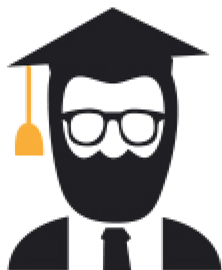
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CHAPTER 10

Possible Worlds: Diasporic Cinema in Canada

Diaspora as a concept . . . offers new possibilities for understanding identity, not as something inevitably determined by place or nationality.

—Paul Gilroy (1997: 304)

It is a coloured, métissé, polymorphous, urban, and cosmopolitan Quebec in which Alexis Tremblay, that Québécois of the mythic stump, the star despite himself of Perrault's films, appears today as the distant ancestor of another society and perhaps even of another world.

—Nathalie Petrowski (de Blois, 2001: 27)

The discourses of national identity in Canada have traditionally focused on the tension between an English-Canadian identity crisis and a more secure Québécois identity frustrated by its lack of a national status. While both sides of this opposition are more complicated than they are often made to seem, its terms have come under increasing pressure from a growing awareness of the nation's ethnic diversity and from the associated idea of Canada as a multicultural state.

In 1971, Pierre Trudeau announced 'a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework' based on the principle that, 'although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other' (Hodgins et al., 1974: 177). The policy was usually interpreted as encouraging immigrants to retain their own cultural traditions, as opposed to the idea of the 'melting pot' associated with the assimilation of immigrants into mainstream culture in the United States. However, its official and unofficial effects were often highly controversial. Despite the premise that there was 'no official culture', the policy generated a large bureaucratic apparatus, and there was a concern that it encouraged the preservation of ethnic cultures in museum conditions, ignoring new developments within the home cultures. It also seemed to imply that the immigrant and the host culture had no effect on each other, but, despite these deficiencies, official multiculturalism did help to open up and to complicate the ongoing debate on national identity.

The films produced by the NFB to promote the official policy also came under attack on similar grounds. These were often 'docudramas', such as John N. Smith's *Sitting in Limbo* (1985) and *Train of Dreams* (1987), depicting the problems faced by immigrants in a sympathetic light but, according to their critics, tending to reinforce ingrained stereotypes and to represent immigrants precisely as a 'problem'. Cameron Bailey has described these kinds of film as a 'cinema of duty' that perpetuated the established 'framework of centre and margin, white and non-white communities' (1992: 38).

For these reasons, the idea of 'multiculturalism' has given way in much recent discussion of migrant cultures to that of 'diaspora'. Originally a term used to describe the dispersal of the Jewish people and then applied to the transportation of Africans to North America as slaves, it is now used by theorists, including Paul Gilroy, more generally to refer to 'the "scattering" of peoples, whether as the result of war, oppression, poverty, enslavement or the search for better economic and social opportunities, with the inevitable opening of their culture to new influences and pressures' (1997: 304).

The diasporic experience thus results in the emergence of hybrid identities rather than the coexistence of distinct cultural identities, as envisaged by official multiculturalism. Hybridity involves its own pressures and negotiations but provides an alternative to complete assimilation, on the one hand, and a fundamentalist adherence to old cultural forms, on the other. It also offers new possibilities for members of the host culture, especially for younger people, and the effects are likely to be felt most intensely and complexly in a relatively new country that is uncertain of its own values.

As Gilroy points out, the diasporic effect is not just a matter of the physical movement of peoples but also of media technologies that circulate images from one culture into another. He argues that 'technological acceleration, arising from digital

processing and computer-mediated communications, means that individual identity is no longer limited to forms of immediate physical presence established by the body' (1997: 314). The elimination of the need for physical presence produces a kind of temporal diaspora in which messages and images from different historical sources are recycled and combined in contemporary culture. Such practices encourage us to think of identity not primarily as a genetic inheritance but as a construction or performance drawing on the resources offered by our contemporary media environment.

