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## Coming out from behind the Rocks: Constructs of the Indian in Recent U.S and Canadian Cinema

ROBERT APPLEFORD

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*From the point of view of fiction as it gives form to our inchoate visions, it is tragic that Native Americans are real, with real feelings and real heritages, rather than the elusive creatures of our imagination . . . [T]he western uses the devices of fiction to speak to the inner needs of its viewers . . . and hence should be responded to inwardly. But the reality of Native Americans disrupts such a possibility . . . History unwittingly crosses over to intervene in the fictive relationship between work and audience.*

—John Harrington<sup>1</sup>

*It was on a night like this that ol' Coyote got on a plane to Ottawa to see the Prime Minister. "Boy are we happy to see you!" said the Prime Minister, "maybe you can help us with our Indian Problem." "Sure," said Coyote, "what's the problem?"*

—Lionel James in *Medicine River*

Much work has been done by scholars to document and critique the long history of negative stereotyping of the North American Indian in film, especially the particularly virulent genre of the

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Hollywood Western.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, recent U.S. and Canadian films reflect a pronounced interest in Indians not as faceless savages who fire arrows at the good guys from unseen hiding places but as members of dynamic cultures. However, it is inevitable that new problems and issues of representation arise when the Indians “come out from behind the rocks.” An examination of these films can yield much information for those interested in North American Indian studies because they act as barometers of social attitudes toward Indian peoples and indicate to what ideological use the Indian subject is being put. The foregrounding of the Indian subject in such high-profile films as *Dances with Wolves*, *Black Robe*, *Thunderheart*, and *Clearcut* is in itself a step toward cross-cultural dialogue. However, these pictures can be seen to conform to the traditional pattern of constructing the “Indian” to embody mainly non-Indian concerns. More modest films such as *Loyalties*, *The Company of Strangers*, *Where the Spirit Lives*, *Spirit Rider*, *Powwow Highway*, and *Medicine River* explore new ways of representing Indian culture and attempt (at least partially) to free the Indian subject from its position of useful but ideologically fixed Other.

“FEELING LIKE KNOWLEDGE”:  
FICTION, REALITY, AND THE INDIAN CONSTRUCT

Although none of the films discussed in this paper claim to be documentary depictions of native life, all contribute to the field of images that define the boundaries of what is considered “Indian” in North American culture. In some ways, the films appear more real to audiences than do the most heavily researched documentaries. Susan Sontag’s comment on photography is perhaps even more reflective of the power of cinema to reify (and thereby legitimate as truth) artificial texts and ideas, especially in relation to how marginalized peoples are transformed through film: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.”<sup>3</sup> Since audiences increasingly desire fictional films to “feel like knowledge” and thus appear to be somehow more realistic than their counterparts, film companies and publicity departments make authenticity a vague but emphatic selling point for their films. However, many of these often depict native characters and storylines in factually inaccurate ways. The \$32-million Canada-France coproduction

*Shadow of the Wolf* (1993) was marketed as representing a distinctly native point of view in opposition to other "unauthentic" films,<sup>4</sup> despite the fact that it is based on a book (Yves Theriault's *Agaguk* [1958]) that has been generally criticized as both inaccurate and misleading.<sup>5</sup> Thus, authenticity becomes a matter of marketing hyperbole rather than of factual verification.

Recent films such as *Dances with Wolves* often attempt to satisfy both the audience's desire for a story and the need (most often expressed by native spokespeople and cultural historians) for factual accuracy. Because they occupy the slippery position between fiction and documentary, these films are often evaluated in light of both and just as often are seen to fail to meet the sometimes rigorous requirements of each. They can also be evaluated in relation to native empowerment, or what use the films are to the aboriginal groups depicted (rightly and wrongly) within the work. The native response to many of these films sometimes cannot be predicted. For example, *Shadow of the Wolf*, criticized for its questionable historical and ethnographic authenticity, was premiered in the Inuit community of Povungnituk with a certain amount of trepidation on the part of Bernard D'Anglure, the anthropologist who fought (sometimes unsuccessfully) to invest the film with some degree of accuracy. He was amazed to find that the elders liked the film and "they weren't going to worry about the details."<sup>6</sup> While one could see this response as a cultural sellout or an indication of the Inuit's internalization of stereotype, it can also be read as an indication of their feeling that a film that presented even an idea of Inuit culture was more important than the numerous inaccuracies that it contained. Thus, the evaluation of these films can be difficult because the use of the three criteria—fiction, documentary, and empowering tool—can rarely lead to the same critical conclusions.

#### HEARTS OF DARKNESS: *DANCES WITH WOLVES*, *BLACK ROBE*, *THUNDERHEART*

Several recent films made on both sides of the border attempt to deal with the historical legacy of cultural and physical genocide against North American native peoples and with the cultural factors that lie behind these policies of destruction. A common strategy for dramatizing these subjects is the narrative pattern made popular in Joseph Conrad's modernist novel *Heart of Dark-*

ness (1902). Conrad's pattern involves the journey of an individual (or the Self) into an unknown and ultimately unknowable region where he/she is confronted with the Other, usually of another race and/or culture. For the purposes of this paper, the term *Other* refers to the shifting set of cultural signs that are perceived to be outside the Self (usually the dominant or mainstream ideology) and that, by their very existence, threaten the Self's own boundaries. What drives this narrative is the mixed feelings the individual Self experiences as he/she penetrates the Other and confronts the fear such a penetration elicits. Conrad's pattern has been used most notably in the film *Apocalypse Now* to illustrate the disintegration of Western imperialism as it attempts to subdue the Other (in this case, the Vietnamese and Cambodians) on its own turf. The use such a pattern has for those who wish to explore the North American Indian's status as Other is obvious, and many films such as Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* are centered around a nonnative protagonist who ventures into Indian country and is changed by the experience. Significantly, the "heart-of-darkness" pattern is altered in Costner's epic in that its hero, Lieutenant Dunbar, comes to realize that his journey into the land of the Sioux is not a descent into darkness but an ascent into light. While the message of the film is affirmative, however, it can be seen as a simple inversion of the heart-of-darkness pattern—an inversion that leaves the ideological division between Self and Other, white and Indian, largely intact.

