In the contested arena of Native American image studies, many contemporary indigenous viewers and filmmakers have redirected, via narration, the meaning of the anterior referent or the ‘real’ in early photography and film. For example, the turn-of-the-century photograph on the following page by Edward S. Curtis, ‘The Three Chiefs – Piegan’, follows the pictorialist tradition in its intensely expressive composition (figure 1). The use of longshot, the stance of the men, their blurred reflections in a waterhole and the wide horizon isolate the central figures, separating them from their community context, while suggesting (in the caption as well as the image) a clichéd nobility. Yet for Blackfoot filmmaker George Burdeau, the image had a very different effect, bringing him back to his own tribal community: ‘When I first discovered Curtis, I found this photograph of three Piegan chiefs out on the plains and I still hadn’t come home yet, so for me, this was like – coming home . . . it allowed me to go on my own journey, and I knew that . . . I needed to come home.’ If images tell stories, stories just as importantly frame and translate images for the viewer, infusing them with a specifically narrative meaning. Revising both the Euro-American melodramatic narratives of ‘vanishing’ Indians and contemporary scholarly criticism of stereotyping in early film and photography, contemporary indigenous films bring the stasis of ethnographic portraiture into the private sphere of intergenerational relationships.

Early ethnographic cinema combined documentation with the exotic, seeking to capture a supposed Native ‘purity’ while using
Euro-American narrative frameworks. *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1914), Edward Curtis’s film about Kwakw’akah’wakw life before European contact, offers a particularly powerful focal text, standing at the crossroads between the impulses of nineteenth-century photography and the rising medium of cinema. The film represents an important point of intertextual origin for documentary film in the converging discourses of cultural anthropology, popular melodrama and race theory at the beginning of the twentieth century. Like his photographs, Curtis’s film, while staging the Native actors and their cultural expressions in a melodramatic cover story, has also provided images that contemporary Native communities have integrated into their attempts to recuperate cultural ties. Along with other ethnographic materials from the same period, the film has contributed to a visual archive available for indigenous repurposing, often at an intimately local level of familial recognition.

In telling contrast to Curtis’s authenticating strategies are those of Native American and First Nations representations of oral narratives on screen since 1980 (the year that Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko made her film *Stolen Rain*, based on a Laguna story). A comparison of Edward Curtis’s film with those by contemporary Native filmmakers such as Zacharias Kunuk and Victor Masayesva, among others, suggests the way in which ‘situations’ and stories influence the perceptions of the visible, locating them in narratives of artifice and authenticity, vanishing and survival. What exactly is gained – or regained – when indigenous narratives structure and situate cinematic images? How do re-enactments and retellings of oral narratives on film affect projects of community revitalization and the ethics of cultural and intercultural transmission? How can film history and film criticism centred in western constructions of family romance address films such as *Atanarjuat/The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2001), in which Inuit
kinship networks, including spiritual ties based on reincarnation, determine both film production and content? Examining how issues of cultural repatriation figure in re-aligning photographic and cinematic meaning reveals the circumstances of the Native actors and interpreters who participated in early films and the ways in which contemporary films reflect on and offer alternative narrative, performance and production situations.

Many contemporary Native filmmakers have reclaimed indigenous images by filming dramatizations or re-enactments of indigenous narratives, including creation stories as well as legends about historical events. This emerging ‘cinema of oral performance’ includes Victor Masayesva’s *Itam Hakim, Hopiit/We, Someone, the Hopi* (1984) and Zacharias Kunuk’s *Atanarjuat*, as well as a host of other work in film and video. These films by indigenous directors and producers, sometimes made in collaboration with outsiders, include key elements that are missing in earlier docu-dramas. Most importantly, they introduce a contextual frame or indication of the storytelling performance, while situating ‘old’ stories in a post-contact, identifiably contemporary setting that both brings the story itself forward and indicates the metanarrative process of producing the story, the mechanics of telling. Further, by privileging multigenerational contexts and images of Native children as the listening audience, the filmmakers challenge the ‘vanishing Indian’ trope that has structured assimilationist policies, ‘blood quantum’ racial criteria, the dismantling of treaty commitments and institutional interventions in Native families. Through strategic attention to production situations, oral storytelling performance and the historical investment in ‘the power of actuality,’ the filmmakers attempt to imaginatively recover the cultural values encoded in the narratives.

