



## First Nation Cinema: Hollywood's Indigenous 'Other'

[Jane Mills](#)

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*Every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries ... an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere.*

Trinh T. Minh-Ha. [\[1\]](#)

Ever since the Oscar-nominated *Ofelaš* (*The Pathfinder*, 1987) by Sami director Nils Gaup, and the Maori films, *Ngati* (Barry Barclay, 1987) and *Mauri* (Merata Mita, 1988) were produced, an increasing number of indigenous films have enriched the global screenscape. Indigenous cinema has a short history and is relatively so new that it has neither a commonly accepted name nor an established analytical framework in which to theorise it.

This essay focuses on First Nation cinema to examine some of the ways that minority cinemas have been defined and understood in order to propose a rethinking of the relations between First Nation cinemas and Hollywood. It argues for the need to re-imagine how we conceptualise and understand the global 'screenscape'.

### Naming and Locating Processes

On the complex issue of what name to use, 'indigenous', 'aboriginal' and 'first nation' are all more or less interchangeable. I prefer the last term in part because the first two can cause confusion since both 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' specifically denote Australian First Nation peoples. The term 'First Nation', moreover, usefully acknowledges the concept of location in referring to peoples who have historically experienced enforced de-territorialisation, and often re-territorialisation, by white-settler colonisers.

Despite their considerable differences, First Nation films have been given numerous designations which tend to present a homogenous cinema engaged in political and aesthetic opposition to the mainstream. These labels include Third, Third World, Fourth, postcolonial, subaltern, hungry, imperfect, anti-racist, ethnic, multicultural, hybrid, mestizo, marginal, avant-garde, minority, minor, transnational, intercultural, transcultural and accented. Laura Marks (6) suggests that the sheer number and variety of terms point to "the continuing urgency of issues that the coining of a new term seems to resolve". [\[2\]](#) This urgency relates to fears, real and imagined, of a hegemonically powerful Hollywood whose threat is perceived as a constant.

Most of the labels fix First Nation cinemas in a one-way relationship to the dominant mainstream cinema. This model places the globally dominant culture at the centre and the local First Nation cinemas on the periphery, a location from which the next new term represents an attempt to retrieve them. The perception is of a globally dominant cinema destroying difference by enforcing assimilation upon a local cinema. In effect, this forcibly relocates First Nation cinema within the boundaries of a cinema to which it is widely seen to exist in opposition.

Locating First Nation cinema is arguably as complex as naming it. Within postcolonial discourse, First Nation cinema is positioned as a minority cinema alongside others with which it is said to share a common experience of dominance and exclusion by the majority, or dominant, cinema. Within the category of national cinema, First Nation films tend to be subsumed within the larger geopolitical nation-state even though they may have a closer rapport with the globally dominant cinema than the more proximate national cinema. Carrying cultural baggage differentiating it from commercial Anglo-American, mainstream, dominant cinema, First Nation cinema tends to be situated on the periphery of cinematic and critical concern and is widely perceived as Hollywood's indigenous 'other'. This perception of diametrically opposed 'otherness' is underpinned by a persistent and widespread notion of fixed and impermeable national, cultural and cinematic borders.

To investigate the inadequacy of this perception, several questions must first be asked. Is First Nation cinema a single entity straddling local, national and regional borders? Is it a number of individual cinemas within individual national cinemas? Can it even be considered a 'cinema' as such? These questions beg further questions relating to cultural particularity and essence, and to the notion of a cinematic centre and its periphery. In other words, to issues of sameness and difference, of cultural transfer and of the permeability, or otherwise, of cultural, national and cinematic borders.

The processes of naming and locating both suggest fixity. The notion of fixity fails to recognise that a range of historical and geographical experiences have impacted upon First Nation peoples in a variety of constantly evolving and mutating ways. Nor does it recognise that the globally dominant cinema is not usefully

conceptualised as fixed and bounded either. My argument is that while First Nation cinema's relationship to Hollywood and the mainstream is certainly not one of equality, this inequality does not mean that the indigenous cinema is inevitably and necessarily crushed or contained by an undeniably powerful dominant cinema. The productive outcomes of globalising processes demonstrate that locating Hollywood and First Nation cinema within each other is not necessarily an indication of cultural cannibalisation. Much greater diversity exists in both Hollywood and Hollywood's First Nation 'other' than is commonly imagined.