The varied responses to *Dances with Wolves* from both Indian and non-Indian critics can be arranged around the poles of artistic criticism and the critique of factual authenticity. In an excellent article on the film, Native American Edward Castillo balances his praise for the film by pointing out some significant historical errors. He suggests that the demonization of the Pawnee satisfies dramatic convention but leaves the audience with a simplistic view of postcontact Indian history, in that the exigencies of survival led other Indian bands (including some Sioux) to collaborate with U.S. federal authorities.<sup>7</sup> Castillo also indicates how the real figure of Ten Bears (played by Floyd Red Crow Westerman [Lakota]), who is shown to be a Lakota chief in the film, is historically a Southern Plains Yapparika Comanche. He explains that the original book on which the film is based is set on the Southern Plains but that the film's production company gained access to a large buffalo herd located in South Dakota, which necessitated a change of nation.<sup>8</sup> In addition to being reproached

for its inaccuracies in the depiction of certain historical facts, the film was also criticized in terms of its fictional content: It was accused of shaping its portrayal of native people to serve the demands of "naive liberalism."<sup>9</sup> Many people balked at the idea of a love story between a white man and his racially white partner being placed at the centre of a film purported to give prominence to native experience.

The relationship between the self and the Other is extremely important in any heart-of-darkness narrative, and Costner's film is no exception. If the film is considered in light of this relationship, many of the factual oddities and the narrative emphasis on nonnative characters are seen to be indications of Lieutenant Dunbar's increasing absorption of the Indian Other into his consciousness. Castillo discusses the questionable realism of Dunbar's "discovery" of the buffalo herd ahead of the Lakota, a people far more skilled and experienced in the art of tracking and hunting the animal. He suggests that the scene where Dunbar walks into the midst of the herd is intentionally dream-like and incredible in order to suggest that what we are seeing is a vision rather than an actual event. He offers an alternative reading of the film not as straight historical narrative but as shamanic allegory, where Dunbar undergoes numerous spiritual rites of passage on his way to becoming "a new messiah . . . to lead the white man back to a balanced physical and spiritual embrace with the earth, our mother."<sup>10</sup> This eco-consciousness is typified by a scene in the film not included in the theatrical release where Dunbar and the shaman Kicking Bird (Graham Greene [Oneida]) happen upon a sacred forest area recently visited by rapacious whites. The area is littered with empty whisky bottles and the rotting bodies of animals killed for target practice. In this way, *Dances with Wolves* can be seen as an exploration of a shift in a mainstream cultural attitude, with native guides helping to facilitate the shift. Amanda Smith goes so far as to suggest that the importance of the "native angle" of the film lies in its catalytic role for Dunbar rather than in any specific attributes of culture:

A good deal of the power of *Dances with Wolves* lies not in its glorification of a specific culture, but in its ability to dramatize that culture in a manner so that it becomes the medium for freeing its protagonist from a vision that is too limited or circumscribed and awakening deeper sensibilities.<sup>11</sup>

Dunbar, the representative of the Self in Western consciousness, is enriched by the Other, but, to a great extent, the distinction between Self and Other remains. Although Costner's character becomes *Dances with Wolves* in terms of inner identity, he cannot totally relinquish the status his white skin affords him. In a discussion of images of natives in literature, Terry Goldie introduces an illuminating quotation from Sander Gilman that bears on this distinction:

Because there is no real line between self and the Other, an imaginary line must be drawn; and so that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled, this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self . . . . Thus paradigm shifts in our mental representations of the world can and do occur. We can move from fearing to glorifying the Other. We can move from loving to hating.<sup>12</sup>

Gilman suggests that the positive stereotype of the Other generated by the awareness of the inadequacies of the Self becomes "that which we fear we cannot achieve."<sup>13</sup> This desire to become the positive Other is also the audience's desire to penetrate the world of the Lakota, and Dunbar, our guide, is our way "in." Because the other whites in the film are largely stereotyped figures of evil, we feel little identification with them and therefore with their destructive actions. We can distance ourselves from the Western imperialist paradigm because our gaze becomes so completely identified with the gaze of the protagonist who has successfully freed himself from that paradigm. By focusing on the Indian Other as a natural resource that the non-Indian Self can use according to its needs, the film does little to disrupt the power relationship that privileges the dominant ideological position of the Self over the subordinate Other.

