

'At the centre of it all are the children'¹: Aboriginal Childhoods and the National Film Board

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Abstract

Given the overall young age of Canada's Aboriginal population, it is unsurprising that so much concern focuses upon trying to find ways to meet the diverse and complex present and future needs of children more appropriately than in the past. Over ten years after the grim findings of *No Quiet Place* (1982) in which child welfare practice was likened to 'the road to hell [...] paved with good intentions and the child welfare system was the paving contractor', the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) highlighted the continuing challenges faced by Aboriginal children in rural and urban settings. Over the same period, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), has produced material in both documentary and fictional form on diverse aspects of Aboriginal childhood experience. This presentation uses NFB material to consider how filmic versions of Aboriginal children's experiences are constructed and presented to their viewers. Imagery, sound, narrative themes and filming offer contrasting perspectives and prompt questions about the production, consumption and interpretation of film material on children where opportunities to show and be seen on screen remain unequally distributed through society - even for the young!

Introduction

Children are central to many aspects of understanding Aboriginal experiences and goals in Canada. The fundamental belief that 'At the centre of it all are the children' has long driven the requests of Canada's First Nations as they seek to overcome the inequalities of colonial domination. Aboriginal peoples have been consistent in their wishes to claim what they see as their children's basic rights: an entitlement to grow up in decent living conditions, access to quality education, medical and social care, employment prospects and opportunities to maintain their language, culture and traditions. Given this centrality of children's experiences to an understanding of past, present and future relations between First Nations and the wider society, this discussion explores how aspects of those childhoods have been made more visible through film.

One readily available source of cinematic imagery is the National Film Board (NFB) so attention focuses upon how Aboriginal children featured in selected films in the period between 1950 and 1999.² I consider how aspects of Aboriginal children's lives are represented in the imagery, dialogue and narratives of these films at different times.³ Since NFB productions are an important expression of Canada's cultural policy-making, discussion of these films links with other selected aspects of modern public policy that have impacted upon the lives of Aboriginal children. Processes that shape the making and meaning of NFB imagery as well as the messages conveyed by particular types of film are combined to set these productions within a wider consideration of changing realities for Aboriginal children.

This topic brings together ideas and issues from different contexts. An extensive literature exists on many aspects of children's lives.⁴ Within that writing, there is a growing body of work on Aboriginal children's experiences particularly in relation to issues of childcare, family relations, education and socio-cultural and physical well being. There is also a vast literature on the NFB and its history and role within the modern development of Canada.⁵ However, in the course of research, nothing has been discovered about the portrayal of Aboriginal children by filmmakers working with the NFB although, of course, it may exist!

The discussion opens with a brief consideration of cinematic interest in children. Next, attention shifts to consider the role of the NFB as a tool of cultural policy. Aspects of public policy-making and, in particular, some key features of policies relevant to Aboriginal children in the period 1950-1999 are identified. Specific films, made by different directors under the auspices of different production series are used to illustrate some of the emerging themes. By this process, NFB representations of Aboriginal childhoods enable us to examine broader issues of public policy making and changing cross-cultural relations in the later part of the twentieth century.

I Children, film and the NFB

The depiction of children on screen is almost as old as cinema itself as shown by Eadweard Muybridge's experiments with moving imagery in the 1880s.⁶ As with adults and unfamiliar places othered by the gaze of early ethnographers, early film-makers' fascination with children expresses patterns of control on and away from the camera. Power relations have long determined where, why, how and whose children were captured in the camera lens, whether for Hollywood or more serious viewing. Children

became standard ingredients of the nascent picture industry just as growing interest in anthropology and psychology coincided with much debate on child care, health, education and the family.⁷ In early anthropological films, children often featured in background scenes of community activity and by the 1940s, they had become central subject matter in studies of family life and home care.⁸ The anthropological interest in children of Aboriginal and Inuit origin amongst early filmmakers in Canada thus readily falls within a recognisable trend of cinematic development. State involvement in the portrayal of indigenous children, through the activities of the NFB may also be seen as being in keeping with broader trends of public policies related to dealing with Aboriginal issues.

Since its inception, the NFB sought to tell Canadians about Canada and promote Canada to the rest of the world.⁹ Its work was thus harnessed, from the outset, to the political tasks of national development and establishing a narrative of the nation. Film policy became an instrument of national policy as film played a formative and varied role in the shaping and defining of national identity.¹⁰ At federal level, film was a means to construct a distinctive reputation as a film-producing country. Moving image was also a means to try to stave off domination by the film industry of the United States. Furthermore, film offered another way of trying to overcome time, space and difference: the elusive identity of Canada as an 'imagined community', it was hoped, might be more easily grasped through the imagery of the NFB. Picturing the nation might help to weld a coherent entity and foster a Canadian way of life.

Over the years, the NFB recast its early role as an instrument of social support and national unity into being an agent of social and cultural change. Commissioned productions, series and special projects increasingly sought to foster initiative as well as record processes of social change. As with any area of public policy-making, however, NFB activity was neither static nor uni-dimensional: internally driven shifts in staffing policy, budgeting and changes of emphasis as well as changing technologies and restructuring of production, distribution and priorities constantly influenced eventual output. External influences such as competition for audiences and changes in mass media as well as wider societal shifts likewise affected decisions and the nature of production work. Such changes are evidenced by the ever expanding coverage of topics and the increasingly diverse range of filmmakers including Aboriginal film makers involved in production work.

As an expression of cultural policy therefore, NFB productions enable us to glimpse other public policy influences and to identify the concerns and responses at different times. Through the NFB's portrayal of Aboriginal

children, issues of Aboriginal education, child and family welfare, and northern development are highlighted. NFB productions testify to the effects of changing levels of official commitment to issues of multiculturalism, citizenship and rights and also register the impact of specific policies upon Aboriginal people.¹¹ The NFB offers a visual record - albeit incomplete and partial - of processes, changing ideas and values that represent the dominant society's relations with its indigenous peoples. Each film's content and approach attest to different phases in that relationship. Productions selected for this discussion disclose concepts, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that denote different stages in the relationship between Aboriginal people and the wider population.

