

Chapter 1

Histories of Convenience: Images of Aboriginal Peoples in Film, Policy, and Research

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Film is a place where a culture tells its stories and hence where cultural icons are both reflected and created. This chapter examines “mainstream” North American film representations of Aboriginal Peoples in order to understand the iconic role they have played in that medium from its origin in the late 1800s to the present. Given most Canadians’ lack of experience with and knowledge of Aboriginal cultures, doing so also offers a glimpse at what many non-Aboriginal people may believe they “know” about Aboriginal Peoples and the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations.

This discussion benefits from the contributions of other authors who have examined how books,¹ films,² and the broader media³ have portrayed Aboriginal Peoples. However valuable, they tend to suffer two main limitations. First is that they tend to be constrained by a methodological model that considers only how certain film images might create certain attitudes or beliefs and ignore the context in which those messages are produced and consumed. Film is not the only place where images of Aboriginal Peoples operate or where the stories of a culture are played out; popular film imagery *reflects* contemporary understandings as much as it helps create them. Second, existing analyses tend to focus on relatively narrow time periods, thus precluding a more comprehensive analysis that shows how media imagery, and the context in which it is produced, change and influence each other over time.

This chapter explores each of these dimensions. Along with film representations, parallel chronologies of research, and policy regarding Aboriginal Peoples also are considered, to understand something of the context in which film portrayals of Aboriginal Peoples have been created. The second dimension is time, that is, how “Aboriginal images” in the realms of research and policy have varied and co-varied over three centuries and, more recently, throughout a century of film. Although covering this expanded canvas requires painting with a broader brush—which brings its own disadvantages—I hope to provide a backdrop for

and complement to the more focused statements and inquiries that comprise the remainder of this volume.

Variation in British/Canadian Indian Policy

Although the oppressive and culturally genocidal aspects of the Government of Canada's Indian policies are by now well-documented,⁴ the years since Confederation (1867) do not tell the full history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. Robin Fisher, for example, asks us to consider a longer and more complex story that distinguishes between "contact" and "conflict" periods of Aboriginal-European relations.⁵

The earlier "contact" period describes the time when European explorers, entrepreneurs, and military representatives found Aboriginal people useful to ensure survival, to act as guides, as productive partners in the fur trade, and as military allies. This period was characterized by relations that were in many ways mutually respectful—as symbolized by the *Two Row Wampum*, treaties of friendship, and, to some degree, the Royal Proclamation of 1763. It was not until the early 1800s—when survival was no longer an issue, exploration of the continent was virtually complete, military alliances were redundant, and the fur trade had been replaced by an influx of settlers interested in tilling the soil and putting it to what the settler peoples defined as "productive" use—that a more aggressive and oppressive "conflict" period transpired.

Boldt encapsulates this latter period well in his examination of how shifts in Indian policy have paralleled shifts in the "national interest," with the latter (which is never defined in Aboriginal terms) always being sacrificed to the former:

Indian interests are always either subordinated or sacrificed to promote the "national interest." When the "national interest" requires fiscal retrenchment, then Indian program budgets are capped. When the "national interest" requires a federal-provincial constitutional accord, then Indian self-government is removed from the constitutional agenda. When the "national interest" dictates a reconciliation with Quebec, then the federal government's fiduciary responsibility for Indians in Quebec is abdicated. When the "national interest" dictates resource development, then Aboriginal title is extinguished.⁶

Prefacing the quoted remarks with a statement that, "When the 'national interest' required Indians to be our friends, and for us to placate any concerns regarding loss of their way of life, we forged friendships and promised non-intervention for as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow," suggests Boldt's observations are not inconsistent with Fisher's analysis, but limited to periods when the "national interest" and "Aboriginal interests" were viewed as antithetical. Together, Fisher and Boldt effectively show that colonial and federal governments have never seriously considered Aboriginal interests *per se* in their policy formulations, or as part of the "national interest."

Variation in Research Imagery

The human sciences seek to understand non-trivial truths about the world. The choices we make about what is important to study, and the interpretations we make about what the facts we gather mean, place research squarely in a cultural context. Foucault has sensitized us to the notion of power-knowledge, incorporating the idea that the two are inextricably linked, and that observation and interpretation of the world is an exercise in which interests of power are expressed.⁷ An implication of his view is that the basis and interpretation of facts will shift in accordance with shifts in hegemonic interest.

The process is well-illustrated by Trigger, who examines depictions of Aboriginal Peoples in histories of Canada written from 1744 to the present.⁸ His analysis reveals that, in the earliest period—which coincides with Fisher's mutually beneficial "contact" period—both French and English histories were uniformly positive in their characterizations of Aboriginal people, who are referred to as industrious, honest, loyal, egalitarian, and perceptive. Characterizations of Aboriginal people by the French changed somewhat after 1759, the year in which the French lost their definitive battle with the British at the Plains of Abraham, thereby ensuring that the dominant colonial presence in North America would thereafter be British. Particular animosity is directed toward members of the Iroquois Confederacy. Not coincidentally, the Iroquois alliance with the British had played a significant role in the French defeat.