Narratives of vanishing natives elide the issue of future generations through images of assimilation or the omission of children, while films such as *Atanarjuat* and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* place children at the centre of the story performance as listeners and as heirs to sovereignty rights based on cultural heritage. Some documentaries by non-Native filmmakers, including *Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians* (Anne Makepeace, 2000), *Box of Treasures* (Chock Olin/U’Mista Cultural Center, 1983) and *Nanook Revisited* (Claus Massot, 1994), have traced the impact and use of silent film images by Edward Curtis and Robert Flaherty in indigenous communities, while others, such as *The Return of Navajo Boy* (Jeff Spitz, 2001) connect repatriated footage with family reunion. Catherine Russell writes that persistent indigenous interest in early ethnographic films suggests the films’ multifaceted roles as documents of both living cultural memory and historical colonial containment.³

If photography is inextricably linked, through its history and its contemporary use, to an imperialist gaze, the very act of bringing the presence of the oppressed into the realm of the reproducible image also conveys the possibility of recuperation in which a new narrative appropriates the power of signification. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland
Barthes writes that the self is constituted in photography ‘in the process of “posing”’, and the converse, that ‘what founds the nature of Photography is the pose’. For Barthes, the long poses required by early photography are a metaphor for the ‘body in its passage to immobility’ as ‘photography transformed subject into object, and even . . . into a museum object’. With multiple claims on the image by photographer, viewer and subject/object, we can ask with Barthes about the ‘disturbance’ of ownership: ‘to whom does the photograph belong?’ – a parallel question to filmmaker David MacDougall’s ‘whose story is it?’

Barthes distinguishes between photography, which freezes the pose, denying it movement and future, and the flow of cinema, which glimpses the figure in passing. Here, I move more fluidly between photography and film, since my focus is on the way ‘poses’ are made part of a constitutive or continuous history through the narrative claiming of cinematic images. Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor engages Barthes’s concept of the pose in the politicized context of Native American images, coining the phrase ‘fugitive poses’ to indicate changeable strategies of dominance and ‘survivance’. ‘Fugitive poses’ describes both an ‘ethnographic surveillance’ that freezes its subjects into simulations of absence, and the fleeting ‘native presence’ that asserts survivance through the ‘solace and mythic chance of traditions and memories in narratives, not cameras’.

Barthes’s description of photography as documentary evidence of a past presence that is ‘without future’ lays the groundwork for Vizenor’s assertion that photographs are ‘possessorial’ spectacles ‘that separated natives from their communities and ancestral lands’, and further, that ‘capturable native motion is aesthetic servitude’. Barthes’s emotional realization of ‘a catastrophe which has already occurred’ – the punctum – echoes a sentiment connected with mourning or weeping as a form of helplessness, a pose also characteristic of the ‘vanishing Indian’ trope that so deeply inflected narratives and images early in the twentieth century. Vizenor claims that photography and other ‘simulations’ are available for other purposes, both within Native communities and in the context of the history of the ‘portraiture of dominance’: ‘The eyes that meet in the aperture are the assurance of narratives and a sense of native presence’. While the circumstances of the initial photographic encounter and the thoughts of those whose ‘eyes meet in the aperture’ are never totally available to viewers, documentary images can clearly bring into being a ‘native presence’ as well as a ‘vanishing Indian’, the two potential narratives each bound up with issues of memory, recognition and anticipation.

Kwakwaka’wakw, Inuit and other groups have used Curtis’s images to reconnect with a precontact past, appropriating and reframing mediated images to assert a distinct cultural identity and collective sovereignty. These narratives counter governmental assimilationist policies, based on ‘blood quantum’ definitions of identity, aimed at eliminating treaty-based land rights and federal services. Chadwick Allen calls attention to
tropes of ‘blood memory’ in Native American activist and literary texts. Narrating connective ties with tribal ancestors imagines an identity that resists governmental definitions of Indianness by quota of blood, transforming ‘that taxonomy of delegitimization through genetic mixing into an authenticating genealogy of stories and storytelling’. Images taken in the past may never be fully rewritten, and acts of repatriation more broadly can denote bitter loss and interruption as well as more utopic notions of restitution and renewal. Through their projects of cinematic retelling, these indigenous filmmakers work in the delicate balance between retrieval and invention to shape a modern identity by deploying a reconstructed past.