If the relationship between First Nation cinema and Hollywood is to be re-imagined, there is need for a paradigm shift. This paper examines ways in which First Nation cinema has been defined, located and understood in order to propose a rethinking of the relationship between First Nation and Hollywood cinemas within a re-imagined global screenscape.

## A Paradigm Shift

Appadurai's analytical framework of disjunctive global cultural flows offers a means of seeing and understanding how cultural phenomena such as ideas, technologies, images and sound, finances, people and the media flow around the globe with ever increasing speed and intensity. The flows are disjunctive because they start, stop, speed up, slow down, collide, unite or by-pass each other chaotically and often unpredictably. When applied to cinema, this framework enables me to challenge how and where Hollywood is typically perceived and located. This, in turn, challenges a centre-periphery model. It reveals a screenscape characterised by globalising processes that are far more dynamic, unruly and creative than popularly imagined.

The notion of disjunctive global cultural flows offers an approach to textual analysis which further troubles the notion of impermeable cinematic borders. Involving traces and tracings, this approach involves looking for and finding the traces of cultural phenomena within the film frame. The traces can be found in aspects of the narrative, the dialogue, the *mise-en-scène*, the soundscape and editing techniques. When these phenomena, or flows, are identified it becomes possible to trace their chaotic paths to and from their points of origin and destination outside the frame. No two flows ever travel or intersect at the same time, in the same place, or with a consistent speed or intensity; Appadurai shows the resulting tensions from these multidirectional flows as they impact upon each other to be creative rather than destructive.

Within this new interpretive framework a previously unobserved, or ignored, screenscape emerges. It is a framework that reveals the existence of porous borders permitting the flow of cultural phenomena not so much *between* national and cultural categories as *above* and *through* their borders. This offers a way of re-imagining Hollywood and its relationship to a minority cinema within the transnational imaginary. Importantly, it decentres Hollywood and shows it to be one of a number of constantly mutating cinematic sites. It also reveals intercinematic relations to be characterised by heterogeneity and flux rather than homogeneity and fixity. This means that Hollywood can no longer be imagined as fixed and bounded, nor as the paradigm by which First Nation cinema defines itself and is judged.

## Racial Borders

To examine how First Nation cinema has been defined and located in relation to Hollywood, it proves valuable to look more closely at the racism which is commonly cited as evidence of fixed and impermeable borders. This involves a close reading of the film text itself to find the traces of cultural flows within the frame and to trace their trajectories beyond the frame.

Racism creates boundaries protecting essence and rejecting difference. It has impacted upon the screenscape in various ways, not least by separating and differentiating Hollywood from its First Nation 'other'. Racism exists in invisibility as well as in the formal properties of films which can be traced to all stages of production, distribution, exhibition and reception. The tensions between racist and non- or anti-racist ideas and images, and the varying speeds and intensities at which they travel, means that although racial and ethnic interests and concerns of Hollywood and First Nation cinemas are usually read as signs of complete otherness, at times they have overlapped.

Hollywood has undoubtedly played a role in blurring, merging and marginalising the cultural specificities of indigenous peoples. But the perception of it as inevitably and irrevocably racist supports the notion a homogenous Hollywood with rigidly patrolled borders, impervious to racial and ethnic difference, or to anything but a single, white racist representation.

Thomas Elsaesser offers a corrective to the widespread perception of Hollywood powered by an exclusionary racist ideology, arguing that from the beginning "Hollywood was simultaneously immigrant, transnational and American".<sup>[3]</sup> A history of 'pro-Indian' westerns that challenges the perception of a single white colonial narrative also needs to be acknowledged. In the late 1900s and the 1910s, for example, there were so many 'pro-Indian' films that some film historians see them as a separate sub-genre.

This does not absolve Hollywood of its undeniable racism but, as Ana M. López argues, it is necessary to 'challenge the commonplace assumption that classic Hollywood cinema [only] either stereotypes minorities or ... ignores them'.<sup>[4]</sup> Hollywood's relationship to each ethnic and minority group is more nuanced than such a simple analysis allows. The following close reading demonstrates how traces of this nuanced relationship can be shown

to exist within the film text itself.