In this context, diasporic experience is highly ambivalent and unsettles traditional notions of identity not only within migrant communities but also for all those open to the possibilities. This is not to imply that all such experiences are equal: clearly, there are more pressures on people from outside the home culture, especially for those who belong to visible minorities. However, the unsettling effect extends well beyond the racial and ethnic issues that are its primary reference and resonates with, for example, the contemporary questioning of traditional ideas of gender relations and sexual orientation. Accordingly, the films produced by members of the Canadian diasporic communities are often organized around three *interrelated* themes: the literal experience of diaspora, the impact of new media technologies, and the effects of both on bodily experience.

Where Is Home?

During the 1990s, English-Canadian cinema was enriched, and complicated, by the work of young filmmakers from the diasporic communities that had established themselves in many cities, most notably Toronto and Vancouver. In films such as Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* (1991), Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1994), and Clement Virgo's *Rude* (1995), the characters must negotiate between the cultural traditions of their original communities and the demands of life in a new country that is uncertain of its own values. The balance of sympathies between old and new is different in each film, but all involve not only a sense of the problems but also an attempt to develop new cinematic pleasures that would correspond to cultural identities that are both hybrid and provisional.

Each of these films disturbs the flow of its narrative with devices that call attention to the process of representing the diasporic experience. In *Masala*, the main such device is the musical numbers, in the style of popular Indian cinema, that interrupt the narrative and express the characters' fantasies. Another is the casting of the actor Saeed Jaffrey in three different roles: Lallu Bhai, a wealthy sari merchant; his brother Tikkoo, who earns a modest living as a mailman; and the god Krishna. In the latter role, he first appears on the in-flight movie screen of an Air India jet just before it blows up, after which he is mainly seen on a video, through which he communicates with Tikkoo's mother (Zohra Sehgal).[1] She persuades him to help Tikkoo, and he does so by arranging a series of coincidences that leave the mailman in possession of an extremely rare Canadian stamp.

As the whimsical appearance of the god on the doomed airliner suggests, the film also unsettles the spectator by the rapid shifts of tone between its serious and playful components. The plot centres on Krishna (named after the god and played by the director himself), a young rebel who missed the flight on which his parents and brother died, but the film embeds this plot in what Christopher Gittings aptly calls a rich array of 'ironized samplings from a diverse field of cultural texts' (2002: 246). It is a *masala*, which in Indian cookery is a mixture of 'a bunch of different things to create a taste that doesn't exist in any one of the things' (Krishna, quoted in Bailey, 1992: 47), and the film constantly undermines those cultural forces that seek to fix things and keep them separate. It uses stereotypes but repeatedly undermines them; it pokes fun at official multiculturalism and the idea of the nation that it serves.

The pompous Minister of Multiculturalism (Les Porter) tells an audience of wealthy Indo-Canadians that Canada is 'a home large enough for all faiths, all communities and all individuals'. In the middle of his speech, he is disturbed by the arrival of Krishna, the disaffected nephew of Lallu Bhai, in whose home the gathering is taking place. Just released from prison, Krishna is clearly not at home in these surroundings, although his uncle does reluctantly agree to let him stay. The luxurious modern house reveals the material benefits to those who play along with official multiculturalism but also exposes the emptiness of their claim to be preserving their traditional culture. At the end of the film, Krishna is stabbed by a white racist, but the effect of his death is undercut by the final sequence, the ironic resolution of the dispute caused by Tikkoo's obstinate refusal to give up his stamp: the Minister of Multiculturalism presides over another ceremony opening the Canadian Museum of Philately, with Tikkoo as its first director.

Several reviewers complained that it was difficult to identify with the main character, and, from within the Indo-Canadian community, Yasmin Jiwani accused the film of being 'a masala that combined the ingredients of an internalized racism mixed with a postmodernist discourse of identity, sexuality and race' (Waugh, 2002: 265). However, the disorienting formal effects work to implicate the spectator in the diasporic situation and to address the loss of feeling often associated with the post-modern condition. Krishna is disturbed at not being able to feel anything about the deaths of his family, although the many aircraft that appear in the film frequently remind him of the disaster. After Krishna's death, he 'sees' yet another plane flying over, and then Rita (Sakina Jaffrey), Tikkoo's daughter, with whom he has become involved, expresses guilt that she can feel nothing about his death.