In the 1991 film *Black Robe*, a \$14-million Canadian-Australian co-production directed by Australian Bruce Beresford, the heart-of-darkness pattern is also developed as a model for interrogating the Western paradigm within an historical framework. However, the film highlights the fixity of the line dividing the Self and the Other rather than (as in *Dances with Wolves*) its fluidity; the Other is never satisfactorily penetrated by the white protagonist or, by extension, by the audience. *Black Robe* tells the story of Father Laforgue (Lothaire Bluteau), an idealistic young Jesuit priest, who, in 1634, comes to New France to convert the "savages." He

sets off at the height of winter from the fort at Quebec (commanded by Samuel de Champlain) on a twenty-five-hundred-kilometer trip upriver to Ihonatiria, an isolated mission post among the Huron people. Unlike Costner's epic, where the protagonist's worldview is enriched by the native paradigm, this film illustrates how ideology interposes between cultures and prevents Laforgue from entering into a meaningful dialogue with his native companions. An early scene in the film juxtaposes the celebrations of the French settlers with those of the Algonquin, where both groups engage in folk dancing and singing around two bonfires separated more by prejudice than by real cultural difference. Only the audience, from its position of historical and philosophical distance, is able to see this ironic juxtaposition of images. Unlike Dunbar, who begins as a celebrated white war hero and ends as an honorary Lakota, Father Laforgue is the ultimate outsider—derided by both the French settlers and the Algonquin guides hired to accompany him on his journey into Huron territory.

The film's originality (and ultimately its notoriety) lies in its unflattering depiction of native life. When Laforgue and his companions are captured by the Iroquois en route to the mission, the captors brutally (and gleefully) mutilate and torture their captives. It is significant that, after this encounter, the Algonquin leader Chomina (August Schellenberg [Métis]) asks Daniel (Aden Young), the Jesuit's French assistant who deeply admires native culture, "You still want to be one of us?" This question seems directed not only at the young man but also at other "wannabe" Indians who view native life through the filter of romance.

After much hardship (including the death of Chomina and all but one of his people), Laforgue finally reaches the Huron outpost only to find the Hurons decimated by smallpox and the mission in ruins. Father Jerome, a dying priest and the only white presence left, urges Laforgue to baptize the despairing Hurons, who see baptism not as a gateway to Christian faith but as a magic protection against the disease. Laforgue, who, throughout the narrative, has held fast to his faith in the righteousness of his divine mission, is left with the task of leading a congregation that has no Christian faith or understanding of its ideals. His own paradigm as shattered as the chapel's roof, he is left as he was found at the beginning of the film: an outsider, now without even the bracing effect of an evangelical impulse. His parting words to Daniel (who chooses to venture off with Chomina's daughter



Annuka (Sandrine Holt)) reflect how his partial understanding of the film's "native" paradigm only helps to emphasize his own existential despair:

What can we say to people who think that dreams are the real world, and that this one is only an illusion? Perhaps they're right.

In stark contrast to Lieutenant Dunbar, our "hero" is unable to incorporate any aspect of the Other into the Self; if we are dependent on him to bridge the gap, neither are we.

What complicates the analysis of *Black Robe* is the problem of whether to evaluate it as fiction or as documentary re-creation. Judged as an historical record of native groups, the film is riddled with inconsistencies. Ann Brascoupe, a Quebec-born Algonquin, points out that the Algonquin people in the film speak Oji-Cree, while the Hurons speak Mohawk, the languages of their respective historical arch-rivals.<sup>14</sup> August Schellenberg, the Métis actor who portrays the Algonquin leader Chomina, led a number of native participants in an ongoing battle to minimize what they saw as elements "demeaning to native people."<sup>15</sup> Just as the departures from fact in *Dances with Wolves* can be explained by emphasizing the film's narrative agenda, *Black Robe's* inaccuracies have been defended by both native and nonnative supporters of the project as faithful re-creations of a subjective perception. Respected Cree/Métis actress Tantoo Cardinal, who plays Chomina's wife in the film, affirms her belief that "this film is not an Indian story, and it's not about Indian spirituality. It's about the Jesuits and what they brought."<sup>16</sup> The book by Brian Moore on which the film is based was inspired by the author's interest in *Jesuit Relations*, a collection of the letters sent by seventeenth-century priests in New France to their superiors in the home country. Moore's book attempts to render as accurately as possible the vision of the priests and how they interpreted what they saw, resulting in an intentionally skewed depiction of native culture and values. The novel's self-reflexive irony poses a problem of interpretation that the film only exacerbates.

The problem of recognizing the fiction of the actor playing an Indian is relatively straightforward when the actor is obviously non-Indian (e.g., Rock Hudson as *Taza, Son of Cochise* [1954]), but, when Indian actors portray Indians on screen, the gap between Indian-as-Text and Indian-as-Presence becomes obscured. Terry Goldie's recognition of this risk in live performance also holds

true for Indian actors in film: “[I]f . . . the voice, the human sound actually heard, is from an indigene throat, how much more difficult for the audience to recognize the distance between ‘voice’ and referent voice.”<sup>17</sup> It may be possible to communicate this cogitative distance to a reader of literature, whose task it is to construct images out of a clearly artificial text and therefore make something initially unreal seem real. However, the perception of a gap between “‘voice’ and referent voice” in a cinematic image requires a substantial amount of self-conscious technique to prevent the audience from conflating the reality of the filmed object with the fiction the filmed object is designed to embody. It is surprising that, given this task, very little of this technique is used in *Black Robe*, which lacks even the protagonist’s narration to temper the film’s “realism.” Because the issue of whether *Black Robe* is meant to be factually accurate or an exercise in unreliable narration is contested even by those responsible for its creation, the film occupies an uneasy position. If it is a re-creation of Father Laforgue’s vision of New France, it is in some ways too successful a re-creation, in that we can perceive little subversion of this vision and can easily ingest it as fact.