### Close reading: *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, 1998)

Locating Hollywood in *Smoke Signals* is an easy task because the two main Native American characters, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams), constantly refer to it. On a long bus journey to retrieve the ashes of his recently deceased father, Victor is driven crazy by the cultural naivety of his constantly smiling and chattering companion. Drawing upon his knowledge of the 'Red Indian' from countless Hollywood westerns, Victor advises Thomas: "Indians ain't supposed to smile. Get stoic ... White people will run all over you if you don't look mean."

Victor performs the stereotypical 'injun warrior look' and recommends: 'Look like you've just come back from killing a buffalo.' Thomas, however, insists upon a verisimilitude that Hollywood often ignored responding: 'But we were never buffalo hunters. We're a salmon-fishing tribe.' Victor replies exasperatedly: 'You want to look like you just been fishing? It ain't *Dances with salmon*, you know.'

This reflexivity demonstrates the concerns of Native-American screenplay writer Sherman Alexie to explore what it means to be re-presented and *mis*represented by Hollywood.<sup>[6]</sup> It is not hard to share Victor's suspicion that Thomas derives his one-dimensional perception of Native American identity through a Hollywood lens. When Victor demands, 'How many times have you seen *Dances with wolves*?' we are not surprised to learn that Thomas has seen it at least two hundred times.

These characters' extensive knowledge of Hollywood, however, enables them to exact a moment of cinematic revenge upon every screen western which even hinted that 'the only good Indian is one who's dead'.<sup>[6]</sup> When forced out of their bus seats by two white racists, Victor and Thomas despondently discuss what happened:

THOMAS:

Man, the cowboys always win, enit?

VICTOR:

The cowboys don't always win.

THOMAS:

Yeah, they do. The cowboys *always win*. Look at Tom Mix. Look at Roy Rogers. Look at Clint Eastwood. And what about John Wayne? Man, he was about the toughest cowboy of them all, enit?

Refusing to supply yet another screen image of the vanquished Indian, Victor bursts into a song that has a hybridity typical of this film: English lyrics and Western musical rhythms combined with Indian vocables and Indian traditional pow-wow drum rhythms. The lyrics rob dominant white culture of at least some of its bite by casting doubt upon the authenticity of John Wayne's teeth:

Are they false, are they real?

Are they plastic, are they steel?

This scene, with its dispute between contemporary cowboys and Indians about who sits where on the bus clearly alludes to the freedom bus rides of the 1960s. For Faye Ginsburg it symbolises the reversal of the historical failure of the US's First Peoples to represent themselves.<sup>[7]</sup> Describing the film as the 'first ever all-Native American feature movie', she cites the film as evidence that 'Native Americans are now able to produce their own images and narratives which can effectively speak back to a U.S. cinema industry that has flourished on the marketing of stereotyped depictions of their lives, cultures, and histories'.<sup>[8]</sup>

For those suspicious of Hollywood's imperialising role and who construct rigid boundaries between Hollywood and its 'others', the Miramax investment might suggest the film is 'Hollywoodised' and thus not 'authentically' Native American. More accurately, however, Alexie points out that *Smoke signals* is 'the first feature film written, directed, and co-produced by Indians to ever receive a major distribution deal'.<sup>[9]</sup> The distinction is important because the film was distributed by Miramax, one of Hollywood's 'Big Ten' distribution and production studios owned by Disney since 1993.

The tensions between what Appadurai calls the 'financescape' and the images, ideas and other cultural phenomena flowing in the screenscape reveal not assimilation and destruction but a productive, hybridising process. The buzz of pioneering excitement and creativity can be seen and heard in an early scene in which a reservation radio station DJ yells: 'It's a good day to be indigenous!' *Smoke signals* feels as if it is celebrating the birth of a cinema emerging from the spaces between Hollywood, North American independent, and other First Nation cinemas and cinematic categories. As the ideas and images flow in varying speeds and intensities through porous cinematic borders, *Smoke signals* creates something new from the different elements.