The next turn in historical representations emerges in the early 1800s, when English portrayals of Aboriginal Peoples become as negative as had the French portrayals years before. The correspondence with the beginning of Fisher's "conflict" period is significant. With Indians no longer useful as guides or required for their survival skills, and with the fur trade diminished, the end of the War of 1812 also brought the end of any external military threat, so that British alliances with First Nations against other European nations or nation states were no longer needed.

English priorities now turned to increased settlement and agricultural development. Aboriginal Peoples now were only in the way. The same people who were depicted as honest, industrious, loyal, and perceptive a mere six decades earlier now were depicted as shifty, unreliable, disingenuous, and lazy, and their "unproductive" use of the land lamented and deplored. As Boldt explains, such a re-characterization is handy if one's interests are to feel justified in expropriating Indian territory and controlling Indian populations. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, with the land well-secured, and aided by legislation in the Indian Act (1876) that made it illegal for Indians to initiate legal action against the government to assert Aboriginal Title, or even to raise money or talk to a lawyer for that purpose, Aboriginal people rarely even appear in histories of Canada, other than as props for the European actors who dominate those accounts. In sum, Trigger's analysis shows that historians' accounts were framed by hegemonic concerns.

The natural sciences also contributed to hegemonic ends. A primary element here was Darwinian evolutionary theory.⁹ Cast as *social Darwinism*, it provided

fuel for Eurocentric fires by suggesting that a “hierarchy” of races was merely part of the natural order and that military campaigns were just a manifestation of Nature’s evolutionary imperative: the “survival of the fittest.”¹⁰ Researchers in the assessment domain buttressed these propositions by offering ostensibly “objective” data that they interpreted as reaffirming the hierarchy of races, with Caucasians, conveniently enough, always at the top of the heap. Closer examination, however, reveals that these assertions did not go beyond tautology. Morton, for example, validated his belief in the link between brain size (cranial capacity) and intelligence by demonstrating that comparisons between the skulls of different races came out as they were “supposed” to: when measured in a certain way, Caucasoid skulls were the largest, followed by Indians, and then Blacks.¹¹

Demonstrations of supposed cultural superiority also involved researchers from non-Aboriginal cultures using their own proclivities and preferences as the measuring stick for “civilization,” which effectively transforms the question of “How ‘civilized’ are you?” into “How much are you like us?” The results are obvious: no one is ever as much “like us” as “we” are, and hence no one will ever measure up to our criteria as well as we do. For example, the European preference for written documentation immediately placed oral Aboriginal cultures at a disadvantage concerning the “evidence” of history: “our” documentary evidence counted; “their” oral history evidence did not. This left Indigenous Peoples the world over, through western European eyes at least, as the “people without history.”¹²

Although one might hope that such imperialist analyses would be a thing of the past, colonialist assumptions—background “understandings” so taken-for-granted they escape scrutiny—continue to the present. Deloria, for example, examines some of anthropology’s enduring chestnuts, such as the Bering Strait theory, and shows how they assume and reaffirm, rather than examine and test, contemporary understandings regarding the origins of peoples.¹³ Alfred examines the construct of “nationalism” as it has been considered in political science and history, shows how the term has been constrained by western European conceptions of nation-state, and contrasts this with Aboriginal (and particularly Mohawk) perceptions, which conceive of both nation and state in dramatically different terms.¹⁴ Kline has examined the ways that racist ideologies regarding Aboriginal Peoples make their ways into legal discourse.¹⁵

A Century of Research, Policy, and Film

The analysis to this point shows that research and policy regarding Aboriginal Peoples have been intertwined over at least three centuries. Both have served broader hegemonic interests that, at times, have coincided with Aboriginal interests, but have never included Aboriginal interests in their formulation. The remainder of this chapter expands the analysis to consider how film representations of Aboriginal Peoples have varied in relation to that research-policy mix. Any discussion of film imagery engages a twentieth-century phenomenon, commencing with Louis

Lumière's introduction of the *cinématographe* in 1895. The timing is significant insofar as the advent of film comes after Canadian Confederation (1867) and hence coincides with the federal government's fiduciary obligation to safeguard the rights and interests of Aboriginal Peoples as part of its obligation to preserve the honor of the Crown.¹⁶

The review of film portrayals of Aboriginal Peoples offered below recognizes four distinct periods. The divisions between periods are, of course, not as sharp as they will appear in my analysis, and I also readily admit to the dangers that come from trying to offer any "overall characterization" of extended time periods in which there is inevitably considerable diversity.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the characterizations are consistent with existing literature and, when viewed in their policy/science contexts, provide useful distinctions which further our understanding of the role that film imagery plays in reflecting and influencing contiguous trends in science, policy, and social belief.