Krishna revealed his own 'postmodern' stance by suggesting that 'to think that we can tell stories that make sense is a lie about the world' (Bailey, 1992: 45), but this is also a refusal of the fundamentalist assertion of fixed and absolute meanings. As Imre Szeman points out, however, the film does try 'to make sense of the hybridity of its characters in the context of their place in the first "officially" multicultural society', and its formal structure opens up the utopian possibility that 'the confusion of space and time, such as in the patterns of flight undertaken by immigrant communities', will produce a new acceptance of hybrid and unofficial forms of identity (1994: 14, 17).[2]

In *Double Happiness*, the device that most overtly breaks the narrative flow is direct address to the camera. The film begins with Jade (Sandra Oh) holding a clapperboard and describing her family, and later her parents and sister also describe their feelings to the camera. As Jade points out, her family is not quite the Brady Bunch, but her allusion invites us to consider the similarities as well as the differences. Mina Shum says that she hoped her film would 'transcend cultural barriers' because 'the difficulty of leaving home is something everyone has gone through' (Banning, 1999: 291). The film superimposes this map of common experience onto the diasporic one of not knowing where home is, and Jade's narration and her ingratiating personality make it much easier to identify with her than with Krishna in *Masala*.

The main emphasis is on Jade's strategies to thwart her parents' attempts to find an eligible Chinese male for her to marry. Her father (Stephen Chang) insists that his children follow Chinese traditions, and he has already disowned her older brother. For the most part, however, the tone remains comic, as when Jade discovers that one of the suitors recommended by her parents is gay. Her need to conceal her affair with Mark (Callum Keith Rennie), an insecure white Canadian youth, also generates several amusingly awkward situations.

As Edward O'Neill suggests, 'whatever questions about cultural identity Shum's film poses are played out as questions about sex and marriage' (1997: 54–5), but this is a common feature of Canadian diasporic cinema. The emergent hybrid cultural forms not only unsettle traditional notions of ethnic and national identity but also create situations in which, as Thomas Waugh says of *Masala*, 'gender and sexuality are troubled and in flux' (2002: 264).

Jade's ability to cope with the demands of her family is related to her ambitions as an actress. When she rehearses in her room, she loses her real-life self in the part and appears in costume amid appropriate sets. She repeatedly has to snap out of these performances to resume her domestic duties, much as mundane reality interrupts Polly's fantasies in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (see Chapter 8). Her aspirations also conflict with the limited roles available to Chinese Canadians: when she auditions for a small role as a waitress in a television show, she is asked to speak with an accent and tries a French accent, before realizing that what is wanted is a stereotypical Chinese one. Despite the constraints, however, Jade enjoys role-playing and turning stereotypes against themselves. Just as in *Masala*, according to Lysandra Woods, 'stereotypes send up identity as performative rather than essential' (2002: 213), so O'Neill argues that, in *Double Happiness*, 'identity is figured not only as a performance, but as a strategic one' (1997: 58).

In *Rude* the ideas of hybrid identities and role-playing are complicated by the film's Rastafarian imagery. The main device that disrupts the narrative flow is the pirate radio broadcasts of the title character (Sharon M. Lewis) during an Easter weekend. However, Rude's poetic monologues do not so much interrupt the narrative as engender the three stories that interweave but never connect, three examples of what she calls the 'ten million Nubian tales in the Projects'. She functions much like a voice-of-God commentator, even though she is visible (but mainly hidden in the shadows of her studio), female, and black. Her authority is contested by the voice of a police officer

who calls to say that he will close her station down, but she claims to represent the 'disenfranchised diasporic voice' and identifies herself with 'the conquering lion of Judah' (which is periodically seen prowling through the spaces of the stories).