Although both films can be criticized as explorations of white consciousness rather than of native North American cultures, they also are marked by the closure afforded by their historical settings. *Dances with Wolves* and *Black Robe* end with epitaphs of the peoples depicted, describing, in the former, the surrender of the last free Sioux band to U.S. authorities and, in the latter, the total annihilation of the newly Christianized Huron people at the hands of their enemies the Iroquois. Because the audience is able to condemn the Indian policies of the past and participate in Dunbar’s enlightenment or recognize Laforgue’s cultural imperialism, the link between the historical “Indian problem” and the present political and social discrimination against native people is not made. In an article in *Canadian Forum* entitled “Hostiles,” Geoff Pevere dismisses both Dunbar and Laforgue as “pop-historical plastic surgeons” who “perform makeovers on history’s messier moments”:

Engineered to raise an issue without implicating its audience, *Black Robe*, like Costner’s feelgood account of frontier racism and genocide, turns on a cunning tactic of acknowledgement leavened with denial. While acknowledging the undeniable fact of systematic white European oppression . . . it also takes pains to keep any blood from splattering the front rows.<sup>18</sup>

It is an ironic coincidence that, in the summer of 1990, Mohawk actor Billy Two Rivers divided his time between explaining the Mohawk position for the media during the Oka (Kanehsatake) and Kahnawake blockades and completing his successful screen test for the role of Ougebemat in *Black Robe*.<sup>19</sup> Although the film was made in the context of volatile political action, the reaction of its director to the native standoffs at Oka and Kahnawake was largely noncommittal. Beresford remarked in an interview that he thought aboriginal peoples in both Canada and his native Australia "tend to overreact" when faced with "clear mistreatment."<sup>20</sup> Similarly leery of being seen to advocate specific political causes, Kevin Costner affirmed that the most important aspect of his film was "the sentiment, the humanity, not the politics."<sup>21</sup> A historical examination is not required to be a manifesto for present-day political action; however, it is undeniable that serious problems arise when a depiction of institutionalized racism of a still-marginalized group does not force the audience to examine its own role in this racism.

A U.S. film that attempts to use the heart-of-darkness pattern to shape a contemporary narrative and thereby resist the closure of history is British director Michael Apted's *Thunderheart* (1992). A dramatized account of the U.S. suppression of the A.I.M. movement during the 1970s, *Thunderheart* tells the story of Roy Levoi (Val Kilmer), a part-Sioux F.B.I. agent sent to investigate a homicide on a Sioux reservation. The film departs from the typical narrative pattern in two vital ways: First, it replaces the white outsider who must penetrate the alien culture with a protagonist who has suppressed his "Indianness" and who must rediscover this part of himself with the help of "his" Indian people. A second departure is its depiction of the white villains who are responsible for the outrages committed against the Sioux. During a contemplative moment, Levoi's partner, Frank Coutelle (Sam Shepard), an intelligent and hard-nosed F.B.I. veteran, explains to Levoi his views on the Sioux's political rights:

I feel for them, I really do. They're a proud people. But they're also a conquered people. And that means that their future is dictated by the nation that conquered them. Rightly or wrongly, that's the way it works down through history.

This is perhaps the most honest and chilling expression of the philosophy behind most modern North American governmental

policies regarding native peoples.<sup>22</sup> By making the villains complex characters whose racism is far more subtle and rational than simplistic "redneckism," the film prevents us from immediately categorizing them.

By dealing with contemporary Indian issues, *Thunderheart* attempts to avoid the safety of nostalgia and force the audience to reevaluate its own position in relation to current political and social struggles. However, it must be pointed out that the film's departure from convention is not as thoroughgoing as the above discussion might imply. For example, the hero's final refusal to join the Sioux community (despite its invitations) conforms to the traditional American narrative focus on the individual rather than on his/her role within the group. Just as Costner's Dunbar takes what he needs from the Lakota band and departs, Lavoie's consciousness is raised by his experiences with the Sioux, but his destiny lies elsewhere.

#### SPLATTERING THE FRONT ROWS: *CLEARCUT*

*Clearcut* (1991), a Canadian film by Polish expatriate Richard Bugajski, is the story of a native person who, to use the words of *Black Robe's* director in another context, "tends to overreact." It is difficult to watch not only because of its graphic violence and explosive fury, but also because it is extremely difficult to ascertain whose violence and fury is being expressed. The film, based on a novel by M.T. Kelly, relates the story of a white, liberal lawyer named Peter Maguire (Stephen Lea) who has just lost a crucial land claims case designed to prevent a logging company from clearcutting a Northern Ontario forest traditionally controlled by natives. As the bulldozers roll in, Maguire ineffectually vents his anger and frustration at the natives' hopeless situation and expresses his desire to "make someone pay, make them hurt." As if summoned, a mysterious native person named Arthur (Graham Greene) appears and kidnaps both Maguire and Bud Rickets (Michael Hogan), the logging company's owner, in order to punish the owner for his crimes against both nature and native people. Arthur (despite the terrified protestations of Maguire) skins Rickets' leg in order to give him a sense of how a tree feels when its bark is removed in one of his mills. It is up to Maguire to stop Arthur in his rampage, and, in the midst of a struggle, Arthur walks into a lake and never returns.