A Tragic but Inevitable Oblivion (1895–1925)

The birth of film takes place in a world in which Aboriginal Peoples are believed to be destined for "extinction" through disease and genetic and cultural assimilation.¹⁸ Social demographers provided the negatively-sloped population graph that verified the "inevitability" of this demise;¹⁹ we were not quite there yet, but it took no great imagination to extrapolate the numbers to zero. Social Darwinism was used to explain that the process was no more than the inexorable flow of nature—however tragic the impending demise might be, it was just another example of an obsolete life form giving way to another more fit.²⁰ Indian policy of the time, which focused on providing opportunities for assimilation through the Indian Act, was seen by those who forwarded it as a benevolent legislation of the inevitable.

It is also around the turn of the twentieth century that North America started to run out of "pre-contact" Indians; by the 1890s, there were few if any Aboriginal Peoples who had never had contact with Europeans, meaning there were few if any cultures anywhere in North America in what was considered their "pristine" pre-contact state.²¹ This coincides with the time when anthropologists were only beginning to make contact with Aboriginal Peoples directly, in part as a mission by the Smithsonian to capture the last vestiges of Aboriginal cultures before they disappeared.²² Early filmmakers joined them in this task, producing quasi-anthropological docudramas ranging from Curtis's *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914; later renamed *In the Land of the War Canoes*) to Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922).

In the Land of the Head Hunters was Curtis's depiction of pre-contact Kwaguleth life. By the time the film was made, many Kwaguleth wore European-style clothing, but Curtis ensured they were festooned in cedar-bark dress. The story line also was imposed by Curtis—a tale of love and familial feud to which the folks back home could relate. Notwithstanding the costuming and dance, we learn little about Kwaguleth culture and their system of beliefs. With no cultural

referents but our own, the Kwaguleth appear superstitious and barbaric (reaffirmed also by the film's original title), leaving the viewer satisfied that the demise of their culture, though tragic, is also inevitable and to be welcomed by European and Kwaguleth alike.

Nanook contrasts with "*Land of . . .*" in many respects—we learn more about Inuit culture than we did about the Kwaguleth, for example, through a sampling of their life space and by seeing the context in which they live. We also benefit from Flaherty's scripted explanations, borne from an understanding and affection that reflected the years he spent with his Arctic friends.²³ Nonetheless, there is still the question of whether this is the film Nanook and his family would have made, and the posing of the question reminds us that the most probable answer would be "no".

Hollywood also was active producing docudrama, with an emphasis on legend-making. We have the settlers in *Oklahoma* going for the big land grab, but without any indication of the Cherokee Trail of Tears and how the land became vacant. In D. W. Griffiths's *The Massacre* (1913), we get the first of what, at last count, were forty-two different film renditions of General Custer, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn.²⁴ Griffiths was not the last to emphasize the alleged sneakiness of the Indians and valor of the American settlers, providing hegemonic justification as to why it was appropriate to slaughter Indians by the village-full. *The Massacre* also was significant insofar as it contained all the elements that would come to define Aboriginal images in the mainstream media for decades to come, including: (a) an emphasis on Plains Indians, and especially the Sioux; (b) living in tipis; (c) wearing feathered headdresses; (d) riding on horseback; (e) always stoic or stealthy; and (f) locked into the 1850–1890 period.²⁵

If the depiction of the Indian in film of this first period relies heavily on the image of the "noble savage," then (*The Massacre* to the contrary) the emphasis is still clearly on "noble." The period is perhaps epitomized by *Vanishing Race* (1925), which begins by quoting social Darwinist Herbert Spencer's idea that "in history, as in nature, the fittest survive"—an interesting use of the science of the day²⁶—and ends with an extreme long shot of a procession of Indians on horseback, vanishing into the horizon, out of the frame.²⁷ The message was clear: however tragic, these noble people are disappearing, so let's remember them while we can. Implicit in this was a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: if we believed that the passing of the Indian was inevitable, then there was no reason to devote the energy to helping ensure they did not, or of incorporating them in any plans for the future.

Justifications for Genocide and Control (1920–1945)

This second time period is associated with a growing awareness, and, by 1930, the clear demographic evidence, that eulogies for Aboriginal Peoples were premature.²⁸ Aboriginal Peoples were *not* going to vanish, either numerically (the numbers of Indians in federal registries started to grow again from 1930 onwards, and birth rates were on the rise) or culturally (the assimilation that federal officials

initially thought Aboriginal Peoples would embrace was met only with resistance). If “nature” would not do the job, then we would have to do it ourselves. Psychologically, this creates a very different situation. When “nature” was to blame for the demise of the Indian, or if Indians would passively accept dispersal into the broader genetic and cultural pool, then we could mourn their passing and perform eulogies to their nobility. But if their passing was “required” for the pursuit of our own hegemonic interest, and the circumstances “required” us to perform the execution ourselves, then our own peace of mind required some legitimation and rationalization of our action.