If the cultural borders of race and ethnicity between Hollywood and First Nation cinemas are more porous than widely imagined, it follows that how and where the two cinemas are positioned in relation to each other must also be re-examined. Cinematic categories such as 'minority', 'third world' and 'accented' attempt to reposition First Nation cinema in relation to dominant mainstream cinema. Taxonomy involves erecting borders and in Film Studies discourse, as already mentioned, new labels and categories have been constructed in an attempt to

retrieve First Nation cinema from the margins. In the next section I question how successful they have been.

### **Cinematic categories: First Nation cinema as minor, accented, third, postcolonial, ethnic, imperfect and avant garde**

The concept of **minor cinema** derives from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of minor literature which is the literature of a minority or marginalised group written in a major language.<sup>[10]</sup> All minor cinema for Deleuze is highly de-territorialised since to make minor use of a major language, he argues, is to articulate living displacement. Minor art rises in conditions where a population has 'not yet' become a people, or is no longer one. Referring to films that draw upon and represent the experience of colonised peoples, Deleuze maintains that the task of the filmmaker in a minor cinema is 'to call a people into becoming'. (Marks, 217)

When applied to First Nation cinema, the model of a minor cinema focuses on issues of de-territorialisation. This usefully links First Nation people and their film culture to land and identifies strategies of appropriation and rewriting used by First Nation filmmakers to challenge the conventions and premises of mainstream cinema.

As an critical framework, however, the construct of minor cinema has limitations. For Marks these reside in the proposal of a single united voice for a cinema which is seen to only ever exist in a collective opposition to the dominant cinema.<sup>[11]</sup> It offers not a de-centred model that might rescue First Nation cinema from the margins, but a re-centred model in which the minor cinema's cultural and political significance exists only in terms of it being 'not-Hollywood'.

In privileging displacement over location, this model stresses where the indigenous cinema and its filmmakers and subjects are *not*, and has little, if anything, to say about where they *are*. It fails to note, for example, the diverse relationships most First Nation cinemas have with other First Nation cinemas. It also obscures the location of a cinema that can - often does - exist alongside rather than within the mainstream cinema. In failing to account for the complexity of cinematic relationships, this model offers a universal minority location in opposition to a universal majority. Rather than privileging peripherality, when First Nation cinema is defined as minor cinema it ends up being contained by the centre.

Many First Nation filmmakers certainly use Hollywood cinematic codes and conventions but their films do not merely replicate the ideas, images and techniques of a majority cinema any more than they inevitably oppose it. Suggesting that their films are not 'at home' but exist within a 'host' cinema, tends to deny or minimise the very links being discovered, recovered and extended by First Nation filmmakers between their land(s) and their culture(s). The suggestion, moreover, that the populace of First Nations have 'not yet' become a people, or are no longer one, is simply untrue.

By theorising 'cinema at the periphery', Hamid Naficy's concept of **accented cinema** addresses some of the problems that the minor cinema model either creates or fails to resolve. Unlike Hollywood, these films possess an accent emanating 'not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes'.<sup>[12]</sup>

Naficy traces the origins of the accented style of films made by exilic, diasporic and postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers to the emergence of postcolonial theories in the late 1950s and the discovery of a Latin American cinema of Liberation. This became known as '**Third Cinema**' as opposed to Hollywood ('First Cinema') and European art cinema ('Second Cinema'). As a cinema of displacement, accented cinema is much more situated than Third Cinema; it is necessarily made by (and often for) specific displaced peoples and diasporised communities.

Naficy uses the trope of accent to distinguish a cinema from the dominant stylistic norm. Hollywood cinema is imagined to be without accent in much the same way that, as Richard Dyer points out, white is widely imagined to be colourless: it is the norm by which all others are defined.<sup>[13]</sup> Accents are often a sign of deterritorialisation because they are generally only noticed when a new, different or foreign group of people inhabit the home of another.

This invites closer investigation of who calls where 'home'. For Naficy, the narratives of accented films are frequently driven by a desire either to return to a homeland or to forge one by combining elements of past and present, here and there, the minority 'us' versus the dominant 'them'. He usefully rejects the dominant approach of **postcolonial cinema** which has tended to treat deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation as themes within films rather than as factors shaping film style. Rather, he focuses on the artisanal mode of production common to accented films involving tiny budgets, low-level technology, small cast and crew, and much overlapping of roles in front of and behind the camera. The outcome is a film style that is imperfect and amateur.