Rude does not narrate these stories but rather provides a poetic monologue that brings out the underlying meanings that link them. In the most fully developed story, Luke (Maurice Dean Wint) returns home from prison to find that his wife (Melanie Nichols-King) has become a police officer and that he must rebuild his relationship with his young son. His place as the boy's father has been taken by his brother Reece (Clark Johnson), who has also replaced him as a drug dealer for a gangster called Yankee (Stephen Shellen), so that Luke struggles, also, to avoid being pulled back into a life of crime. In a second story, Maxine (Rachael Crawford) lives in an empty apartment after the departure of her boyfriend and is troubled by the voyeuristic videos he made of her and by her visions of the daughter she did not have because of an abortion. The third story focuses on Jordan (Richard Chevolleau), a boxer who joins his friends in beating up a gay man but then must come to terms with the realization of his own gay desires.

Rude has been described as 'a trickster figure', a term that links her to First Nations legends (Gittings, 2002: 257), and she indeed refers to the 'Ojibway sacred soil' on which African Canadians must live out their struggles. In her 'SOS from the land of the Mohawk and the Ojibway', Native spirituality is coupled with Rastafarianism to commemorate a shared experience of oppression and to suggest a possible source of renewal. The same connection is made on the mural that Luke paints on a wall in the neighbourhood, which remarkably remains undefiled while he is in prison, and in front of which the film reaches its violent climax when his wife shoots Yankee, who is holding their son hostage.

This final confrontation, like many other moments in the film, evokes the ''hood movies' of popular American cinema, while the reggae and gospel music, with which Rude's voice shares the soundtrack, grounds the film in black cultural forms that have become part of contemporary youth culture. Set in a city that is actually Toronto but which Rude calls Babylon, and in a neighbourhood that looks like the New York projects of the 'hood movies, the film received some criticism for not addressing the specifics of African-Canadian experience. The most outspoken critic was Rinaldo Walcott, who, as summarized by Erin Manning, 'argues that the politics of place are not adequately addressed in *Rude*, and thus the politics of blackness in Canada are not theorized' (2003: 69).

This kind of argument, like Jiwani's critique of *Masala*, tends to impose what Kobena Mercer calls a 'burden of representation' on the diasporic filmmaker, who is expected to speak for the entire community, whose interests are rarely addressed in films (1994: 81).[3] From a rather different perspective, John McCullough takes Virgo to task, partly because *Rude* does not measure up to 'the standards of realism' but also because it fails to use its distancing devices in the political manner of Bertolt Brecht and remains 'wholly mute on the concept of revolution' (1999: 23). It is certainly true that the diasporic films discussed here do not seek to destroy the spectator's pleasure in the film, in the spirit of certain avant-garde and political critiques of popular cinema,

but rather they set out to produce new hybrid forms of pleasure that have a broad appeal for audiences from different cultural backgrounds.

These diasporic voices have unquestionably made a major difference to English-Canadian cinema, and there are many more films than the three I have discussed here.[4] One problem is that critics tend to ghettoize the filmmakers by assuming that they will make only films dealing with the diasporic groups to which they belong. Thus Deepa Mehta's first feature, *Sam and Me* (1990), a comedy about the friendship between an Indian immigrant (Ranjit Chowdrey) and the elderly Hungarian Jew (Peter Boretski) he is hired to care for, received a generally positive response. *Camilla* (1994), her second film, also dealt with an unlikely friendship, but this time it involved two white characters—a young woman (Bridget Fonda) and an eccentric old lady (Jessica Tandy)—travelling from Georgia to Toronto. The stars were American, yet the screenplay was a typically quirky story by Canadian writer Paul Quarrington. It even included cameos by Chowdrey as an unlikely southern sheriff and Graham Greene as a smooth con man, but the critics seemed to think that Mehta was out of her depth. One recent writer even claims that she directed the film in Hollywood (Melnyk, 2004: 178).[5]