It was during this period that Indian policies in Canada were elevated (or sank) to new levels of oppression, with reinforced cradle-to-grave legislation that criminalized expressions of culture (e.g., the potlatch and other ceremonial festivals), criminalized any effort to pursue Aboriginal land or other treaty rights in court, to seek a lawyer for such a purpose, or even to raise money with the intention of seeking a lawyer for such a purpose.²⁹ Indians were going to disappear whether they wanted to or not. As former Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott stated, “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department.”³⁰

The film industry played its part by offering stories by settler filmmakers that articulated a settler perspective, that is, putting a positive spin on historical slaughters of Aboriginal Peoples and reaffirming the moral rightness of policies that appropriated Aboriginal resources, kept Indians under control, and tried to squeeze any remaining “Indian-ness” from them. Films of this period constructed the myths that many of us grew up with: (a) the homogeneity, savagery, and inferiority of “Indians” and Indian culture; (b) the bravery and honor of settler populations; and (c) the myth that all North American Indians were conquered peoples. Not surprisingly, most films also emphasized the 1850–1890 period when Aboriginal Peoples were at their weakest and most desperate. The general message was that the Indians deserved to be killed (the settlers were acting in “self-defense” against the savage heathens) and that Aboriginal cultures would inevitably disappear, since they were obsolete and inferior and had nothing to offer the contemporary world. Though the central image was still that of the “noble savage,” the emphasis in this second period had moved from “noble” to “savage.”

Stagecoach (1939) is a particularly interesting example of this period for several reasons, not the least of which is that Aboriginal characters were notable for their physical absence—and yet constant “presence”—throughout most of the movie. The only characters we meet in Act I, and hence identify with, are the passengers on the stagecoach. The Indians *are* referred to (e.g., warnings that, “You’re all going to be scalped and massacred by that old butcher, Geronimo”); we see a burned-out ranch that presumably was attacked by Indians; and we also get several “Indian-point-of-view” shots from a mountain top that makes the stagecoach seem vulnerable and under hostile surveillance. However, we never actually *see* an Indian until the attack on the stagecoach in the film’s climax. Perhaps this is an indication

of how well-defined the Indian persona was by that time; character development was not required, with their role as villain and threat already well-established.

They Died With Their Boots On (1942) is yet another rendition of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. It is telling that, in this version, the first two-thirds of the film are spent solely with George Armstrong Custer, and to know him is to like him. By the time the plot finally takes Custer to South Dakota and his post as commander of the Seventh Cavalry, we care for him; his eccentricity is acknowledged, but the general message is that he is a man of valor and integrity. The role of Crazy Horse is played by a non-Aboriginal actor—Anthony Quinn—who plays the Aboriginal leader in film-appropriate stoic fashion. An early meeting between the two leaders—in which Custer knocks Crazy Horse off his horse—shows us that Custer is not bloodthirsty (i.e., he could have killed Crazy Horse but did not) and that, in a fair fight, Crazy Horse is no match for Custer. Other scenes show that Custer is only concerned with keeping the peace (for example, he makes a treaty with Crazy Horse), and any unjust treatment of the Indians is attributed to the work of isolated greedy whites, rather than any systematic government policy. The battle at the Little Bighorn takes up only a small proportion of the total film. The film tells us that the battle began when a huge number of Indians sneak up on and attack a small and vulnerable Seventh Cavalry, killing them all; Custer is the last to remain standing, until Crazy Horse delivers the final, fatal blow.³¹

Killing Me Softly (1945–1970)

A third period of Aboriginal film portrayals extends from roughly 1945 to 1970 and reflects a change of heart that some observers believe emerged from Canadian and American experience in World War II. Tennant suggests that appreciation of Indian contributions to the war effort (particularly because natives were not subject to conscription, and hence their participation was voluntary), growing realization of the material poverty in which most Indians lived, and the failure of government policies to improve their lot, all combined to spur renewed concern about Canada's "Indian problem."³² Fleras and Elliott and Tennant note that, after fighting a war for freedom, many believed it was time to take care of our own back yard.³³ Changes occurred both nationally and internationally in the direction of "softening" policy, and welcoming Aboriginal Peoples into existing structures, although rarely with Aboriginal input and rarely in the directions that Aboriginal Peoples themselves preferred. The operating assumptions that continued to guide policy were that Aboriginal ways of life were obsolete and hence that Indian-ness was only something to be left behind.