Aboriginal children and Canadian public policies

Childhood is a arena in which state intervention may strive to construct notions of nationhood.¹² From the later nineteenth century onwards, in Canada as in Britain, the shaping of childhood became a public rather than private matter and the lives of children were increasingly monitored, managed and regulated by state governance.¹³ Childhood, and in particular, Aboriginal childhood was increasingly conditioned by the social preoccupations, cultural mores and nationalist aspirations of the dominant society. Assimilationist policies, driven first by church and quasi-charitable agencies and increasingly by federal and provincial authorities, expanded through the first half of the twentieth century.

Children bore the brunt of the twin-pronged assault on indigenous culture through education and child-welfare programmes which, despite various changes of emphasis and approach mid century continued to have a disastrous effect upon Aboriginal children's lives for the next four decades.¹⁴ Despite the warnings from as early as 1947, state intervention continued with public policies and practices that were fundamentally flawed. The slow journey towards more enlightened, culturally sensitive and consultative approaches to the care, schooling and understanding of Aboriginal children's needs and experiences is the context for the rest of this discussion.

II Aboriginal Children and National Film Board productions in the 1950s

Given the importance of NFB productions to the construction of nationhood, it is unsurprising that children should feature in early post-war series. Their inclusion, however, is often only a means to raise public awareness of other issues and we often learn relatively little about children

through the walk on parts accorded them by adults. Two early films that purport to focus on northern children's lives illustrate this tendency as both films reveal more about post-war policies in the Canadian north than about the lives of Aboriginal children. Indirectly, however, the state manipulation of childhood experience testifies to the wider oppression of indigenous communities' rights by social, economic and health federal policy introduced in the post-war period.

Pied Piper of the Three R's (1953) was part of the 'Eye Witness' series - a number of short films available in both English and French - designed to inform Canadians about modernising aspects of their country.¹⁵ The nine minute long film features a government-sponsored education programme for Aboriginal children and traces 'their first introduction to school in the freedom of the outdoor'. *Pied Piper* was filmed at Fort Simpson, a settlement that lies in the south western corner of the Northwest Territories. When the film was made, an ethnically mixed community that largely comprised Dene and Metis lived in the locality.¹⁶ The population of under 500 people was soon to be joined by a sizeable non-Aboriginal population as a result of road building and the pipeline that crossed the MacKenzie river to the south of the settlement.¹⁷

Although the Dene in this region became signatories to Treaty 11 in 1921 they did not live on a reserve. This meant that they had no protection against provincial child intervention programmes, a point that is highly relevant when considering the significance of the *Pied Piper*.¹⁸ Subsistence activities - hunting, fishing as well as the gathering of bush or country foods - were central to the local economy and much cultural activity. Then as now, the settlement resembles many of the small Aboriginal communities and its mix of problems and strengths were not unlike those that were to be found in many similar settlements found in the northern areas of the prairie provinces, Quebec, and Ontario.¹⁹ *Pied Piper of the Three R's* thus illustrates processes of socio-political, economic and cultural change that were much more widespread.

The title refers to the story, made familiar by Robert Browning, of a mysterious outsider whose pipe-playing first rids the town of Hamelin of its unwelcome rats and then, in the absence of payment, returns to lure away the children. The title contains ironies that were presumably unintended. If the piper represents the state, and Hamelin's children are Aboriginal youngsters taken to school and later into the child welfare system, then what of the unwanted rats at the start of the tale? An apparently innocuous title discloses some of the paradoxes and prejudices that occur in the treatment of northern peoples in the post-war period.

Was the local population living in a relatively untroubled way until the arrival of external influences? Do local peoples' loss of tradition and increasing dependency prompt the outsider's response? Is the collapse of fur-trading the fundamental source of the indebtedness that prompts the piper to lead the children away to an alternative future? Surely this would not be an insider's understanding of why the children were removed: the bargain apparently struck in the first place had been forced upon the local people and its unsustainability was not of their making.

Framed in their shabby clothes as they play, the film's evocation of outdoor childhood freedoms that were about to disappear, denotes a new level of state intervention in northern communities. The surveillance of the NFB camera presages unprecedented levels of governance that were to transform the lives of children, their families and whole communities as inter-related social, economic and educational aspects of public policy came into operation. Until well after WW2, the government was not particularly eager to eliminate northern hunting and trapping lifestyles. The fur trade - increasingly unstable though it was - offered the only insulation against welfare dependency and a 'leave-them-be' approach continued into the late 1940s²⁰. Assistance, such as it was, usually came in the form of further support for hunting activity and was designed to keep indigenous people on the land.²¹ Since the maintenance of traditional hunting and trapping lifestyles was incompatible with formal education, it might be suggested that the continuing reliance upon the mission school system is another indication of government reluctance to bring about change.

New economic and military interests in the north radically transformed this laissez-faire approach and ushered in a new era of school development that led to the building of day and boarding school facilities across the north.²² Educational policies became part of the modernisation and opening up of the Canadian north.²³ Funding, administrative reorganisation, new developments, the introduced curricula and trained teachers from elsewhere were to have profoundly dislocating and for many devastating effects, as we now know, on both the lives of individual children and whole communities.

The NFB's choice of title was prophetic indeed: the educational policies evoked by *Pied Piper of the Three R's*, did more than remove some children from learning in the home and the bush. Over the next decade, the percentage of 6-16 years olds attending school as a percentage of the total school age population increased from 23 percent to 75 per cent.²⁴ Since the payment of family allowance was linked to school attendance, many families moved closer to the new schools in settlements and abandoned

their seasonal pattern of residence at fish lake encampments. As the numbers of people rose, the availability of locally available bush game plummeted and women's traditional economic role was effectively abandoned and increasingly limited to the town-sites that had neither envisaged nor been funded for year-round living. The introduction of permanent wage labour benefited only a minority and, men, for the most part, still retained their fishing, hunting and trapping areas. Increasingly, they had to travel further from home, thereby exacerbating the breakdown of socio-cultural and economic links between old and young. Children lost the experience of living through the winter in the bush and increasingly remained in the town-sites throughout the year until when they transferred elsewhere into hostels or boarding schools²⁵.