Accented films are 'created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices'.<sup>[14]</sup> In consequence, they resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices while also benefiting from them. Unlike minor cinema, accented films are not necessarily oppositional; they exhibit diverse narrative strategies. And while their style signifies 'the endemic dislocation of our times in general and of these filmmakers in particular', it also 'serves to locate the filmmakers as authors of their films and to some extent their own destiny'.<sup>[15]</sup>

When applied to First Nation films, however, the concept of accented cinema reveals some unresolved tensions.

First Nation filmmakers and audiences are not necessarily displaced, and they are often situated in a space which, for them, *is* home: home can be a far more mobile space than an accented cinema allows. First Nation filmmakers may feel and, indeed, be marginalised by the dominant screen culture but this does not make them 'visitors' in the country in which they reside, whatever the past colonial history of deterritorialisation.

Once again, an emphasis on displacement tends to minimise the significance of location. The model attends to the specificity of each displaced filmmaker, community, or formation which is seen as an important safeguard against the unacceptable proposition of a single or homogeneous accented cinema. But, as Fran Martin points out:

*On the one hand, Naficy concedes that the filmmakers are all differently situated, and are located in varying social formations at different points on the globe – which in the light of his generally historical-materialist framework would imply differences that should matter for the films they produce. While on the other hand, he seeks a style that will encompass common characteristics, cut through differences, and be explicable in terms of what now appears as a generalized fact of 'shared' displacement and deterritorialisation.*<sup>[16]</sup>

Also unresolved is the implicit use of Hollywood as the yardstick against which to measure the other's otherness. Positioning Hollywood at the centre of critical concern, accented cinema is mired in the trap that Naficy himself comments on, namely the tendency of the film production and film theory industries to place films in specific categories surrounded by impermeable borders:

*While these classificatory categories are important methods for framing and positioning films to target markets, distributors, exhibitors, reviewers, and academic studies, they also serve to overdetermine and delimit the film's potential meanings.*<sup>[17]</sup>

In emphasising the relationship between the First Nation film and its own territorial history, accented cinema ignores First Nation cinema's location within the global screenscape. It offers a way of seeing what is common between First Nation cinemas but does not necessarily help explain or understand their differences. Accented cinema as a category usefully reclaims First Nation filmmakers from the marginalised genres of **ethnic** and **imperfect**, if exotic, '**avant garde**' cinema but it does not help us see the cultural hybridity that exists. Hybridisation does not simply turn the tables on the colonizing culture but questions the norms and knowledges of any culture presented as discrete, whole, and separate.

Ultimately, accented cinema is a model that demonstrates insufficient concern for observing and tracing the transcultural, transnational and transformative processes within the screenscape. These are processes in which audiences are offered a hybridised mix of global and local. This mixing of cultures, or the 'glocal' as it has become known, reframes First Nation cinemas pointing to their transcultural positioning within the global screenscape. It clearly locates *Smoke signals*, for example as a story of the search for the lost father which is simultaneously a traditional Western European story and a Native-American story. As its screenwriter said: 'I'm working with two very classical, mythic structures. You can find them in everything from *The Bible* to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.'<sup>[18]</sup>

## Re-imagining the Global Screenscape

The next close reading reveals the value of looking for and finding the hybridisation processes within a film text to support my main argument for the need to rethink intercinematic relations and to re-locate First Nation cinema within a re-imagined global screenscape.

### Close reading: *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002)

Hybridisation processes are central to the narrative of this film which concerns the historical attempt by white Australia to breed out the blackness from light-skinned Aboriginal children. Hybridity also extends to the mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cast and crew, the ethnoscape in Appadurai's terminology, and to the transnational and transcultural flows of ideas and ideologies, images, sounds, finances and technologies. Traces of these cultural flows can be found inside the film's frames and their trajectories can be traced to their points of origin and destination beyond frame.

An all-Australian production, with Noyce's lowest budget for several years, the film is simultaneously local (First Nation), national (Australian), and global (Hollywood). Directed by a non-Indigenous Australian filmmaker and with a screenplay by a non-Indigenous writer, Christine Olsen, other members of the cast and crew include the internationally renowned British actor Kenneth Branagh, the celebrated non-Indigenous Australian cinematographer Chris Doyle, best known for his experimental and art-house Hong Kong films, the British world music celebrity Peter Gabriel, and David Gulpilil, Australia's pre-eminent Aboriginal actor.