In Canada, many of the Indian Act's more oppressive elements were deleted in a 1951 revision (e.g., prohibition of the potlatch and prohibition of making inquiries regarding or hiring a lawyer to pursue land claims were both rescinded). Indians also were given the right to vote in federal elections in 1960. Various committees and commissions of the 1950s and 1960s took turns showing the material impoverishment that existed on the reserve: higher infant mortality rates,

shorter life expectancies, lower educational attainments, higher incarceration rates, and the negative end of every other social indicator on which Natives and non-Natives could be compared.

Little of any consequence occurred, however, largely because of enduring differences between Aboriginal Peoples, who renewed their call for recognition of Aboriginal title and Aboriginal rights, and the government and its bureaucracy, who wanted Indians to forget their collective rights and start acting a bit more like everyone else. Indeed, the root cause of their deplorable situation was not attributed to the policies that had been imposed, but to enduring Aboriginal aspirations that had been ignored! As Boldt explains,

When the “national interest” imperative prescribed that Indians should be “Canadians as all other Canadians,” they were given the image of a racial minority group, of disadvantaged citizens suffering from multiple burdens of segregation, prejudice, discrimination, inequality, and lack of individual rights. This set the scene for the 1969 White Paper that identified their special status, their Aboriginal rights and their land claims as the “cause” of all their disadvantages, and sought to terminate these elements of the Aboriginal heritage.³⁴

The federal attitude is evident in a 1963 letter from Arthur Laing (later Minister of Indian Affairs from 1966–68) to a senior civil servant, in which he claimed that the main problem with Indians was that they had not yet accepted the values the government wanted them to accept: “The prime condition in the progress of the Indian people must be the development by themselves of a desire for the goals which we think they should want.”³⁵ Federal objectives, in other words, were still to assimilate Aboriginal Peoples; the way to do so was to provide all the *individual* rights that all Canadians enjoyed, but none of the *collective* rights that Canada’s original inhabitants were due.

Similar approaches were evident in the international arena, where the International Labor Organization (ILO) took the initiative to deplore the situations faced by Indigenous peoples around the world and also to call for changes that would help alleviate those conditions. However well-meaning, the ILO initiatives embodied no respect for Indigenous cultures—which were referred to as “backward and underprivileged”—and the clear assumption was that assimilation was the desired objective.³⁶ Tennant captures the social psychology of this approach well:

The representation of Indigenous peoples as ignoble primitives not only supports a general rhetoric of progress: it also legitimizes the development and assimilation of Indigenous peoples themselves. If progress is accepted as desirable, and if Indigenous peoples are located at the far bottom end of the ladder of progress, then it is an act of compassion and humanity to develop and assimilate Indigenous peoples into modern society. Indeed, this was the self-confident and enthusiastic project of the ILO in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s: to help Indigenous peoples develop out of their miserable lives and into the modern world.³⁷

The second period of film (1920–1945) had done its hegemonic part not only by offering justifications for a horrific past but also in devaluing the worth of

Indigenous cultures and people. Only by bringing such an understanding to the process could a "caring" ILO assume that "doing good" for Indigenous people would necessarily involve providing the mechanisms through which Aboriginal people could leave all cultural attachments behind.

Accordingly, the more overtly hostile film portrayals of Indians of the preceding period were replaced by portrayals that appeared more sympathetic: they paid renewed attention to the "nobility" of Indian character and acknowledged many of the more negative actions of settler populations (e.g., land theft, murder, racism). Their hegemonic character was still evident, however, in several respects: (a) more heinous actions (land grabs, treaty violations, specific massacres) were dismissed as the regrettable actions of isolated misguided individuals, rather than broadly and systematically pursued objectives; (b) "Indian-ness" continued to be treated as a relic that is left behind when one no longer hunts buffalo or uses tipis; and (c) the "inevitable" passing of the "noble red man" is affirmed and accepted. Exemplars of this film period include *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964).

The opening scene of *Cheyenne Autumn* takes place in Oklahoma, with the Cheyenne humbly awaiting a federal government party who are to sign a treaty with them. The party never shows up; we learn later that it was because the officials deemed the trail to the Cheyenne was "too dusty" and preferred to rest for that evening's Officer's Ball. The Cheyenne have had enough and set out to return to their original homelands. Captain Archer (Richard Widmark) sees the injustice of the situation, but is given the order to bring the Cheyenne back. As the Cheyenne continue their trek, and are caught and escape, Archer, a Quaker woman, and the Secretary of the Interior (the "good" whites) are pitted against callous politicians, a fanatical fort commander, and a cowboy who shoots an unarmed starving Indian simply because he has always wanted to kill an Indian (the "bad" whites).