Quebec Métissage and the Politics of Identity

The situation in Quebec is rather different. Although there are many diasporic communities, mainly in the Montreal area, they have had less of an impact on film production. Since Quebec has a much stronger sense of a collective identity, it is more difficult to develop and express the kind of hybrid identities that have developed in Toronto and Vancouver. Such identities are found in the films of Robert Lepage (see Chapter 12), and he deplores the extent to which 'mistrust of the foreigner is engrained in the Quebec identity' (Coulombe, 1995a: 23). The ideology of *conservation* (see Chapter 3) stressed an idea of 'home' based on a deep suspicion of outside influences, and a long literary tradition depicts close-knit communities disturbed by the arrival of an 'outlander', to use the title of the English translation of Germaine Guèvremont's novel *Le Survenant* (1945).

Such encounters occur in several of the Quebec feature films of the 1940s (see Chapter 3), most notably in *Le Gros Bill* (René Delacroix, 1949). The outsider is Bill Fortin (Yves Henry), who arrives, from Texas, in a small Quebec village. The effect is initially comic: 'western' music accompanies his train as it pulls into the snowbound station, and he must overcome problems of communication because he speaks no French. He becomes an outcast when Alphonse (Maurice Gauvin) and other village youths, who resent the handsome Texan for attracting their girlfriends, frame him as a thief. By rescuing Alphonse from the river after a logging accident, Bill redeems himself, and he is finally integrated into the community through his engagement to Clarina (Ginette Letondal), the one villager who can speak English.

Bill is not really a foreigner but the son of a villager who emigrated, and he returns because he has inherited his uncle's farm. The film speaks rather to the idea of *américanité* and the need to protect and define Quebec culture in relation to the

powerful influence of 'America' (a term that often seems to encompass English Canada). Since the collectivity defines itself by its French linguistic and cultural roots, it must protect itself not only from outside influences but also from the presence of immigrants, especially those from non-French backgrounds.

While the Quiet Revolution opened Quebec to broader cultural influences, the rejection of the term 'French Canadian' in favour of 'Québécois' also encouraged a tendency to regard hyphenated categories of identity as a sign of weakness rather than of potential and complexity. The term often used to describe the new cultural forms emerging from the diasporic experience is *métissage*, previously used—mostly disparagingly—to describe the interbreeding of whites and Indians. It now may carry more positive connotations, but Marco de Blois has denounced it as 'a fashionable word' that conceals the true complexity of Quebec's cultural heritage (2001: 27).

Italian Canadians are the diasporic group most prominent in Quebec cinema, partly because their European background and Catholic heritage render them less different than is the case with other ethnic groups. Yet their growing numbers and cultural confidence are perceived as a threat to the survival of a strong francophone culture. As we have seen, the Italian presence is a key issue in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Un Zoo la nuit* and *Léolo* (see Chapters 4 and 6, respectively), and the ending of Denys Arcand's *Jésus de Montréal* also generates tensions around this question. The donation of Daniel's heart to an American man and his eyes to an Italian woman, the film's parallel to Christ's resurrection, can be viewed as an ironic comment on the neglect of the francophone majority or as a call for the Québécois to 'let go of their myth of the unitary, historical subject that is at the basis of their nationalism' (Alemany-Galway, 2002: 131).

The experience of the Italians in Quebec is addressed from within in the films of Paul Tana, who came to Quebec at the age of 11. His first feature, *Les Grands Enfants* (1979), initially seems like a genial version of Forcier's *Le Retour d'immaculée conception* (whose working title it appropriates), with its depiction of a group of young Montrealers seeking direction in their lives. Yet the film gradually opens up to encompass people from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. The main character is François (Gilbert Sicotte), a Québécois who refers to his 'marginal existence' but wonders what it is marginal to. He thinks that his English-Canadian neighbour Gary (Bryan Doubt) represents the Quebec dream because he speaks French and lives in a French neighbourhood, but Gary insists that his grandmother was Polish and that, in any case, the neighbourhood is largely populated by Portuguese immigrants.