This film, far from rewarding the audience's liberal-humanist impulse, attempts to expose the perceived hypocrisy that underpins it. Once again, our doppelganger is a white liberal who "cares," but his experience with Arthur forces him to reexamine his own preconceptions regarding the people he professes to care about. Early in the film, Maguire condescendingly claims that he is familiar with the natives' oral tradition. In response, Arthur produces a live snake and bites its head off, spitting out the head in front of Maguire, with the words, "That's oral tradition." When Maguire apologizes to Wilf, a native elder (Floyd Red Crow Westerman), for losing the case, the elder asks, "Who do you feel bad for, us or yourself?" Arthur's attacks are directed not only at the capitalists who destroy the land but at the whites who, because they sympathize with native struggles, feel they have done enough to assuage their own guilt. Reviewer Martin Knelman, reacting to this uncomfortable message, called the film a "cinematic hate letter to white people."<sup>23</sup>

What becomes problematic in analyzing this film is the matter of Arthur's identity. In a speech delivered to the bound and terrified Rickets, Arthur indicates how the configuration of native identity by whites is driven by a fear that anything without a stable identity is dangerous:

See, a man tears the wings off a bird, and he hates it because it can't fly. And then it scares him 'cause he doesn't know what it's good for, lyin' there, floppin' around on the ground like a fish.

Because Arthur's anger is so horrifying and uncontrollable, the audience comes to identify the logging company owner as the victim and sees the "renegade Indian" as the dominant power to be subverted. However, many critics have argued that Arthur signifies Maguire's own murderous impulses. When Maguire begs Wilf, the native elder, to stop Arthur's revenge plot, Wilf replies, "You dreamed anger, and your anger is real." In this reading, Arthur becomes the irrational primal impulse that must be addressed by Maguire, the highly rational representative of civilization. As in *Black Robe*, where the attempt to represent native characters as projections of nonnative consciousness fails to take account of the apparent reality of the filmic medium, here, too, the imaginary appears real. Arthur may be a wandering signifier of white anger, but, as Knelman suggests, "Arthur is

closer to reality than anyone else in sight.”<sup>24</sup> The quotation from John Harrington that heads this paper suggests that the cinematic fiction of the Indian involves the embodiment of the audience’s feelings about and knowledge of itself using a construction that bears an outward resemblance to the Indian, and that, in turn, affects how we perceive real Indians. By using as a symbol something resembling a “real Indian” within a narrative context that resembles a real-life problem (clearcutting of forests), *Clearcut* risks configuring the actual native land claims debates according to reified fears of the Other.

#### THE CIRCLE OF WOMEN: *LOYALTIES*, *THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS*, *WHERE THE SPIRIT LIVES*

If the previously discussed films can be seen to use the construct of Indians to embody distinctly non-Indian concerns, they can also be seen to concentrate on constructs that are distinctly masculine in nature. Although figures such as Black Shawl (Tantoo Cardinal), the outspoken wife of the shaman Kicking Bird in *Dances with Wolves*, can deliver scathing one-liners at the expense of her husband’s ego, such isolated instances of female presence are unconnected to the main narrative. It is important, therefore, to analyze three rather modest Canadian films (one made for television) that focus on the struggles of native women, both as women and as powerful members of distinct cultures.

One recurrent theme in Canadian films centering around native women is the search for solidarity across cultural lines. The 1986 film *Loyalties*, directed by Anne Wheeler, focuses on two women, Rosanne (Tantoo Cardinal) and Lily (Susan Wooldridge), whose backgrounds could not be more dissimilar. Rosanne is a Métis single mother who works as a babysitter for Lily; Lily is an upper middle class woman who left her native England with her doctor husband under mysterious circumstances and moved to the rugged Northern Albertan town of Lac La Biche. The film effectively contrasts the cramped but emotionally supportive environment of Rosanne—an extended family consisting of Rosanne’s three children and her mother—with the sterile, isolated existence of Lily, who endures a loveless marriage with a man who was forced to leave England (we later learn) after a scandal involving child sexual abuse. The film dramatizes the thesis that women separated by the apparently insurmountable

barriers of class, race, and money can form relationships based on common concerns. In an article entitled "The Multiple Oppression of Women of Colour," Vanaja Dhruvarajan suggests that this bond can attack the cross-culturally patriarchal systems that deny women access to real political power:

To achieve significant structural changes and replace male domination with the ideology of gender equality, white women need to forge alliances with all women . . . . Otherwise those in positions of power and privilege can use racial, ethnic and class cleavages to their benefit and to the detriment of all women.<sup>25</sup>

"The only difference between [Lily] and me is money," says Rosanne, the astute cultural materialist, "but what a hell of a difference!" When Lily, hungry for the emotional warmth of Rosanne's dilapidated home, remarks during a visit, "It's so nice here," Rosanne is quick to reply, "Are you gonna make a speech about the happy poor next?" The title of the film refers to the misplaced loyalty Lily maintains toward her husband, even after he has raped Rosanne's young daughter. Lily hits Rosanne over the head with a vase as the latter attempts to shoot Lily's husband; thus Lily commits an act of gender betrayal for which she atones at the end of the film by helping Rosanne press charges against the doctor. The film is less an in-depth examination of what it means to be a native woman than a plea for transcendent unity—a unity that stresses commonalities rather than existing cultural differences. To this end, Wheeler's film minimizes the potential for culturally based conflict between the two women.