The film is a significant departure from the previous period to the extent it acknowledges white injustice and broken promises. At the same time, it is another example of stereotypical Aboriginal characters (stoic, tragic, defeated) played by non-Aboriginal actors, against an ideological backdrop in which the Cheyenne way of life is assumed obsolete in the face of inevitable progress. In a culminating scene, the Secretary of the Interior Edward G. Robinson arrives just in time to stop what otherwise would have been yet another Army massacre of Cheyenne men, women, and children. The Cheyenne leaders, played by Ricardo Montalban and Gilbert Roland, note the string of broken promises they have been given, but readily believe Edward G. Robinson when he promises that things will be different and that he personally will tell the American people about the injustices they have incurred. They apologetically note they have no tobacco for their peace pipe, however, at which point the Secretary suggests they start a new custom and passes out cigars. Though they look slightly stunned by the gesture, the message is that their salvation will come from embracing the "new" American way and that they have much to learn about their "new" society.

Aboriginal Perspectives and Voices (1965–Present)

The last thirty years have seen significant new positions advanced in science and policy regarding Aboriginal Peoples, along with attendant shifts in film portrayals. In the academy, the significant democratization that began in the mid- to late-1960s with greater participation by women, blacks, Aboriginals, third-world academics, and so on has continued.³⁸ An increased inclusiveness also is evident in the range of perspectives entertained as “legitimate” within the academy. Those engaged in First Nations studies, for example, have found their work enriched by oral history evidence and the voices of Aboriginal people.³⁹ More broadly, the last few decades have seen the emergence of a postmodern perspective that explicitly eschews the idea that any single perspective can proclaim itself foundational by fiat.⁴⁰

Analogous strides have occurred in the domain of Indigenous policies, with several “turning points” that can be identified. Legal benchmarks include the Nisga’a moral victory in the Supreme Court of Canada in the *Calder* case, which formally placed Aboriginal rights on the map once again, as well as *Delgamuukw*, in which the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en successfully asserted recognition of Aboriginal Title.⁴¹ The last thirty years also have seen some strides made in the institutionalized acceptance of Aboriginal self-governance, particularly following formal recognition of Aboriginal and treaty rights in the Constitution Act (1982).

Gains also have been made on the international stage, where the “assimilation” talk of the ILO era has been replaced by discussions regarding “self-determination.” As Tennant describes:

The techniques of pragmatic engagement in the later era of the UN involvement were and continue to be quite different from those of the earlier period. The objective of engagement has changed from national assimilation to self-determination and autonomy within an international framework. Indigenous peoples are themselves recognized as important actors with independent objectives. With the shift from assimilation to autonomy has come a de-centering of control over the engagement. The image of national governments working with the assistance of international agencies to assimilate their Indigenous populations now seems simplistic and arrogant. The United Nations, other international agencies, states, and Indigenous peoples are all actors in what is understood to be a process of mutual engagement.⁴²

Indeed, Indigenous peoples’ representatives now have participated in many United Nations fora, a key springboard being the UN’s Working Group on Indigenous Populations (formed in 1982), although this is just one of many arenas in which Indigenous rights and interests are advanced.⁴³ The creation of a *Draft Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, passed after years of development and discussion by a substantial majority of Indigenous peoples who attended the twelfth session of the Working Group in 1994, exemplifies this cooperative involvement.⁴⁴

Film imagery regarding Aboriginal Peoples has changed in a parallel manner to research and policy as outlined above. A first set of developments occurred in

the late 1960s and early 1970s with the first appearance of “Aboriginal perspectives” in film. An early form saw non-Aboriginal filmmakers incorporating Aboriginal characters in positive roles in their scripts. The prototypes here were *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969). *Little Big Man*, for example, offers a significantly different view of the Battle of the Little Bighorn than *They Died With Their Boots On* (1942). Although the star of the show—Dustin Hoffman (playing both Jack Cragg and Little Big Man)—is still non-Aboriginal, the film makes an effort to incorporate an Aboriginal point of view; this time it is the Cheyenne who are human and vulnerable, and the Seventh Cavalry that is ruthless and beyond understanding.

We first see Custer engineering the Washita Massacre to establish the technique of killing whole villages of Indians when they congregated in winter; this version also shows it is Custer who attacked the Indians at Little Bighorn, not the Indians who ambushed Custer.⁴⁵ *Little Big Man* also acknowledges a more overtly genocidal and strategic quality to settler intervention, as opposed to dismissing injustices as the isolated actions of a few corrupt or greedy whites. The film also features one of the first Aboriginal stars in Chief Dan George. More recent Hollywood productions such as Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990) continue in this genre, but do not go beyond the white-man-as-star or express more than non-Aboriginal views on what some Aboriginal perspectives on events might have been (see discussion by Márgara Averbach in Chapter 2).