If state intervention, in the form of the Pied Piper's appearance at Fort Simpson, displaced the indigenous population from localities with resource potential now valued by southern economies, it also severed fundamental links with many aspects of traditional knowledge and child raising. Informal learning and effective patterns of socialisation among extended families and inter-connected communities were not perceived by the child welfare agencies which entered the north zealously in search of homes that were considered to be sad, bad or simply different from the Euro-Canadian norms emphasised in their own professional training.²⁶ In their search for the normative family - nuclear, two adults, heterosexual and legally married - middle-class social workers ignored existing childcare networks as, on behalf of children's best interests, they increasingly removed children into foster care, adoption placements and residential schools. As educational policy began to turn against residential schools in the later 1940s, some schools took on a social service function and accommodated children who were said to be at risk if they were returned to homes perceived to be neglectful and inadequate homes. It has been suggested that, at this period, 'residential schools were way-stations on the road to foster care and adoptions into non-Aboriginal families'.²⁷ Viewed retrospectively, the Pied Piper's arrival in the north occasioned many Aboriginal children to disappear in both a metaphorical and literal sense. The tune being played by *The Pied Piper of the Three R's* was discordant indeed and long after the revised Indian Act of 1951, its tragic echoes would continue to resonate.

Sudden changes in direction and intent have been typical of Aboriginal policy in Canada.²⁸ Assimilation, and its associated processes of dispossession, segregation, protection and civilisation, gradually gave way through the 1950s, to policies that seemed to advocate integration, the break up of reserves, the virtues of private property and citizenship. Arguably, desegregation was a cheaper means to achieve assimilation and

acculturation under another name. Old thinking did not disappear overnight and, in many ways, education and child welfare agencies clung to what they believed was a civilising regime and described by some subsequent commentators as cultural extermination and neo-colonialism²⁹. Indeed, in his comments on the limited changes brought by the integrative policies, Jean Chretien spoke of the 'white wash' of the integrated school that 'can serve no place in a child's world' and only 'alienates him from his own people'³⁰.

Public policy does not function with a united voice and vision any more than any other aspect of public life. Contradictions, tensions and fundamental omissions persisted in the design, delivery and review of policies on Aboriginal issues. The NFB's cinematic gaze upon indigenous affairs during the 1950s uncovers some responsiveness to the flux of ideas circulating within the dominant society. Its various depictions of children capture both discursive shifts in public policy towards Aboriginal families and their children but also illustrate how alternative forms of emphasis could occur even within relatively short periods of time. *Angotee: Story of an Eskimo Boy* (1953) is one such example.

Set in the eastern Arctic, *Angotee* documents the story of an Inuit child's development from infancy, through adolescence and into adulthood. Traditional subsistence activities underpin the seasonal rhythm of Angotee's life as he takes an increasingly active role in the varied processes of planning, managing and utilising the varied resources derived from effective hunting. The footage is ethnographic both in content and in style. It shows some similarities with the numerous evocations of Arctic life recorded with differing degrees of accuracy, sensitivity and technical competence or aesthetic judgement by varied filmmakers at different periods.³¹ We witness Angotee's socialisation and his development of hunting and trapping skills. Although there is penetration of external influences, this is essentially a portrayal of an apparently unchanging traditional lifestyle. Cinematically trapped in time and space, Angotee's reassuring story of maturity and eventual marriage excludes all possibility of unpredictability and change. It is a vision of northern lives that is clearly at odds with reality.³²

Angotee was part of the 'Window on Canada' series which was an early production for television. The expansion of mass media heralded new opportunities for nation building.³³ As in earlier periods, childhood was a locus for state projection of citizenship. The documentary portrayal of children's lives in film was a means to present the public with a vision of Canadian diversity in a non-threatening way. Angotee's life was a

reassuring cinematic symbol of Canada's inclusiveness, in contrast to the monolithic notion of identity being constructed and projected from south of the border. Notwithstanding the film's anthropological interest, its evocation of Angotee's world could seem to offer a somewhat self-congratulatory message about the space offered for cultural difference, especially in the northlands. In reality, *Angotee* differed profoundly with the actuality of indigenous experience, and in particular, with the devastating policies currently being applied to Inuit communities across the Arctic.

Redefining the gaze: 1960s and 1970s

Over the next decade, Aboriginal children featured in a number of documentary-style NFB productions. Although children were central to some films, much of the footage of childhood was largely incidental to other themes. Children are in the background if at all. Their under-representation is not entirely surprising if we consider some of the influences upon family life and childhood during the 1960s. The combined effects of child welfare policies and education led to the disappearance from public view of thousands of Aboriginal children into institutions, foster-homes and adoption placements.³⁴ Perhaps the cinematic gaze was less attracted by children now bereft of their cultural identity? Certainly, there was little about the circumstances facing many Aboriginal children that readily fitted with Euro-Canadian constructions of childhood.³⁵ There was growing recognition of how governmental neglect of Aboriginal communities over successive generations was now impacting upon thousands of children on and away from reserves, in and out of residential schools, foster homes and adoption.³⁶

Ever affected by wider processes of socio-cultural change and discursive practice on public policy-making, the NFB had undergone a number of internal shifts by the time that producers turned again to the subject of Aboriginal children during the 1970s. A number of key influences may be identified. The expansion of Aboriginal organisations, their increasing participation in government consultations and their contribution of research and recommendations on indigenous issues raised the political and cultural visibility of First Nations. Such activity, together with the bleak findings and debates prompted by the publication of the Hawthorn Report (1966) obliged the Canadian public to acknowledge and respond to the multi-faceted legacies of colonial oppression and systematic forms of cultural denigration.³⁷ Together with the growing pressure in response to Quebec issues, wider debate on issues of ethnicity, language and culture had also occurred during the 1960s. The more official endorsement of modern

Canada as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society in turn affected diverse aspects of organisation, recruitment, production and planning within the NFB.³⁸ With regard to its depiction of Aboriginal children, four discrete but inter-connected strands of initiatives were particularly significant.