In a similar vein, the National Film Board of Canada production of Cynthia Scott's *The Company of Strangers* (1991) also stresses affinities of gender rather than differences. This gentle film, part fiction, part documentary, tells the story of seven women (only one of whom is a professional actress and under the age of fifty) who must spend time together in a deserted country house in the Quebec wilderness because of a bus breakdown. During their wait, they trade autobiographical stories and come to identify similar patterns running through their seemingly disparate lives. Alice Diabo, a seventy-four-year-old Mohawk woman from Kahnawake, trades thoughts on love, dying, and other universal concerns with her fellow elders. It is not her Indianness that is emphasized but her identity as a venerable woman who has lived a life rich in experience. Thus, native women in both of these films

are viewed not as the site of Otherness but as women who are "sisters under the skin."

*Where the Spirit Lives* (1989), a \$2.6-million television project cofinanced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (a largely governmentally financed television network) and directed by Bruce Pittman, is an important departure in the presentation of native people in North America. Since the Canadian feature film industry is relatively small, the medium of television has become a forum for works that merit production but that may not interest the largely conservative backers who finance big-budget films. *Where the Spirit Lives* is the first major film to chronicle the trauma and outrage of the mission school system in Canada, and it offers some insight into the often-misunderstood role of native women in their own societies. The film's protagonist is Astokomi (Michelle St. John [Mohawk]), a twelve-year-old Blood Indian girl who is kidnapped by white authorities in 1937, along with her brother Pete (Clayton Jilian [Micmac]), from a remote village and forced to attend an Anglican mission school. Astokomi's life in the Blood village before her forced removal is indicated by a telling scene in which her friend begins her first period. The women of the village hold a puberty ceremony welcoming the girl into the ranks of the women, who value her fertility as an indication of her new-found power within the community. In stark contrast, when Astokomi begins to menstruate at the mission school, she approaches a sympathetic female teacher (Ann-Marie MacDonald) in order to learn what white society's ceremony is for the female rite of passage. The embarrassed woman explains that no such ritual exists, and Astokomi is told to "go see the nurse." Instead of stressing cross-cultural female solidarity, as the two previously discussed films do, *Where the Spirit Lives* shows the attitudes of the two cultures in counterpoint: The white attitude of shame and denial regarding biological femaleness stands in sharp contrast to the native position of honor and respect.

Another important departure from the typical pattern is the emphasis on Astokomi's role as keeper of cultural tradition. She teaches a naming ceremony to a native girl who has never had the opportunity to learn her own culture, and she acts as architect and leader of a secret burial ceremony for one of the students who has died in an attempt to escape the school. By showing a female figure who can draw on her people's traditions and alter them to fit a new cultural context, *Where the Spirit Lives* offers an original and useful model of empowerment.



VISIONS OF COMMUNITY: *SPIRIT RIDER*, *POWWOW HIGHWAY*, *MEDICINE RIVER*

The idea of depicting a native community for a mainstream audience without the intercession of a white character is not a new one. (Mary Austin's 1911 stage play *The Arrow-Maker* is an early example of an "all-native" story.) But it is certainly not a popular one, considering how major film projects are conceived and produced. Purely native stories do not sell, goes the conventional wisdom, because mainstream audiences demand characters with whom they can identify. This argument is based on the premise that a native North American storyline can have no universal appeal. However, three films (one U.S. feature film and two Canadian television projects) have appeared recently that challenge this notion.

*Spirit Rider* (1993), a Canadian television project directed by Michael Scott, is a coming-of-age story typical of the genre, in which a teenaged boy named Jesse Threebears (played by Ojibway actor Herbie Barnes), transplanted to a new environment (a Manitoba reserve), proves himself both in relation to his own fears and in the eyes of a rival. What enlivens this potentially trite formula is the film's focus on how Jesse, who was removed from the reserve at a young age and placed in foster homes, is reintegrated into his tribe and is able to "find himself" as both a unique individual and as a valued member of a community. The film presents Jesse's journey through the boy's own eyes, and all of the major parts are played by native actors. Thus two narrative patterns—the individualistic coming-of-age and the communal homecoming—are interwoven to produce a story with strong universal appeal and an empowering message for native people attempting to rediscover (or reinvent) their own ideas of community.

Another film that weds a familiar mainstream formula with material specific to Indian culture is the 1989 U.S. film *Powwow Highway*, directed by Jonathan Wacks. The film follows the adventures of Buddy Redbow (played by actor A Martinez), a veteran of Wounded Knee II and a fiercely militant activist, and Philbert Bono (Gary Farmer, who hails from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario), a child-like figure on a spiritual quest to become a traditional warrior. The film follows the standard road movie pattern, with Buddy and Philbert keeping one step ahead of the law as they attempt to free Buddy's sister from unlawful imprisonment in Santa Fe. With plenty of car chases and a spec-

tacular explosion for a finale, the film appears generic on the surface. But one element that enriches the narrative is the depiction of contemporary Indian approaches to problem-solving. Buddy, the hot-blooded A.I.M. crusader, advocates open revolution to halt white encroachment on native lands and their valuable natural resources. Philbert, in contrast, looks to his ancestors' traditional wisdom concerning passive resistance to help provide strategies for survival. The film's message is that the two approaches need to complement one another if Indian nations are to thrive in the coming years (a message that, because it serves to temper violent Indian "overreactions," could be criticized as being too amicable to a mainstream audience's sensibilities). This film, like *Spirit Rider*, presents complex Indian characters whose identity is dependent not only on where they come from but where they want to go.