This mixing of cultures delivers a story of Indigenous Australian experience which draws upon narrative techniques and visual devices from Hollywood genres'.<sup>[19]</sup> Promotional material stresses the transcultural nature of these flows by calling attention not only to the film's Australianness ('Arguably the most important Australian film in 20 years'), but also its Indigenous specificity (large images on the posters of the two leading young Aboriginal actors, Evelyn Sampi and Tianna Sansbury, looking overwhelmed by the vast desert terrain), its Hollywood connections ('From the director of *Dead calm*, *Patriot games*, *Clear and present danger* and *The bone*

collector'), and its universalism ('An extraordinary story of human spirit overcoming all odds').

*Rabbit Proof Fence* is an example of transcultural cinema, a concept which retrieves First Nation cinema from the margins in part by an emphasis on location and cultural mobility rather than dislocation and deterritorialisation. It allows us to see that as hybrids, these films challenge the separateness of cultures and make visible the colonial and racist power relations that seek to maintain this separation. The notion of transcultural cinema does not offer yet another bounded category, rather it offers a critical framework for understanding First Nation cinema as one which transcends the borders around discrete cultures. It does not emphasise, aestheticise or celebrate the deterritorialisation at the expense of location.

In recognising hybridising processes, a transcultural model rejects the imperialist centre–periphery model of 'coloniser versus colonised' implicit in the notion of the dominant national cinema as the 'host' culture. In denying a universal minority position it creates a bridge between dominant and minority cinemas, recognising that they have 'overlapping interests and porous borders', even though those borders 'are often under institutional constraints to defend established territories'.<sup>[20]</sup> In short, the transcultural makes it possible to see not only what is happening inside the borders of the film or cinema, but also what is happening beyond these borders, and offers an inside/outside approach that can be applied to the text of the films themselves, as this last close reading shows.

### Close reading: *Beneath clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002)

Australian Aboriginal filmmaker Ivan Sen wrote the screenplay for this, his first feature, because he was 'always interested in people searching for something that makes them believe they belong somewhere'.<sup>[21]</sup> It is a road movie in which two young Aboriginal teenagers, Lena (Dannielle Hall) and Vaughn (Damian Pitt), meet by chance and over a couple of days hitchhike from a small town in north-west rural NSW towards Sydney.

Passing for white, Lena is running away from her mother and her Aboriginality in search of an Irish father whom she never knew. Vaughn is running away from juvenile detention to see his dying mother. The film approaches the ambivalences and ambiguities about who these two people are and to whom and where they belong in many ways.

We see Lena's bedroom, a small haven she has created with pictures of the lush, misty green Irish countryside on the walls, a copy of *The tempest* on the bookshelf and, most precious, her album containing fetishised old photos of her father. Lena has created an identity based on an imaginary 'homeland' far removed from that of her abusive mother and stepfather, her delinquent brother and friends, the inevitable pregnancies of young teenage girls and their careless, frequently uncaring, young boyfriends. A romanticised Ireland and an idealised father, address unknown: this is where Lena wants to be, and where she claims she 'belongs'. Vaughn, however, is suspicious:

VAUGHN:  
When was the last time you saw your dad?

LENA:  
A while ago.

VAUGHN:  
A long while I bet.

*Cut to a close-up photo of an Irish landscape in Lena's album.*

VAUGHN:  
You're not really from there, are you?

LENA:  
But that's where I belong.

VAUGHN:  
How do you know?

LENA:  
I just know.

Vaughn has no reservations about his Aboriginality. Even if he wanted to forget, which he doesn't, his white guards and fellow prisoners, black and white, constantly remind him. As does the racial prejudice he meets, almost without exception, whenever he encounters a white person. He is less certain, however, about belonging to his family. He feels abandoned and claims he wants nothing to do with them, especially his mother: "... I was locked up for 2 fuckin' years. How many visits did I get? Fuck all. She didn't give a rat's arse." But Lena sees through his bravado and asks an astutely pertinent question: "Why d'you break out of jail?"