First, the regionalisation of NFB activity within the English programme led to the appointment of producers with a strong commitment to the development of regional themes and local production. Decentralised production planning sought to encourage young filmmakers and could be more responsive to social and economic concerns and was to become significant in areas of high Aboriginal population, including British Columbia, the Prairies and the Maritimes. In addition, the success of an initiative in 1965 to use film in the fight against poverty prompted the setting up of 'The Challenge for Change' programme which sought to highlight varied aspects of contemporary social concern. New forms of documentary that allowed local people to voice their own concerns and opinions resulted from this more participatory approach.³⁹ A third influential strand was the growth of a stronger relationship between the NFB and schools. While much of the focus was on production of classroom materials, closer awareness of young audiences influenced the development of programming for children. Perhaps the most significant development of all was the setting up of a training programme for Aboriginal filmmakers in 1968 that subsequently was assisted by the Department of Indian Affairs. Many of the earliest indigenous directors associated with NFB productions became involved with this initiative.

The NFB's representation of Aboriginal children expanded considerably during the 1970s. Some of the earliest productions undertaken by Aboriginal filmmakers have a young audience in mind: for instance, the use of animations, by Duke Redbird in *Charley Squash goes to town* (1969). Children's drawings depict a small Northern settlement in Alanis Obomsawin's first film, *Christmas at Moose Factory* (1971),⁴⁰ Neither directly show the world through children's eyes. Memories of childhood, evoked both through testimony and life histories, for instance, Obomsawin's *Mother of Many Children* (1977) and also through autobiography also emerged in the 1970s and were to remain an important strand of Aboriginal filmmaking through to the present.

Through the decade, documentaries on communities under pressure were made by both indigenous and non-indigenous directors.⁴¹ They portray how diverse aspects of children's lives were directly affected by wider struggles. From these films on resource development projects and Aboriginal

relations with the land, and as well as studies of individual settlements, facets of children's lives emerge. Their childhoods are shaped on and off the camera by the ideas, issues and actions of adults as their families and communities seek in different ways to cope with varied socio-economic, cultural, environmental and political situations.

While these films portray impoverishment and hardship, they also highlight the centrality of children within the rhetoric for greater political autonomy and control over the circumstances of daily life. Such insights contrast with the unremittingly bleak visions of educational failure, disrupted childhoods, family breakdown, neglect and despair that characterise the descriptions of Aboriginal children's experiences to be found in contemporary discussions of child welfare, social policy and education. Explicit filmic treatment of such concerns was not to appear until the subsequent decade and will be considered later.

One aspect of NFB production was more immediately responsive to changes of emphasis found elsewhere within public policy, namely multiculturalism. In the aftermath of recommendations set out in the Trudeau government's White Paper (1969) that had sought to end the special status according to Canada's indigenous peoples, affirmation of the distinctiveness of Aboriginal culture gained momentum through the following decade. Cultural revitalisation was emphasised within and beyond First Nations' organisations. Cultural recovery and re-assertion were vital to the task of trying to tackle the systemic racism and widespread ignorance of Aboriginal people within the dominant society. Enhancing self-esteem could help to sever the links between under-achievement, socio-economic marginalisation and exclusion. The growing centrality of culture and ethnicity within Aboriginal contexts coincided with - although did not inform as considered later - broader public policy discourse on issues of multiculturalism. The political weight ascribed to culture, language and identity within the context of Quebec and the impact of recent migration upon the country's ethnic composition and demographic make-up guaranteed that new concerns about multiculturalism would inform English production planning at the NFB. The significant contribution of one individual, Kathleen Shannon, also set in motion processes that were also to change the NFB's representation of Aboriginal children.⁴²

Shannon was committed to challenging racist and sexist discrimination throughout her three decades of working with the NFB. She believed that film offered a means to tackle the ignorance and bigotry that enabled prejudice to flourish. Media could reflect the diversity of Canada's population and 'give access to the stories and perspectives of Canadians of

all backgrounds including women'.⁴³ After producing a series of films entitled 'Working Mothers', for the 'Challenge for Change' Programme, Shannon became, in 1974, executive producer of Studio D, a new studio that sought to promote films by and about women. A number of the now pre-eminent Aboriginal women film makers including Alanis Obomsawin, Loretta Todd and Christine Welsh gained opportunities through Studio D, as they worked on a range of productions, including projects on a variety of educational, social and multicultural issues. *Kevin Alec* (1977) by Alanis Obomsawin is one example of socially committed work that features Aboriginal children.

Kevin Alec was filmed on and around the Xaxl'ip community or Fountain Reserve as it was then known. The small community lies just to the north of Lil'wat (Lillooet), close to the Fraser River in the Sta'at'imc territories of interior British Columbia. Against a mountainous backdrop, the opening image shows two young brothers beside their father's grave. From Kevin, we learn that the boys and their sister are being cared for by their grandparents and an aunt who has returned from the United States to help. They are part of a large extended family in which strong links exist between and within generations. The children have contact with the nearby local non-Aboriginal community, as at Carnival time. They watch and take part - in buckskin clothes and feathered headbands - in a parade of tractors, pick-ups full of children perched on hay-bales, fire engines and sweet throwing that is typical of a small town having an annual occasion. Kevin's involvement in playing football on the local soccer pitch also seems an informal and co-operative event that brings together men and boys from different backgrounds - at least in front of the camera.

Community relations, positive though they appear to be, are only one theme of the film: attention also focuses on the boys' relationship with each other and, in particular, Kevin's rapport with his grandparents. Scenes show Kevin learning and working alongside each of the adults on a variety of traditional activities, fishing, making fish nets, and preparing a hide. Playfulness typifies the sequence involving Kevin and his aunt as they skin, wash, stretch and smoke a hide. Silences, shared laughter and dialogue punctuate Kevin's explanations of different tasks. The quiet, knowledgeable respect between adult and child is even more apparent in the scenes with the grandparents. The film thus enables Kevin to tell a story about himself and his relationship to people and places that he values. He displays knowledge about the natural environment and relates well as a listener and a learner. Obomsawin offers us an active, outdoor loving and responsible child, attentive to the needs of those around him, at ease with adults and

other children. Nothing suggests that he is exceptional not even, his wish at the end of the film - not mentioned elsewhere - to be an athlete.