It is François's relationship with Jeanne (Julie Vincent) that offers a tentative possibility of resolving the alienation he feels and developing a new sense of Quebec culture. After he meets her in the home of one his friends, they slowly get to know each other, and she tells him that she came from Italy as a child and has been in Quebec for 19 years. She resents constantly being asked where she comes from, even though she has lost all trace of an accent and has adopted a French name (she was originally called Giovanna). However, she does not reject her background and takes François on a tour of the Italian district before they decide to live together.

In *Caffè Italia Montréal* (1985) and *La Sarrasine* (1992), both made in collaboration with the historian Bruno Ramirez, Tana explores the history of the Italian presence in

Quebec, thereby revising the 'official' history that portrays the Québécois identity as purely French. *La Sarrasine*, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, is a virtually bilingual film, in which the lives of a French-Canadian family and an Italian immigrant family become entangled in a series of cultural misunderstandings. These come to a climax when Giuseppe (Tony Nardi), an Italian tailor, tries to break up a brawl and kills the son-in-law of his friend Alphonse (Jean Lapointe). This catastrophe becomes the prelude to the story of the emerging independence of two women.

Through her struggle to get justice for her husband, Ninetta (Enrica Maria Modugno) resists the patriarchal restraints of traditional Sicilian culture and refuses to return 'home', even after he commits suicide in prison. At the same time, Félicité, (Johanne-Marie Tremblay), Alphonse's daughter, rejects the idea of retiring into widowhood under the dubious protection of a priest who denounces the effect on Quebec society of 'foreigners' who act as if they were 'at home', and instead takes over the family store in Montreal.

Since the film shows Ninetta learning to write under her husband's guidance and because her journal helps Félicité realize what they have in common, Bill Marshall argues that *La Sarrasine* fits into a liberal 'post-Quiet Revolution narrative' in which education is seen as way of promoting 'intercultural exchange' (2001: 281). However, while Ninetta does grow in confidence as a result of her new command of language, the main exchange that occurs is with a woman who recognizes the feeling expressed in a journal she cannot read. The final sequence, in which Ninetta visits Alphonse in his country home, shows her squatting to urinate beside a large tree in a snow-covered landscape, affirming her sense of belonging through an image that draws on the ties to the land in French-Canadian cultural traditions.

Another diasporic filmmaker in Quebec is Arto Paragamian, who is, like Atom Egoyan, of Armenian descent, and his films offer a similar 'cool, ironic perspective' on the culture in which he lives (Alioff, 2001b: 21). His two feature films to date, *Because Why* (1993) and *Two Thousand and None* (2000), were made in English, but he did participate in *Cosmos* (1996), a French-language project made up of episodes directed by a group of promising young filmmakers and put together by producer Roger Frappier. The title character is a Greek-Canadian cab driver, who sleeps in his cab and links the different stories in which all the main characters are white and francophone. Paragamian directed these linking sequences as well as the final episode, in which Cosmos and a black colleague pursue bank robbers who have stolen his cab.

There are other diasporic filmmakers in Quebec, and they are likely to become an increasing factor in the future. So far, however, the impact of the new cultural diversity has been explored mainly in films by Québécois directors, such as Gilles Carle's *Pudding chômeur* (see Chapter 5). *L'Ange de goudron* (Denis Chouinard, 2001) interweaves a thriller plot involving terrorism with the efforts of an Algerian immigrant to obtain Canadian citizenship for his family. The Italian presence is still the most acknowledged and becomes the source of broad comedy in *Mambo Italiano* (Émile Gaudreault, 2003) when an Italian-Canadian family tries to cope with the discovery that their son is gay.