Edward Curtis’s photographic and cinematic images have already been critiqued for the stories they tell. His images did much to further the ‘vanishing Indian’ trope and the idea of the authentic or pure Indian, frozen in time and untouched by Euro-American culture. Close scrutiny of Curtis’s photographs reveals his strategic and careful arrangement of his subjects to conform to an idea of the precontact ‘primitive’. Curtis regularly cropped and retouched photographic images to obscure the posed nature of the shots. He supplied wigs and costumes, and removed wristwatches, umbrellas, suspenders and signs of written language in order to eliminate evidence of acculturation, hybridity and modernity. His works were at best mediated images of Native people; at worst, they undermined Native survival by presenting a vanished Indian. Yet what is the story of Curtis’s story, and how does it intersect on screen with the stories of the people and objects he filmed?

In writing In the Land of the War Canoes, Curtis made up a story to justify the display of costumes, artefacts and dances and to show as many ceremonial activities as possible – a narrative ‘glue’ or ‘pastiche’. Given his extremely careful control of images so as to eliminate evidence of European influence, why did Curtis not use Kwakwaka’wakw stories as the basis for his scenario for the film? They were certainly available in Franz Boas’s publications and from the Kwakwaka’wakw communities where Curtis filmed. Boas had recently published Kwakiutl Texts with George Hunt in 1905 and Kwakiutl Tales in 1910, and Curtis was in regular correspondence with Boas. Further, Curtis and Boas both worked extensively with George Hunt, a native speaker of the Kwak’wala language. Curtis himself, with Hunt’s help, had collected Kwakwaka’wakw narratives from the communities where he filmed War Canoes.

Curtis could easily have used a local narrative – one told to him or gleaned from Boas’ collections – as the basis for his film. In an interview with Curtis in 1915, the Strand magazine writes that he ‘regarded the [film] from a purely educational standpoint, but in order to add to the interest he felt compelled to mix it with a little romance . . . . The story, of course, is a minor detail, the real object of the film being to show the customs, amusements, fights, domestic life, and sports of the North American Indians’. By treating the narrative scenario as ‘a minor
detail’ and by ignoring the rich potential of the Kwakwaka’wakw verbal art that was all around him, Curtis missed the opportunity to give the silent images an indigenous ‘voice’. His film also isolates aspects of Kwakwaka’wakw life from their resonance in everyday life by highlighting the decontextualized objects and ceremonies only, without a corresponding depiction of either ordinary activities or the body of lore that surrounded them.

Curtis was attuned, though, to the values and expectations of his intended audience. Still photography had long relied on narrative frameworks to guide viewers’ interpretations of the images on display. Martha Sandweiss, tracing the relationship between narrative modes and early photography, observes that the ‘literal accuracy’ of nineteenth-century daguerrotypes ‘could not satisfy a public that . . . valued the symbolic and theatrical’. To become a marketable image the photograph had to become iconic, ‘an important scene in a longer story’. Attached narratives gave early photographs a fixed meaning and interpretation through sequential presentation, in narrative lectures accompanying slide shows and via short titles and texts appended to the photographs themselves. Even in silent film, the heir to the theatrical and narrative impulses in photography, intertitles help the viewer interpret the visual sequences. Curtis’s own cinematography follows the stylized techniques of his photographs, and attests to the influence of Alfred Steiglitz and the other pictorialists who used silhouettes and blurred, misty effects to create expressive photographs that adopted the dramatic qualities of etchings and lithographs. Curtis’s complex narrative, however, is carried largely by the intertitle cards, without which the film’s plot would be almost impossible to follow.

What is this narrative that frames Curtis’s images for the viewers and guides their interpretation? In a gesture typical of Euro-American narratives about indigenous peoples during this period, the film depicts a heroic warrior figure and a ‘Sorcerer’ who practices ineffective magic. This negative view of the shaman or healer figure reflects turn-of-the-century race theory, based on biological determinism, which combined ideas about progressive developmental stages of humanity with an assertion of Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy. The Sorcerer figure was perceived in this context as a relic of pre-Christian, pre-agrarian and prescientific thought. As such, he represented spiritual elements of indigenous cultures that westerners most rejected yet simultaneously sought to recreate through display. As Fatimah Tobing Rony has noted, the ‘politics of authenticity’ in salvage ethnography visualized a ‘vanishing native’ who was ‘simultaneously pathological and genuine’. Curtis’s recording of the ritual life of the Kwakwaka’wakw both attests to its value and acts to devalue that very ritual life, not only in the filming but in the narrative that frames the objects and images Curtis worked so hard to collect, document, preserve and display.