Although the aforementioned films present stories that appear to be more Indian in content than others, one cannot ignore the fact that they are written by non-Indian artists. With the exception of *The Company of Strangers*, they are fueled by the standard cinematic formula of setup, confrontation, and resolution, which is so familiar to us as to seem natural. Drew Hayden Taylor, Ojibway screenwriter and present artistic director of the Native Canadian theater company Native Earth Performing Arts, has suggested that this conflict-based model of human behavior often does not reflect the dynamics of many native communities. In an article entitled "Adapting Native Scripts," he argues that "to verbally admonish someone or create an incident that draws attention is not part of the culture" and that, because of this, "many of the conflicts in Native stories are personal and internalized" rather than openly aggressive in nature.<sup>26</sup> One could argue with Taylor's essentialist conception of native culture, but his observation—that the elements of native culture that cannot be manifested in recognizable conflict are ignored in film—seems to be borne out by the majority of the films produced thus far.

A notable exception to this rule is the delightful Canadian television movie *Medicine River* (1993), a major, \$2.5-million project and only the second feature film to be scripted by a native North American (the first being Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor's screenplay for the U.S. film *Harold of Orange* [1983]). Thomas King, a Cherokee fiction writer, has often affirmed his belief that native writers are less interested than white writers in the nineteenth-century setting and its stereotypical Indians:

Rather than try to unravel the complex relationship between the nineteenth-century Indian and the white mind, . . . most of us [native writers] have consciously set our literature in the present, a period that is reasonably free of literary monoliths and which allows for greater latitude in the creation of characters and situations, and, more important, allows us the opportunity to create for ourselves and our respective cultures both a present and a future.<sup>27</sup>

King adapted his own book *Medicine River* for the screen, and the resulting film demonstrates in a delightful way just how entertaining and refreshing the violation of the conflict model can be. Directed by nonnative Stuart Margolin and billed by its producer as “the first made-for-television film with an all-native cast that isn’t dealing with a native problem,”<sup>28</sup> the film traces the misadventures of Will (Graham Greene), a jet-setting photojournalist who returns to his Alberta birthplace to attend his mother’s funeral. Through the good-natured machinations of the local population, spearheaded by a mischievous character called Harlen Big Bear (Tom Jackson, Métis-Cree), Will is drawn deeper and deeper into the life of the community, often against his professed wishes. The film’s interest lies in its subtle humor and gentle subversion of traditional native stereotypes. At the hospital giving support to his girlfriend during the birth of her child, Will is mistaken for the baby’s father by an attendant nurse. The nurse asks Will what name has been chosen for the baby, and, thinking he is making a joke, he reads a sign behind the nurse’s head and replies, “South Wing.” Much to Will’s embarrassment, the new mother adopts South Wing as the baby girl’s real name.

Thomas King has described the character of Harlen Big Bear as a modern-day trickster who constantly prevents the highly linear and repressed Will from doing what he wants to do instead of what he *needs* to do. The film’s originality lies in its deft handling of what Saulteaux poet and playwright Marie Annharte Baker calls “the moment of the Trickster,” which she defines as the point at which “we trip up and over our very limited human undertakings.”<sup>29</sup> Like the young protagonist in *Spirit Rider*, the outsider Will is drawn into the inner life of the community, and he, too, decides that communal life can liberate as well as support and nurture. Barbara Allinson, the producer of the film, indicates how such a quirky project could only have been realized on the small screen: “You know—nice, small-budget Canadian feature, and what the heck do you do with it? I mean, they die in the theatres

... [W]e will reach more Canadians [through television] than we would have had we gone the feature route."<sup>30</sup> Both the critical and popular success of this film suggests that "nice, small-budget Canadian features" do very well as television projects and can explore aspects of native culture and storytelling hitherto ignored by the producers of native blockbusters.

The difficulty of making definitive statements comparing U.S. and Canadian film images of natives lies partly in the internationally cooperative nature of the Canadian feature film industry. Both *Shadow of the Wolf* (a film mentioned at the start of the paper) and *Black Robe* are big-budget productions that could only have been financed through partnership with other countries—France and Australia, respectively. Some Canadian critics such as Geoff Pevere believe that these coproductions, with their mandate to please as many investors as possible, produce "country-less" films that, in Pevere's words, are "utterly devoid of anything resembling a point of view."<sup>31</sup> Whether one agrees with this position or not, the issue of how "Canadian" these coproductions are remains a thorny one.

With that caveat in mind, we can make some general comparisons between U.S. and Canadian film images. U.S. films like *Dances with Wolves*, *Thunderheart*, and *Powwow Highway* are informed by an epic sensibility that valorizes individual heroism and clearly enacted conflict between the forces of good and evil. As indicated in the discussions of these films, this epic sensibility often prevents the audience from recognizing the ideological uses to which the Indian image is being applied. In comparison, Canadian feature films like *Black Robe* and *Clearcut* are flawed experiments in self-reflexive narrative and do not present a unified native subject for the audience; but, as has also been indicated, this aesthetic strategy does little to give native peoples a voice in mainstream cinema. It is important to note that smaller-scale Canadian films such as *Medicine River* and *Where the Spirit Lives*, which are partially funded by government institutions and are aimed at national distribution, are able to stretch the boundaries of our perceptions of contemporary native people; bigger-budget U.S. films such as *Dances with Wolves*, which are designed for broader-based international markets, must utilize more conventional narrative patterns. The deceptively quieter Canadian films are able to explore subjects such as female empowerment and community values, which often fall outside the purview of the epic feature film. In the case of responsible image-making, bigger is not always better.