Disarmingly simple, Obomsawin's film was an important contribution to the portrayal of Aboriginal children and their well being in an extended family situation during the 1970s. It is an unassuming tribute to the inter-generational support systems within Aboriginal societies. It acknowledges the actuality ignored or dismissed by so many of the child-saving and educational initiatives that intervened in Aboriginal children's lives for much of the twentieth century. Kevin, Geordie and their sister Carmen are growing up in a situation that does not conform to the normative family long required by Canada's child protection agencies but they have an enriching secure home life in touch with tradition and modernity.

The film's omission of details is important: we do not hear about how the father died or what happened to the mother. The understated snapshot leaves scope for different possibilities. We hear of another adult but do not learn of his relationship to the boys: what matters is that he arrives soon on the scenes to take the younger brother to hospital after Geordie falls from his bike. We only see fragments of the home so we cannot work out how many live people together. The battered car may or may not work and the outside clutter is a recognisable part of living with children and animals in the country. We see nothing of the school that Kevin attends nor do we learn about his academic ability. It might not offer answers to an agency enquiry but there was little room to doubt the children's wellbeing.

Kevin Alec offered an important perspective to an increasingly urbanised and culturally diverse Canadian population. For Aboriginal viewers, perhaps it could both affirm and inspire. For its non-Aboriginal viewers, it was a picture of a contemporary rural Aboriginal childhood that could help to counter the pervasive negative imagery of Aboriginal experience in town and on reserves. Its implicit message about valuing difference also attested to the NFB's active espousal of multiculturalism at a time when Aboriginal people were widely being omitted from the government pledge to support *all* of Canada's cultures.⁴⁴ For a variety of historical and administrative reasons, multicultural policies evolved in Canada in isolation from wider consideration of Aboriginal needs. As a result, Aboriginal people were largely ignored in the contradictory, inconsistent and problematic conceptualisation of federal multicultural policy. The NFB, however, was one public agency that did include an indigenous dimension within its action on encouraging cultural plurality. Moreover its commitment to educational programming linked output with one area, Aboriginal schooling, where the notion of cultural diversity expanded to include

indigenous cultures more swiftly than many other areas of public policy. *Kevin Alec* attests to that commitment.

Between 1970 and 1979, the NFB completed sixty-five film projects on Aboriginal issues and many portrayed aspects of Aboriginal children's experiences in different ways. In 1980, the 'Challenge for Change' programme ended: it had been an ideological mainstay of the NFB's commitment to making social documentaries.⁴⁵ Non-Aboriginal filmmakers continued to produce challenging films on controversial aspects of Aboriginal relations with the dominant society in contemporary and historical contexts. A combination of new initiatives across the regions, and the strong support systems that were developing between Aboriginal directors and production teams ensured that indigenous issues continued to find expression in documentary form through the eighties. The growth of co-production work with independent companies, a new programme for current social issues and the continuing strength of Studio D (until reorganisation in 1985) ensured that opportunities within the NFB continued for both new and established First Nations' directors.⁴⁶

Despair and hope: 1980s and 1990s

Films about Aboriginal children's experience during the eighties reflected the growing involvement of indigenous producers, scriptwriters and directors. Subject matter reflected personal concerns, the greater recognition of the socio-economic problems among Aboriginal peoples and more widespread acknowledgement that Aboriginal children were a particularly disadvantaged section of the population. Research on the extent of child poverty, mounting evidence on the extent of Aboriginal children failing in and being failed by the educational system and the disastrous record of intervention by child protection services and Aboriginal education all converged to highlight the need for urgent action. NFB productions on issues of school experience, racism and foster care were in response to the topicality of children's needs.

Changing emphasis upon political issues both within First Nations and the wider society are also detectable in NFB productions during the eighties. By the close of the previous decade, First Nations had targeted two areas as central to self-determination and both centred on childhood: Aboriginal responsibility for Aboriginal education and, rather more controversially, Aboriginal control of child welfare and protection. More broadly, there was greater public focus upon equality and rights, prompted by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and by 1988, the Multiculturalism Act had helped to situate a broadening range of Aboriginal issues within the inter-

connected spheres of equality, race and community relations. These various influences may be seen in the commissioning of such films as Alanis Obomsawin's *Richard Cardinal: Cry from the Diary of a Metis Child* (1986) and Gil Cardinal's *Foster Child* (1987).

The documentary style of both productions addresses the impact of social workers' intervention in Aboriginal children's lives in very different ways. In *Richard Cardinal*, Obomsawin reconstructs the downward spiral into despair by a child removed with his siblings from the family home at the age of four. Through the use of diary extracts, archival newspapers and photographs, dramatised role play and interviews, Obomsawin charts Richard's thirteen bleak years in twenty-eight foster homes, shelters and lock-ups and the responses to his suicide at the age of seventeen. The film documents a nightmarish life of brutality, neglect and indifference that exposes the colossal failure of mainstream agencies to protect either a child or a culture, notwithstanding the warning sounds offered over a decade earlier about interventionist forms of child welfare policies upon family, race and culture. The NFB production further highlighted the situation that the final foster parents refused to let his death pass unnoticed. The subsequent judicial enquiry helped to bring about changes in child welfare administration, legislative change and contributed to the setting up of social services under First Nations' control, some of which have in turn become the subject of more recent NFB productions.

Gil Cardinal's *Foster Child* also focused on the theme of being Metis and taken into foster care. The film charts his quest for information: his subsequent journey of self-discovery involves his white foster parents, a press release in local Albertan papers and the social services that still, over thirty years later, refused to let him see his original files. The camera records the time-consuming and detailed nature of his search. It captures the range of emotions that accompany different discoveries: a childhood spent within a mile of where his mother had lived before her death, his isolation from Metis and Aboriginal influences and his reunion with members of his extended family. The unstaged and unrehearsed autobiographical approach to reclaiming an identity that was denied as a result of prevailing child welfare practice is simply told. The film presents viewers with details that were to shape Cardinal's subsequent life: the mother's wish for her child to escape poverty and to have an education; the years of being fostered because his Metis origin excluded the option of adoption; the ironies of actions taken in his 'best interest' both in the past and as a adult in search of his origins.