It is outside the Hollywood mainstream that Aboriginal film portrayals have more fully embraced Aboriginal voices. British filmmaker Michael Apted, for example, has given prominence of voice to the Oglala Sioux and Lakota and members of the American Indian Movement in his documentary re-examination of the Leonard Peltier story, *Incident at Oglala* (1992). In Canada, a series of films involving the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), by filmmakers such as Hugh Brody (e.g., *Time Immemorial* [1991]; *A Washing of Tears* [1993]), has similarly given the screen to Aboriginal people to tell their stories.

A most important development, however, is the advent and growing number of truly Aboriginal films, that is, where Aboriginal filmmakers produce and direct their own stories. For example, Alanis Obomsawin’s award-winning *Kahnesatake* (1993), a documentary filmed primarily inside that community during the Oka conflict, is both informative and moving in its historical analysis and portrayal of contemporary Mohawk life. The NFB also started Studio I as a production vehicle for Aboriginal filmmakers. Filmmakers such as Loretta Todd (e.g., see *Helping Hands*, 1994), whose early work often had NFB support, are now well-established. Another important aspect of these developments is that “Aboriginal film” has broadened to include not only “docudrama” designed to correct the historical record and show another perspective on Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations, but also contemporary Aboriginal stories (such as *Dance Me Outside*, 1994). This development clearly shows that a thriving Aboriginality is very much a part of contemporary culture, with much to enrich us all, thereby countering racist ideologies that suggest “Aboriginal cultures” are somehow only a part of the past or ended when Aboriginal people started eating pizza or driving snowmobiles.⁴⁶

Conclusion

I have tried to show in this chapter the interweaving of science, policy, and “mainstream” film, how each has changed over time, and how these changes have reflected and helped justify hegemonic interest. Although the analysis suffers from the inevitable limitations of trying to paint historical processes with a very broad brush, it also, I hope, will move us away from what appear to be common conceptions of science, policy, and media as monolithic entities that never change. If change *was* possible, then it *is* possible; one hopes my enduring message is one of optimism in that regard.

The analysis offered here also is intended to sensitize non-Aboriginal researchers, policy-analysts, and filmmakers to consider the contextual influences and understandings that each brings to their task. Bold formulations in any one area can help open the door to reformulations in any other. We all have a role to play in that regard by broadening the range of perspectives we are prepared to entertain, and especially to understand the aspirations of Aboriginal Peoples with respect to the determination of their own futures. I started this chapter by noting that film is a place where a culture tells its stories. Film also provides an opportunity to listen to the stories that others tell. A century of filmmaking *about* Aboriginal people/s has finally reached the point where there is filmmaking *by* Aboriginal people/s. Those who take the time to listen—and I would suggest it is in our “national interest” and “international interest” to do so—will find that Aboriginal people/s have much to say, and have had for a very long time.

Notes

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1. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

2. Gretchen Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet, eds., *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980); Michael Hilger, *The American Indian in Film* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986); J. A. Price, “The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures,” *Ethnohistory* 20 (1973): 153–71; J. M. Skinner, “The Portrayal of the Canadian Native in the American Cinema: Selected Cases,” *East-West* 2, no. 2 (1988): 115–28.

3. Ward Churchill, M. A. Hill, and N. S. Hill Jr., “Examination of Stereotyping: An Analytical Survey of Twentieth Century Indian Entertainers,” in Bataille and Silet, *The Pretend Indians*, 35–48; Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992).

4. For example, see Menno Boldt, *Surviving as Indians: The Challenge of Self-Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Noel Dyck, *What Is the Indian “Problem”?: Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration* (St. John's, Nfld.:

Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University, 1991); Augie Fleras and Jean L. Elliot, *The Nations Within: Aboriginal-State Relations in Canada, the United States, and New Zealand* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992).

5. Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, 2nd ed (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992). [1st ed 1977.]

6. Boldt, *Surviving as Indians*, 71-2.

8. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970); M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

8. Bruce G. Trigger, "The Historians' Indian: Native Americans in Canadian Historical Writing from Charlevoix to the Present," in *Out of the Background: Readings on Canadian Native History*, ed. Robin Fisher and Ken Coates (Mississauga, Ont.: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 19-44.

9. The problem may be less with Darwinian theory per se, and more a reflection of the uses to which the theory has been put, and the meanings that have been emphasized, particularly in the context of social Darwinism. For example, the theory has been interpreted hierarchically and has been imbued with concepts of "development" and "progress," but it can just as easily be seen as merely a taxonomy of difference and relationships. Similarly, notions of "progress" and "development" imply we are "going somewhere," when the theory can also be read from the viewpoint that we are going nowhere, or at least nowhere that can confidently be determined a priori, but that we merely respond as a species to varying conditions that are partially within our control, and partially not. Even the phrase "survival of the fittest" is inaccurate; Darwin's phrase is "survival of the fit." The difference between the two is telling: the former implies an inevitable competition for dominance, while the second implies differing forms that are equally but diversely adaptive to prevailing conditions can co-exist. Finally, Darwinism has been used to justify the oppression of others, when the theory is equally well suited to valuing the diversity among us since, as a species, the broader our diversity, the higher the likelihood that, in the event of catastrophe, we will survive.