## CONCLUSION: NATIVE EMPOWERMENT AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE NATIVE

If new and responsible images of native peoples are to be created, native artists must access the means of production of cinema. In her positive review of *Dances with Wolves*, Marilou Awiakta (Cherokee/Appalachian) sees the film as paving the way for native producers, directors, actors, and screenwriters who will "guide the public further along the trail of authentic understanding."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in his discussion of native peoples' increasing involvement in the production of documentaries about themselves, Harald Prins declares that, "having gone from 'objects' in films to directors or producers of documentaries, American Indians have gained substantial control over the flow of information about themselves."<sup>33</sup>

Although the increased participation of native artists in feature filmmaking is a necessary and (we hope) imminent step, films made by nonnatives about native subjects can provide a substantial empowering role. Nonnative filmmakers who wish to create more responsible and verisimilar fictional films about North American Indians need to take their cues from aboriginal people who are already working to produce informed and provocative images of themselves and their communities. Documentary filmmakers such as Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), in works like *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), express their personal visions of native politics and culture. This commitment, in turn, invests their films with a vital depth that is missing in many of the films made by those unfamiliar with native life. That being said, a romanticized film such as *Dances with Wolves* can be useful as an empowering tool if its attempt to present a humanized native construct fosters attention to native issues and concerns outside of the movie theater. If, however, such films encourage a type of solipsism involving our own nonnative obsessions, the creatures that emerge from behind the rocks will inevitably look like grotesque versions of ourselves.

## NOTES

1. John Harrington, "Understanding Hollywood's Indian Rhetoric," *The Canadian Review of American Studies* 8 1(Spring 1977): 78-79.

2. See Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978).
3. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 4.
4. In an article on the film in *The Globe and Mail*, a major Canadian newspaper, the caption on the publicity photograph reads in part, "[I]ts creators were determined to maintain the story's integrity—its Inuit point of view. This is not another *Dances with Wolves*" (6 March 1993).
5. See Ray Conlogue, "The Story of an Inuit Hero's Evolution," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 March 1993.
6. Quoted in Conlogue, "Running the Gantlet of Compromise," *The Globe and Mail*, 6 March 1993.
7. Edward D. Castillo, "Review," *Film Quarterly* 44:4(Summer 1991): 15–16.
8. *Ibid.*, 17.
9. Conlogue, "Gantlet."
10. Castillo, "Review," 22.
11. Amanda Smith, "Mythic Descent in *Dances with Wolves*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20:3 (1992): 199.
12. Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 18.
13. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 20.
14. Christopher Harris, "Black Robe Faces Attack on Two Fronts," *The Globe and Mail*, 7 September 1991.
15. Stephen Godfrey, "Blending the Real and the Magical," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 November 1990.
16. Quoted in Mark Bastien, "Black Robe Wrapped in Controversy," *Calgary Herald*, 9 October 1991. A similar argument from a native source for reading the film as a portrayal of the Jesuit mindset and not a balanced rendering of native history is put forward in a review of the film by Marilyn Dumont in a Native Canadian newspaper, *Windspeaker* 9:15 (25 October 1991): 13.
17. Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 188.
18. Geoff Pevere, "Hostiles," *Canadian Forum* 71:814 (November 1992): 36.
19. Don Gillmor, "Going Native," *Saturday Night* 106:7(September 1991): 38.
20. Stephen Godfrey, "Romantic Images of Canada," *The Globe and Mail*, 26 November 1990.
21. Kevin Costner et al, *Dances with Wolves, The Illustrated Story of the Epic Film* (New York: New Marker Press, 1990), 3.
22. It is important to note that Frank Coutelle's speech is a close paraphrase of a statement made by real-life FBI agent Norman Zigrossi in relation to the Pine Ridge incident: "They're a conquered nation, and when you are conquered, the people you are conquered by dictate your future . . ." (quoted in D. Weir and L. Bergman, "The Killing of Anna Mae Aquash," *Rolling Stone* 7 (April 1977), 55.

23. Martin Knelman, "Dances with Natives," *Toronto Life* (December 1991), 22.
24. *Ibid.*, 22.
25. Vanaja Dhruvarajan, "The Multiple Oppression of Women of Colour," *Briarpatch* (March 1991), 19.
26. Drew Hayden Taylor, "Adapting Native Scripts," *Cinema Canada* (May 1987), 16.
27. Thomas King, "Introduction," *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), xii.
28. Quoted in Jane Stevenson, "CBC Film Boasts Native Humour," *Calgary Herald*, 15 December 1992.
29. Marie Annharte Baker, "An Old Indian Trick Is to Laugh," *Canadian Theatre Review* 68 (Fall 1991), 48.
30. Stevenson, "CBC Film Boasts Native Humour."
31. Pevere, "Harpooned: Epic Compromises: The Making of a Canadian Co-production," *Canadian Forum* 71:818 (April 1993): 22.
32. Marilou Awiakta, "Red Alert! A Meditation on *Dances with Wolves*," *Ms.* (March/April 1991), 71.
33. Harald Prins, "American Indians and the Ethnocinematic Complex: From Native Participation to Production Control," *Visual Sociology* 4:2 (Fall 1989): 87.