboriginals is to make their own films for general audiences. But what sort of films should Native directors make for Native peoples? Some Native videos seemingly made for strictly First Nations audiences are explicit instructional videos. Examples include videos explaining traditional craftmaking techniques, language training, quillwork, beadwork, tanning, preserves, and other traditional activities. These videos are empowering for native communities. They present the traditions in video format for
Native youth who are distanced from the community and must learn the skills in urban centres. Another example are home videos of powwows and drums, songs and dances. Although primarily for Native audiences, the songs and dances can be appreciated by any ears or eyes. Other uses for video that First Nations have undertaken are even more empowering. An often cited example are the Kayapo in Brazil who have used video to photograph traditional dances, and ceremonies as well as document boundaries, trespassers, and oral treaty promises to be used in courts of law (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Churchill (1992), writing about the critical appraisal of Dances With Wolves stated:

If Kevin Costner or anyone else in Hollywood held an honest inclination to make a movie which would alter public perceptions of Native America in some meaningful way, it would, first and foremost, be set in the present day, not in the mid-19th century. It would feature, front and centre, the real struggles of living native people to liberate themselves from the oppression which has beset them in the contemporary era, not the adventures of some fictional non-Indian out to save the savage. It would engage directly with concrete issues...(Churchill, 1992, p. 246).

If there is one thing that sets apart Native productions from non-Native productions, it is that Native productions follow these proposals. Any filmmaker wishing to make a film about Native peoples would benefit from observing the following guidelines. First of all, the film should be set in the present day, and furthermore, settings should be chosen that do not ostracize us from the rest of society. Dance Me Outside was set in the present day, but it almost seemed as though there was no connection between the reservation and the outside world.

Secondly, make us people who just happen to be Indian. It doesn’t sound difficult, but so often we are reduced to mystic soothsayers or brave killing machines. A lot can happen when the fact that a character is Indian has little to do with their role in the film. Graham Greene’s portrayal of a police officer in Die Hard with a Vengeance had nothing to do with working on an “Indian” case. His ethnicity did not enter into the
role. So, in the future, cast Indians in “regular” movies or rather, movies which do not deal specifically with Native themes. This action helps to make us normal in the eyes of movie viewers. In the film, *Once Were Warriors*, the character Beth Heke is so well realized that many people forget that being Maori is an important part of her identity. That’s what happens when Indians are written as actual living, breathing, bleeding people. Thus, in writing and directing films with Native people, it is important to remember not to reduce the Native character’s personality traits, but to make them more complex.

Thirdly, a social or cultural issue should be used as the action or backdrop of the story. There certainly is no shortage of problems in Indian country. And furthermore, these issues can be enough to draw an audience to a movie. It certainly provides more movie topics than yet another frontier conflict between cowboys and Indians. Some issues to tackle are poverty, domestic violence, suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, alienation, psychological damage from numerous types of abuses, struggles for land, mineral rights, water rights, and other resource rights. There are several more options for fascinating stories that include Native people. It does not have to alienate audiences just because it involves Indians.

*Once Were Warriors* is a fascinating film which many critics characterized as a film about domestic violence (Cheechoo, 1995). It is a testament to the film’s power that the fact all the cast and crew (including the director and writer) are Maori does not have to enter into the enjoyment of the film. But at the same time, the importance of the traditional cultural practices is not eliminated from the story or the screen. The traditions are not hidden for fear of alienating audiences, yet they are not exploited by being shrouded in mysticism and supernaturalism. They are presented as an integral part of Aboriginal life. And these traditions become an important theme of the film since how they are passed on to the youth becomes a secondary thrust of the film. *Once Were Warriors* is perhaps the best film involving Native people to have been made to date.
Given the controversy about this film's portrayal of the Maori, it should not be characterized as an ideal film about Native people. In any case, it is anything but simplistic. What remains to be seen is if a film as complex as this one can be made about one of Turtle Island's (North America's) First Nations. Based on the findings of this thesis, such a film would require Native people in positions of creative control.
References


Cheechoo, D. M. (1995, May). Once were warriors a searing look at domestic violence [Review of Once were warriors]. Windspeaker, p. 10.


Dennis, B. & McDonald, B. (Producers), & McDonald, B. (Director). (1994). *Dance Me Outside* [Film].


*Globe And Mail*. July - October 1990.


“http://us.imdb.com/cache/title-more/business+24571”

Internet Movie Database. (1997b, March).

“http://us.imdb.com/cache/title-more/business+25219”


National Film Board of Canada (Producers) & Obomsawin, A. (Director). (1993). Kanehsatake: 270 years of resistance [Film]. Ottawa, ON: National Film Board of Canada.


Scholes, R. (Producer), & Tamahori, L. (Director). (1995). Once were warriors [Film].


Friedman (Ed.). Unspeakable images: Ethnicity and the American cinema. Chicago,


Thompson, J. B. (1990). Ideology and modern culture: Critical social theory in the era of

National Woodlands Publishing.

Directions, 6, (1&2), 1-6.

(Eds.). The pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the movies. (pp.


Wagamese, R. (1991, March 30). Kevin Costner’s realistic portrayal of natives in
Dances With Wolves could set a new trend [Review of Dances with wolves].

Calgary Herald, C1.


Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press.


Vita Auctoris

Jean-Paul Restoule was born in 1972 in Brampton, Ontario. Of Anishinaubaek heritage, he is a member of the Dokis band of Ontario. He graduated from Orangeville District Secondary School in 1991. At the University of Windsor, he obtained a B.A. in Communication Studies in 1995. He is currently a candidate for the Master’s degree in Communication Studies at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Spring, 1997.