New Worlds/Old Stories

The relativism and hybridity of postmodern, post-colonial societies are often experienced as disorienting and destabilizing. A longing for old certainties has produced a resurgence of fundamentalism in many of the world's religions, which is itself a key aspect of postmodernism. Deepa Mehta came under attack from fundamentalist groups when she returned to India to make *Fire* (1997), the story of two oppressed women in a Hindu family who have a lesbian affair. Her depiction in *Earth* (1998) of the bloody events during the partition of India also provoked protests, and the production of an intended third film was halted by riots.[6] She returned to Canada to make *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), a film in which Canada becomes the slash between two dominant film traditions, an in-between location celebrated in the clumsy but enthusiastic imitation of a Bollywood musical number on the balcony of a high-rise building overlooking the city of Toronto.[7]

Another response to this precarious situation has been a renewed interest in the values and traditions of the people now known as Canada's First Nations. This interest in Native spirituality is, of course, not confined to Canada, and it has inspired large-budget co-productions, such as *Black Robe* (Bruce Beresford, 1991), *Shadow of the Wolf* (Jacques Dorfmann, 1992), *Kabloonak* (Claude Massot, 1992), and *Map of the Human Heart* (Vincent Ward, 1992). Ironically, these films are themselves hybrids: *Shadow of the Wolf*, for example, is an English-language production, directed by a Frenchman, based on *Agaguk*, a classic Quebec novel by Yves Thériault, starring American and Japanese actors as Inuit characters. Just as ironically, it proved to be a big hit in Quebec, dubbed into French, and a commercial failure everywhere else.

Rather more thoughtful treatments of Aboriginal characters appear in the films of Jean Pierre Lefebvre (see Chapter 7) and Gilles Carle (see Chapter 5), although Carle in particular tends to focus on the hybrid experience of the Métis people. These films, and many others, deconstruct the myth of the 'noble savage' to expose the hypocrisy of white society. The idea of Native people as victims of an internal diaspora has been developed in a few films that focus on life on the reservations, to which they have been assigned by the government but which also provide an environment that can protect the old traditions. Films such as Bruce McDonald's *Dance Me Outside* (1994) and Jack Darcus's *Silence* (1997) work against stereotypes but raise their own issues of authenticity and appropriation.[8] In the documentary field, the anthropological films of Arthur Lamothe, most notably the *Carcajou et le péril blanc* series (1971–7), offer a detailed account of the way of life of the Montagnais people in northern Quebec and an exploration of the impact of white culture and technology.

In Quebec, the issue of the treatment of Aboriginal peoples involves the need to relate their oppression to the idea of the Québécois themselves as victims of cultural oppression, a problem made thornier because most First Nations people use English as their second language and feel threatened by the prospect of an independent Quebec. The documentaries of Alanis Obomsawin, an Abenaki filmmaker at the NFB, have sought to give voice to the concerns of her people. In *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of*

Resistance (1993), she filmed behind the barricades throughout the Oka crisis, an armed confrontation in which Mohawks protested the expansion of a local golf course on their sacred land, and used the events to draw attention to a long history of exploitation.

Obomsawin came under attack for not being sufficiently objective (see Chapter 1). The CBC initially refused to show *Kanehsatake* without cuts, and many Quebec critics questioned the accuracy of her claims. Yet the use of her own voice dissociates her films from the kind of 'authority' implied by the conventional (white, male) voice-of-God commentator. As Jerry White suggests, the subjective voice contests the 'false objectivity' of the Griersonian tradition and, instead, has the effect of 'identifying whose eyes this is all seen through' (1999: 31). The result of this reflexivity is not to call into question all forms of authority; rather, it asserts the filmmaker's solidarity with her people, through what Zuzana Pick identifies as 'the storytelling tradition that is the cornerstone of First Nations' knowledge, culture, and history' (2003: 181).