These two films offer Aboriginal perspectives upon the interventionist policies that affected thousands of children between c.1950 and the 1980s. They are tributes to the suffering caused by decades of misconceived child welfare policies that were meted out to families of Aboriginal origins. They attest to a patchwork provision of social services that was characterised by under-funding, a ill-defined sharing of federal and provincial responsibilities and the persistence of culturally myopic and destructive processes underpinned more by institutionalised discriminatory practice and assimilationist goals than a real acknowledgement of Aboriginality and Metis identity.

State management of Aboriginal childhood, viewed through the NFB productions of the eighties show the enduring influences of earlier child-saving initiatives and illustrate how public policy continued to treat indigenous children as transferable and transformable commodities well into the late twentieth century. The films offer a stark visual testimony to Judge Edwin Kimmelman's indictment of provincial child protection services in *No Quiet Place* (1985): 'The road to hell was paved with good intentions and the child welfare system was the paving contractor.'⁴⁷ Highlighting such issues on film raised the public profile of child welfare concerns still further. Gil Cardinal, the director of *Foster Child* states his purpose unequivocally on screen:

I didn't feel my story was important...in fact, it's rather tame, considering the experiences other native children have had. But I felt it was important for foster and adoptive children who are now adults to see we can take control of our lives; we can reclaim what was lost or denied.

This sharing of personal experience by an eminent Aboriginal filmmaker was another step toward acknowledgement of individual and collective pain, a process that would gain momentum over subsequent years in disclosures over residential school experiences and other issues.

Through the nineties, the views of Aboriginal childhoods offered by NFB productions continued to diversify. A number of reasons may be suggested for this increased acknowledgement of the varied lives of Aboriginal children in and away from urban areas. The work of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* showed that children remained central to such diverse aspects of political debate as self-determination, community healing, cultural and linguistic recovery and in the quest for greater economic parity with the wider society.⁴⁸ Links between present struggles

for a better future and the need to offer greater opportunities for subsequent generations recur in the visions of personal and collective aspiration.

Take for instance, Obomsawin's extensive visual exploration of the issues associated with the events at Oka in 1990. So far, her social documentary films that arise from Oka include *Kanehsatake: 270 years of Resistance* (1993), *My Name is Kahentiosta* (1995), *Spudwrench - Kahnawake Man* (1997) and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (2000). All these productions illustrate how children were caught up in the stand off between adults and the authorities. Their presence eloquently expresses the unassuming start of a confrontation that was to become decisive in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations at the end of the century.

The centrality of children within First Nations culture is less controversially explored in Catherine Anne Martin's film, *Mi'kmaq Family Migmaoei Oijiosog* (1995). Prompted by her own desire for her young son to have a strong sense of his cultural identity, the filmmaker embarks upon a quest to find out about Mi'kmaq values and tradition. Her mission involves her interviewing community members and Elders during the annual St Anne's Day celebrations, an important date in the Mi'kmaq calendar. Against a festive background of food preparation and large family picnics, we learn about older people's school experiences, the importance of story telling, the close links between old and young and the value of ceremonies as children grow up. The film evokes an optimistic and up-beat portrayal of Mi'kmaq culture and family life in which today's children, unlike recent previous generations, may flourish.

During the 1990s, powerful documentaries on aspects of residential school experience, street life and racism remained a strong strand of NFB output. Established and newly emerging Aboriginal directors offer different aspects of childhood experience and approach familiar themes differently. Several simply plotted docu-dramas lie within a recognisable NFB commitment to making materials suitable for use in classroom contexts on sensitive issues. They include important differences in detail that point to some changes in First Nations relations with the wider society. For instance, Alanis Obomsawin's *Walker* (1991) tells the story of friendships that develop between an Aboriginal child first with a dog and then with a lonely white child. The white social worker's arrival signals that Walker is being fostered, but in this production, the foster parents are an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal couple and they live in a mixed residential neighbourhood. The naïve prejudices of local white teenagers encourage rather than prevent the two younger children from striking up friendship.

For Angela (1994), made by Daniel Prouty, is also set in a respectable leafy suburb where a single mother lives with her daughter while attending classes in journalism as a mature student. Following abusive comments by teenage boys, the daughter cuts off her long braids and accompanies her mother to the boys' school where the mother identifies the main culprit and talks with him. The making of *For Angela* was prompted by an actual racist incident involving a mother and child and white Canadian youths and the young daughter's attempt to deny her Aboriginality as a result of relentless taunting and stereotyping.⁴⁹

A rather lighter approach to reconciling Aboriginal identity with growing up in urban areas is taken in Annie Frazier Henry's *Totem Talks* (1998). The film charts the mysterious transportation of three children from downtown Vancouver to the forested islands of the West Coast where, with the help of totem pole figures that come to life, they discover aspects of their Aboriginal identity, belief systems and values. The film includes animations, rap, traditional singing, archival footage from films by Edward Curtis and other early photographic sources. Its script combines street credibility with wonder and enables Frazier Henry to present issues of tradition and modernity in an accessible form for young viewers.

Totem Talks is witty and fast-paced even if its speech patterns and the attempts to evoke nineties kid-speak are bound to date fast. Slang codes change too quickly for these characters to remain convincing to young viewers if they ever were - even on the West Coast! Nevertheless, through its constant shifts of location and mood, the film connects childhood urban experiences and linguistic registers with aspects of indigenous cultural tradition. The children are larger than life hybrid products of television and contemporary North American urban living. By the end of the film, they seem at ease both in and away from the city. The children's fragmented world of railway lines, street blocks, graffiti and back alleys becomes no less strange than their encounters with the varied sounds, designs and house frontages of West Coast culture. The film is non-realistic in its use of animations, computer-generated imagery and quirky characterisation. Yet it evokes important issues concerned with the need to negotiate new notions of belonging as the Aboriginal demographic shift into urban areas continues.⁵⁰ On-screen opportunities for urban Aboriginal youngsters to negotiate the multiple meanings of growing up in, away and in between rural and city locations are increasingly important as part of cross-cultural understanding.