But for the film's lightness of touch, the conceit of Lena passing for white might seem all too obvious a symbol of racial and cinematic border-crossings. She successfully convinces Vaughn, however, who says of his new friend: 'Never knew any whitefella before. Not like you, anyway.' Lena does not enlighten him.

Ultimately, Lena can run away from her mother and she may even be able to join her father (although it seems unlikely), but she cannot fool herself. Nor can she fool the elderly Aboriginal woman whom she and Vaughn encounter on the road. The woman's question, 'Where are your people from, girl?', gets to the very issue Lena has been evading. She turns to look at Vaughn, who looks away. Whether he feels betrayed, disappointed or ashamed of her is left to the audience to decide, for he says nothing. Perhaps he feels a mixture of all these things. Lena does not reply: it seems she is going to have to face up to being not black or white but black and white.

Lena's pale skin speaks of her mixed-race identity and this hybridity is something she shares with the film itself. She finds herself on the edges of blackness and whiteness, hoping to create an identity resulting from the interplay of two different races and cultures, as Sen negotiates the interplay of dominant and First Nation screen cultures to create a film with a transcultural dynamic. *Beneath clouds* draws upon a range of cinematic influences that are global, national, local and thus transnational and transcultural.

Nowhere is this more evident than in a scene where Lena, sitting in the back of a car, turns her gaze from the photo of a misty-grey Irish countryside framed by a postcard in her album to the misty-grey Australian countryside framed by the car window. We can't really discern any difference; nor can Lena.

We find more traces of the transcultural at the points where the Australian road movie meets the Hollywood road movie and the two versions of the genre commingle productively. A similar outcome results from the combination of the long, slow, carefully controlled documentary-style shots of rural Australia mixing with an occasional fast jump-cutting technique which Sen explains he borrowed from the Hollywood movie, *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994).

Sen consciously embraces hybridity, mixing indigenous lifestyles, hopes and fears with white Australian perceptions. He sees his film as a 'culmination and a conclusion to his long held concern with his mixed heritage and notions of cultural identity'.<sup>[22]</sup> And he looked for a stylistic marriage between the Hollywood director Michael Mann (*Heat*, *The Insider*, *Ali*, *Collateral*) and the 'maverick Danish master of contrived spontaneity', Lars von Trier (*Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark*, *Dogville*).<sup>[23]</sup> In First Nation cinema, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse says of hybridising processes, 'it is the mixing of cultures and not their separateness that is emphasized'.<sup>[24]</sup> The film mixes Indigenous lifestyles, hopes and fears with white Australian perceptions to create something new, different, and First Nation.

This reading of *Beneath Clouds* reveals nuanced hybridising processes. Awareness of these processes can also contribute to an awareness that dominant cinema, if one looks, can be located in First Nation cinema and of the role it plays in the interconnected issues of nation, identity and belonging.

## First Nation cinema: films in negotiation and dialogue

*Beneath clouds*, *Smoke signals*, and other First Nation films such as *Once were warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994) and *Atanarjuat/The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2001), all demonstrate that First Nation cinema is in constant negotiation with contemporary and historical national mainstream screen culture, its institutions and aesthetics, as well as with Hollywood, although not necessarily directly. They show themselves to be part of a cinema involved in a border-crossing relationship with dominant cinema. Films such as *Rabbit proof fence* and yes, even *Dances with wolves*, show the flows are multidirectional, multileveled and mutual. In cinematic terms, this translates into the transnational and transcultural flows of narratives and narrative structures, cinematic styles, techniques and genres, as well as of filmmakers and the funding processes between First Nation, national and Hollywood cinemas.

Asked if mainstream US popular culture had influenced him, Sherman Alexie was not afraid to locate Hollywood in his work, citing his sources as

*my father, for his non-traditional Indian stories, my grandmother for her traditional Indian stories, Stephen King, John Steinbeck, and The Brady Bunch. That's who I am. I think a lot of Indian artists like to pretend that they're not influenced by pop culture or Western culture, but I am, and I'm happy to admit it. A lot of independent filmmakers would look down their nose at their own pop influences, or at my pop influences. It's a cultural currency.*<sup>[25]</sup>

Asked if he saw US popular culture as a *lingua franca*, Alexie replied:

*Exactly, and, in the same way, I use that as a way to bridge the cultural distance between the characters in my movie and the non-Indian audience. It's a way for me, as the writer, to speak to the audience through my characters in a way that will give them something to hold onto as they're hearing and seeing something brand new.*<sup>[26]</sup>

The notion of a cinematic *lingua franca* points to a more fluid relationship between the globally dominant and First Nation cinemas than is widely perceived. In looking for and locating Hollywood in its First Nation other it is necessary to look beneath the epidermic surface of the film text and find the role that globalising processes play in creating transcultural experiences. This is a process in which audiences play an important role as they recognise how dominant cinema persists in, and is reshaped by, these hybridising processes: Hollywood and its

so-called indigenous 'other' both inform and transform, and in so doing are themselves transformed.

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## Endnotes

[1] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Other than myself/my other self". (G. Robertson, M. Mash, L. Tickner, J. Bird, B. Curtis and T. Putnam, eds, *Travellers' tales: narratives of home and displacement*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 9.

[2] Laura U. Marks, *The skin of the film: intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000) 6.

[3] Thomas Elsaesser, "Ethnicity, authenticity and exile: a counterfeit trade? German filmmakers and Hollywood" (Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, exile, homeland: film, media and the politics of place*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 97–123.

[4] Ana M. Lopez, "Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, ethnography, and cultural criticism". (Lester D Friedman, ed, *Unspeakable images: ethnicity & the American cinema*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 404.

[5] Sherman adapted the screenplay from his collection of short stories, in particular 'This is what it means to say Phoenix, Arizona' (*Lone ranger and Tonto fistfight in heaven*. New York: Perennial/Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993).

[6] This phrase, widely thought to typify the classic Hollywood western's approach to the Native American, is ascribed to (and denied by) General Philip H. Sheridan (1831–88). Sheridan played a decisive role in the US army's long campaign against the native peoples of the plains, forcing them onto reservations with the tactics of total war.

[7] Faye Ginsburg, "Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies: Resignifying Indigenous Lives". (Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds, *Multiculturalism, postcoloniality, and transnational Media*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press University Press, 2003) 77–98.

[8] Ginsburg, 77.

[9] In the Introduction to his published screenplay Alexie also writes: 'There have been many other Indian filmmakers, our elders, who made wonderful films that have been wrongfully ignored to dismissed. Our film would not have been possible without the filmmaking efforts of previous generations of Indian writers, directors, producers and actors' (Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals*, New York: Hyperion, 1998: xi). Emphasis added.

[10] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *Kafka: toward a minor literature* (trans. Dana Polan) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

[11] Laura Marks, "Deterritorialized filmmaking: A Deleuzian politics of hybrid cinema", *Screen*, 35.3, 1994: 244–64.

[12] Hamid Naficy, *An accented cinema: exilic and diasporic filmmaking*. (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press. 2001): 4.

[13] Dyer, Richard, *White*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[14] Naficy: 6.

[15] Naficy: 6.

[16] Fran Martin, 'Review: Hamid Naficy, *An accented cinema*', *Screening the past*, 14 November 2002, at <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/reviews/rev1002/fmbr14a.html>.

[17] Hamid Naficy, "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre" (Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds, *Global/local: cultural production and the transnational imaginary*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996): 120.

[18] Dennis West and Joan M. West, 'Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals: An Interview with Sherman Alexie' in *Cineaste* v23, n4. Fall, 1998. <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/alexie.html>

[19] Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian cinema after Mabo*. (Port Melbourne and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 133.

[20] Françoise Lionnet and Shih Shu-Mei eds, *Minor transnationalism*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 5.

[21] Mike Walsh, 'Beneath clouds: language as simple as a look', <http://www.realtimearts.net/rt48/sen.html>.



[22] Walsh. <http://www.realtimearts.net/rt48/sen.html>.

[23] Mark Naglazas, 'Great Black Hope', *The west Australian*, June 2002, <http://www.eniar.org/news/sen.html>.

[24] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'Globalisation as Hybridisation', in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, eds, *Global modernities*. London: Sage, 1995: 62.

[25] West and West, 'Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals: An Interview with Sherman Alexie' in *Cineaste* v23, n4. Fall, 1998. <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/alexie.html>.

[26] West and West, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/alexie.html>.

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