The revival of an ancient storytelling tradition is central also to *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2000), the first feature film in the Inuktitut language. After falling foul of the Telefilm bureaucracy, which could only deal with major projects in English or French, the finished film won a major prize at Cannes and was acclaimed by critics in Canada and internationally. Kunuk, who began his career as a sculptor and sold his soapstone carvings to buy his first camera, was a founding member of the Igloolik Isuma co-operative that produced *Atanarjuat*. He had previously made numerous videos on Inuit life for broadcast by the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation.

The film opens with a long shot of a lone Inuit in the midst of a vast snow-covered landscape as sled dogs howl around him. This is an archetypal image of the Far North for non-Inuit audiences, who, as Kunuk himself points out, are usually unaware of the changes in the old way of life. This image is held on screen for almost a minute, and then, after we hear a voice saying, 'I can only sing this song to those who understand it', there is a cut to a dark, cramped interior, setting up the crucial contrast between inside and outside that shapes life in the North and the legend that will now be retold. There is no indication of a specific time period, and it only gradually becomes clear that the action is set in a timeless past appropriate to a legend that has apparently 'been passed down from generation to generation for four millennia' (Said, 2002: 22).

The filmmakers draw on the memories of elders who, as in all oral traditions, offered slightly different versions of the story, but the film was made possible only by digital video technology, which we see being used to shoot the film during the closing credits. By combining the traditional and the new in the production process, the filmmakers were seeking to reconcile the different forces that have shaped their lives. Kunuk thus regrets the loss of the nomadic ways of his people but also insists that the changes—the replacement of sleds by snowmobiles, for example—have not altered their fundamental values.

The legend chosen for the film involved the community in addressing the extent to which their lives had changed. As Kunuk explains, the story is 'about people who break taboos', but the filmmakers themselves had to confront the taboo introduced by Christianity against representing shamanic religious practices (Chun, 2002: 22–3). The film depicts a community divided as a result of the unjust actions of an evil

shaman and the leader he supports. In this disordered world, Atanarjuat (Natar Unglaaq) himself breaks a taboo when he marries Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu) even though she has previously been betrothed to the chief's son Oki (Peter Henry Arnatsiaq). When Oki and his brothers ambush him on a hunting trip, Atanarjuat runs naked across the ice to escape and eventually returns to re-establish order.

The mythic struggle of good and evil is vividly embodied in the elemental images of the naked man racing across the vast barren landscape. This 'fight to the finish between the forces of continuity and those of destruction' attracted critics who saw its 'authentic emotion' as an antidote to the artifices of Hollywood cinema (Alioff, 2001a: 21). As one critic put it, the legend may take place in a world that is remote from the experience of most spectators, but 'the epic battle of vice and virtue makes perfect sense' (Melnyk, 2004: 261).

The difficulty of location shooting in the Arctic created a strong sense of 'authenticity' (a word that occurred in many reviews) and gave the film its power, as opposed to the Hollywood special effects that are another product of digital technology. The effect is clearly different for Inuit and non-Inuit audiences: for the former, the film reaffirms the reality of a past that is both distant and within living memory; other audiences respond to its elemental imagery, but the film also provoked discussion about its implications for Canadian cinema. In his *Globe and Mail* review, Rick Groen called it 'intriguingly exotic and uniquely Canadian' (Melnyk, 2004: 260). George Melnyk has even suggested that it offers 'the potential for recreating Canadian identity away from its Eurocentric heritage'—if the nation can embrace the 'internal foreignness' that it embodies (2004: 262–3). If this happens, it remains to be seen whether it will counter or reinforce the hybrid forms generated by Canada's diasporic cinema, which can hardly be called Eurocentric and often challenges the very notion of authenticity.

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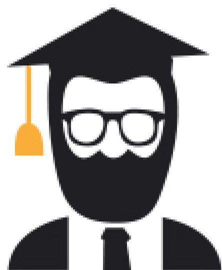

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