If *Totem Talks* represents a cleverly packaged message, Dorothy Schreider's *The Little Trapper* (1999) is more traditional in its documentary style. The

film offers a glimpse into the life and ambitions of Robert Grande Jambe Junior who, unlike many of his peer group at Fort Chipweyan, continues many Cree traditions. Dressed in baseball cap and zipped jacket, Robert does not seem very different from many other thirteen year olds: during the week, he plays pool, he gets up late and he gets cross when things don't go as he wishes. The difference lies in how he spends his weekends, his knowledge about trapping, hunting and fishing and his developing expertise on traditional resource management. The film displays his prowess and self-reliance as well as the parents' determination to support him in his preferred choice of opportunities. Both parents work and acknowledge the disruptions within their own childhoods as well as their own severance from much traditional knowledge and values that they now wish to pass to another generation.

Shrieder portrays a self-assured, intelligent and mature youngster whose lifestyle combines tradition and modernity but for whom being in the bush has more fulfilment. The film has no sense of being elegaic, nor does it show a lifestyle that seems to be under threat. It is a straightforward depiction of a boy with the skills and understanding that currently seem to offer a viable and valued route to pursue. Since the film is set in the present, we do not know what happens and whether adolescent preferences for country rather than the town will survive into adulthood. The interest in the film perhaps lies in the director's wish to offer a version of Aboriginal childhood in which tradition does not seem under threat: rather, it is being actively sought despite the availability of other options. The film acknowledges the rupture in passing on knowledge between generations and expertise now comes as much from the child as from the father who seems to be reclaiming aspects of his own past through the impetus of the son's interests. Such details accord with the reality for many Aboriginal people who as a result of past policies lacked the exposure to cultural practice as they grew up. Schieder offers a filmic space for parents and for children who want to do things differently.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how Aboriginal children's experiences have been portrayed in NFB productions over five decades. Canadian film production is one tool of cultural policy. It offers a window through which we may consider aspects of how Aboriginal children's lives were represented at different times to different audiences. As with any consideration of film, it must be acknowledged that the existence of a film indicates nothing about its actual audience or reception. Given that these films were produced, and

increasingly available in video format, it does seem appropriate to consider the messages they offer at different times and their possible audiences.

Since the mandate of the NFB was to tell Canadians about Canada and each other, it must be assumed that films and, from the early fifties, NFB productions on television, were a powerful source of imagery about indigenous lifestyles for the wider society. From the outset, NFB materials sought to inform and educate in accordance with prevailing assumptions. The NFB strove not only to provide audiences with something distinctively different and Canadian in contrast to the visual and cultural bombardment from the United States. Hollywood's long fascination for the Canadian north and its inhabitants seemed to prompt the NFB to embark upon a documentary style counter-attack that was more than merely a more factual way of depicting the north. It was also a means to contribute to southerners' visualisation of the northlands, and a contribution to the later evolution of northern communication systems.

NFB productions on Aboriginal matters brought many Canadians into contact with peoples and places that the majority population might otherwise never have encountered. These mediated cultural meeting points, produced for classroom and general viewing may be understood, initially as attempts to present a public account of how Canada treated its Aboriginal population. Over time, the investigative approaches of socially committed documentary filmmakers covered and uncovered situations that undermined the seemingly neutral ethnographic reportage that had once given visual form to aspects of government policy.

From the late 1960s, the mounting evidence of disadvantage and oppression, highlighted by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people prompted the NFB towards more probing forms of production work on increasingly controversial topics. For an agent of state cultural policy, any other strategy might surely seem heavy-handed: acceptance of criticism is a necessary, however unwelcome part of the democratic process. While some NFB productions clearly continued to endorse shifts in government policy and to use changing emphases as means to bring Aboriginal concerns into public prominence, film also provided a way of bringing complex, controversial and geographically remote issues into the homes and classrooms of the population as a whole.

What relevance did NFB productions have for Canada's indigenous population? The involvement of Aboriginal and Inuit peoples in developing successive forms of modern communications, from the later sixties right through to the launch of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (1999)

demonstrates that the cultural politics of being heard and seen on screen has long been significant.⁵¹ Being the subject of NFB productions increasingly became another useful means of bringing Aboriginal concerns to wider audiences both in and beyond Canada. In most cases, any coverage was better than no coverage at all, particularly as closer collaboration became possible over the production process.

It seems likely that poverty and location would have greatly limited Aboriginal people's viewing of early NFB material. By the early 1970s, the combined effects of demographic, socio-economic and technological change meant that Aboriginal viewers formed a larger component within an increasingly diverse audience within the wider population. It is apparent that the increasing involvement of indigenous production staff coincides not just with wider outreach but greater socio-cultural and political visibility of Aboriginal people within Canada.

Changes in audience and production staff as well as changes in relations between First Nations and the wider population had an effect on what and how topics were developed. The objectifying ethnographic cinematic gaze upon Aboriginal children of the 1950s gave way to more child-centred and participatory approaches from the 1970s onwards. Increasingly, children can be heard as well as seen, commenting upon their own lives. Although, the children are still represented through adult eyes, they are framed more freely in cinematic space, echoing perhaps the greater sense of autonomy found within their actual lives.

If there seems to be greater optimism in recent portrayals of Aboriginal childhoods in NFB productions, how justifiable is it when the lives of all children, let alone Aboriginal children, seem ever more circumscribed by dangers in and beyond the home?⁵² Is it wishful thinking on the part of filmmakers to visualise versions of childhood that somehow seem to offer more freedom and choice than when they were growing up? Understandably, there is a very strong desire to offer positive role models when discriminatory processes persist in so many areas of Aboriginal experience, regardless of age. It certainly seems important for the NFB to continue to find ways of portraying the diversity of Aboriginal childhoods if it is to be responsive to social change. Since numerically, Aboriginal people are the fastest expanding section of Canada's population, cross-cultural understanding of past and present experiences of growing up seem an essential ingredient in building a more inclusive society. Depending on who is in charge of the camera, imagery seems to remain too important to ignore as Canada's indigenous population continues to negotiate places for

itself and its children in a society that still has to prove its willingness and commitment to overcoming the processes that perpetuate inequality.