10. For example, see Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*; see also George W. Stocking Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987); recall also note 9.

11. S. G. Morton, "Observations on the Size of the Brain in Various Races and Families of Man," *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences* 4 (1849): 221-24. For a detailed analysis and critique of Morton's research, see Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

12. See Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

13. Vine Deloria Jr., *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner's, 1995). The Bering Strait theory suggests that Aboriginal Peoples came to North America from northern Russia/Mongolia some 15,000 years ago via a land bridge that existed between Alaska and Siberia during the last ice age. Deloria makes a compelling argument for the implausibility of that theory and offers his own theory that also incorporates oral history testimony and a "decolonized" reading of available evidence.

14. Gerald Alfred, *Heeding the Voices of our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of Native Nationalism* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995).

15. M. Kline, "The Colour of Law: Ideological Representations of First Nations in Legal Discourse," *Social and Legal Studies* 3 (1994): 451-76.

16. For example, see *R. v. Sparrow* [1992]. 1 S.C.R. 1075.

17. For example, see Foucault, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

18. Various authors object to the common use made of the word "extinction" in reference

to Indigenous peoples, since it is normally used in reference to flora and fauna rather than people (e.g., see p. 16 of C. Tennant, "Indigenous Peoples, International Institutions, and the International Legal Literature from 1945–1993," *Human Rights Quarterly* 16, no. 1 1994: 1–57).

19. Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 1982).

20. See Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*; Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*; see also note 9.

21. It is another enduring colonial legacy that "contact" is defined only in terms of contact with Europeans, suggesting it is the only contact that counted.

22. This may seem an odd statement to those who hold the image of the lonely anthropologist writing field notes while living for extended periods among Indigenous peoples, but the phenomenon of anthropologist-in-the-field is actually a relatively recent one. Earlier contacts and written accounts tended to be done by missionaries, explorers, travelers, and colonial officials; the "anthropologists" were back in Europe digesting these accounts and putting them in theoretical perspective. The professionalization of ethnography, involving observation in the field, did not begin until the early nineteenth century and was not a well-established practice until very late in the nineteenth century (e.g., see A. J. Vidich and S. M. Lyman, "Qualitative Methods: Their History in Sociology and Anthropology," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln [Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1994]: 23–59).

23. See, e.g., Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973).

24. See Hilger, *The American Indian in Film*.

25. See, e.g., Churchill, Hill and Hill, "Examination of Stereotyping."

26. See note 9.

27. See Hilger, *The American Indian in Film*, 7–8.

28. See Dippie, *The Vanishing American*.

29. See Boldt, *Surviving as Indians*; Dyck, *What is the Indian 'Problem'*; T. S. Palys, *Prospects for Aboriginal Justice in Canada* (Burnaby, BC: SFU School of Criminology, 1993); <<http://www.sfu.ca/~palys/prospect.htm>> (accessed on July 3, 2000); Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849–1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990).

30. Quoted in Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics*, 92.

31. Compare James Welch, *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

32. P. Tennant, *Aboriginal People and Politics*.

33. Fleras and Elliott, *The Nations Within*; C. Tennant, "Indigenous Peoples."

34. Boldt, *Surviving as Indians*, 69–70.

35. Letter dated October 13, 1963; cited on p. 48 of Sally M. Weaver, *Making Canadian Indian Policy: The Hidden Agenda, 1968–1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

36. From *Proceedings* of a 1949 ILO conference; cited by C. Tennant, "Indigenous Peoples," 26.

37. C. Tennant, "Indigenous Peoples," 10.

38. See, e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

39. See, e.g., Fisher and Coates, *Out of the Background*.

40. See, e.g., Denzin and Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*; Ted S. Palys, *Research Decisions: Qualitative and Quantitative Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1997).

41. *Calder v. Attorney-General of British Columbia*. [1973]. 1 S.C.R. 313. *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. [1997]. 3 S.C.R. 1010.
42. C. Tennant, "Indigenous People," 29.
43. Franke Wilmer, *The Indigenous Voice in World Politics: Since Time Immemorial* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1993).
44. See, e.g., Sharon H. Venne, *Our Elders Understand Our Rights: Evolving International Law Regarding Indigenous Rights* (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1998).
45. See, e.g., Welch, *Killing Custer*.
46. See, e.g., Kline, "The Colour of Law."