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Endnotes

¹ Canada. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996c.

² This article draws upon materials made available by staff at the National Film Board and is supplemented by correspondence and other research undertaken in Canada as part of wider research.

³ This discussion focuses only on materials available in the English Program of the National Film Board and thus ignores films made in French. It does not seek to be exhaustive as portrayals of Aboriginal children feature in portraits of motherhood (for instance, Alanis Obomsawin's *Mother of Many Children*, NFB, 1977) and in productions that address aspects of childhood recollection, see for example *Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place*, 1987 also by Alanis Obomsawin and Christine Welsh, *Kuper Island: Return to the Healing Circle*, 1998.

⁴ See, for instance, general discussions on childhood by Aries, Philippe, 1962; Mause, 1974; Erikson, Erik, 1977; Postman, Neil, 1982 and Cunningham, Hugh, 1990. Valverde, Mariana, 1991 and Sutherland, Neil, 1998 discuss different aspects of societal attitudes towards children within English-speaking regions of Canada. McGillivray, 1997 writes specifically of Aboriginal children and public policies. Extensive general references to Aboriginal childhoods exist in the abundant literature on residential school experiences.

⁵ See for instance Lerner, 1997.

⁶ Russell, 1999.

⁷ I discuss this further in relation to the emergence of home movie making. See for instance, 'Seeing how it was? Childhood, memory and identity in home-movies', *Area*, 33(2) (June, 2001): forthcoming.

⁸ Brigard, Emilie de, 1995.

⁹ Romanow, 1992.

¹⁰ Since projects of state nation building were dualistic, competing nationalistic discourses surround the evolution of the NFB as an institution with both English and French language programmes.

¹¹ Graham, Dittburner and Abele, 1993.

¹² See, for example, McGillivray, 1997a and 1997b.

¹³ Donzelet, 1979; Sutherland, 2000; Valverde, 1991; McGillivray, 1997.

¹⁴ Milloy, 1996; McGillivray, 1996.

¹⁵ 'Eye Witness No. 29' groups material on a new school for northern Aboriginal children together with footage of a new subway in Toronto, a drive-in movie theatre in Ottawa and scenes of sea cadets watching tiny radio-controlled vessels engaged in naval battle. *Pied Piper* thus fits clearly in with the national modernising vision promoted by the NFB.

¹⁶ Watkins, 1977; Rea, 1968.

¹⁷ The Dene formed two distinct peoples: the upriver and the down-river families, each with distinct subsistence activities. The Metis at Fort Simpson included descendants of the historic, Red River and Batoche Metis who had moved north and west during the Metis diaspora; there were also some descendants of mixed Dene and non Aboriginal heritage.

¹⁸ At Fort Simpson, as elsewhere, the Metis lacked both land-base and recognition and some Dene lost legal status as Indians for a variety of reasons during the twentieth century.

¹⁹ Kulchyski, 1994.

²⁰ Milloy, 1996.

²¹ The continuation of private credit relief operated by trading companies, together with periodic handouts from the RCMP in cases of severe hardship, saved government outlay.

²² Rea, 1968; Watkins, 1977.

²³ The new commitment to universal education was prompted both by the demands of an ever expanding population of non Aboriginals attracted by new employment opportunities and also by an official recognition that traditional livelihoods were unsustainable.

²⁴ Rea, 1968.

- ²⁵ Watkins, 1977.
- ²⁶ McGillivray and Comaskey, 1999.
- ²⁷ Milloy, 1996.
- ²⁸ Bateman, 1997.
- ²⁹ Adams, 1995; Gillivray, 1997.
- ³⁰ Milloy, 1996.
- ³¹ Fienup-Riordan, 1995; King and Lidchi, 1998; Harcourt, 1998.
- ³² Berger, 1977.
- ³³ The advent of television in Canada in 1951 - although not in the north until 1967 - reinforced public debate on national identity and brought new impetus to comments about the need for strategic use of mass media to safeguard, enrich and strengthen national unity. 'Window on Canada' may be seen as one response to that rallying cry, as the NFB produced easily programmable material that would unite the country's diversity within an identifiable cultural, social and geographical entity.
- ³⁴ Miller, 1989; York, 1989; Milloy, 1996.
- ³⁵ See note 4.
- ³⁶ Milloy, 1996; McGillivray, 1997.
- ³⁷ Weaver, 1981; Weaver, 1993.
- ³⁸ National Film Board of Canada, *History. 1960s*. Available at: <http://www.nfb.ca/E/2/3/index>. (Accessed 2.9.2000).
- ³⁹ Pendakur, 1990.
- ⁴⁰ National Film Board of Canada. *Categories List - Indian Peoples of Canada*. Available at http://www.nfb.ca/FMT/E/cate/1/Indian_Peoples_of_Canada.html
- ⁴¹ The *Categories List. Indian Peoples of Canada* also identifies sub-categories for more specific access.
- ⁴² National Film Board of Canada. *Organisation. People. Kathleen Shannon*. Available at <http://www.nfb.ca/E/2/6/1/bioshan.html>. (Accessed 2.9.2000).
- ⁴³ See note 42
- ⁴⁴ Freisen, 1991.

⁴⁵ National Film Board of Canada. *History. 1980s*. Available at <http://www.nfb.ca/E/2/3/index.html>.

⁴⁶ Bunel Edwards, 1985.

⁴⁷ Manitoba Community Services, 1985. See also Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993.

⁴⁸ An overview of issues facing Aboriginal children may be found in Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a. Detailed sections on different aspects of children's needs and experiences may be found in Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b-d.

⁴⁹ An interview with Rhonda Gordon is included at the end of the film. "I was impressed by her need to do something about the way she had been treated, her need to take control of the situation" (Daniel Prouty, quoted in a special brochure on the National Film Board's *Aboriginal Directors Video Collection*, 1996).

⁵⁰ Todd, 2000.

⁵¹ Valaskakis, 1995.

⁵² Sibley, 1995; Ward, 1990.