It is important to note also that Kwakwaka’wakw shamanism was itself highly theatrical, involving public displays of magical ‘tricks’ and,
according to Michael Taussig, a deep interdependence between skepticism and faith, between ‘skilled revelation and skilled concealment’. Aspiring healers reinforced the shamanic system by combining a suspicion of elder shamans’ fraudulence with a paradoxical desire to acquire their technique. The ‘nervous system’ of shamanism involves ‘learning shamanism’ and ‘doubting it at the same time’. Taussig’s case study, four versions of George Hunt’s autobiography (finally published in 1930 as *I Desired to Learn the Ways of the Shaman*), demonstrates the deeply intercultural nature of any conclusion regarding Kwakwaka’wakw shamanism and its representations in ethnographic texts.  

Catherine Russell argues that Curtis’s original film, *In the Land of the Headhunters*, is essentially a completely different film than the restored version, retitled *In the Land of the War Canoes*, which has reduced footage and fewer intertitles. The commingling of Hollywood melodrama and salvage ethnography in the restored film (the only version available for analysis), Russell asserts, represents an early instance of experimental filmmaking as ‘antirealist discourse’ that ‘frees ethnography from the burden of authority and from the weight of the historiography of loss’. Yet Curtis’s photoplay also reconstitutes and bolsters popular western cultural narratives, already widely current in silent ‘Indian dramas’, in which ‘vanishing’ indigenous spiritual practices exist in opposition to discourses of western rationality and Christian reform. This impulse to unmask or debunk is one of the animating features of Edward Curtis’s 1914 film.

The narrative mode that Curtis chose to reach his audience was melodrama. The stock characters of melodrama are apparent: Motana is the victim-hero, the Sorcerer the villain, and Naida the maiden in distress. Melodrama, which offers what has been called ‘moral legibility in an era of moral uncertainty’, narrates sympathy with the suffering of the noble and virtuous in Motana and rejection of villainy coded as ‘savagery’ in the Sorcerer.  

Yet the very elements that Curtis’s audiences found most fascinating in the film – the spectacle of ceremonial dances, religious objects, ‘vision quests’ – are those they most associated with a ‘backward’, ‘superstitious’ and, above all, *false* belief system. The work of the film is to bring these two sites of visual pleasure into a staged – melodramatic – conflict. Curtis’s assertion of the film’s authenticity and realism (its ‘documentary mode’) present in the *details* of artefact, figure and image, is contradicted by the narrative’s ‘melodramatic mode’, which places the characters in a distinctly Euro-American story about heroism, villainy and moral excess.

In the film, the warrior Motana and the ‘Sorcerer’ compete for the hand of Naida. The Sorcerer’s magic fails, but war breaks out between the families of the two men, culminating in a canoe chase in which Motana’s men are triumphant. Early on, Curtis depicts a secret tryst between Motana and Naida. The Sorcerer’s evil nature becomes visible as he crawls on all fours through the underbrush. Significantly, although he is
cast as the viewer’s opposite, he also allows for a doubling of the viewer’s investigative gaze. His actions replicate what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls the ‘legal voyeurism’ of anthropology, in which observations ‘give the reader the feeling of being the accomplice of a voyeur hidden behind some wall or bush, taking delight in seeing and appropriating two lovers’ utmost intimate acts.’

As the lovers part, Motana is in silhouette as Naida paddles her canoe away from him along a path of sunlight reflected by the waters. Reviewers admired Curtis’s experimental technique of pointing the camera into the sun to achieve the spectacular lighting effects of the sunset on water, and the beauty of this image invests the couple with an aura of natural legitimacy and moral good. Their separation echoes Curtis’s photographs of Indians departing on horseback toward an unknown future at the vanishing point of the horizon. Curtis’s narrative sustains the couple in the end, but this image depicts a nostalgic sense of loss that would have been immediately resonant for an audience familiar with narratives and images of vanishing Indians and doomed Indian romance.

The Sorcerer’s voyeuristic intrusion on the lovers signals his devious character, and the choice of actor, an older man, suggests to the western audience the character’s unsuitability for the young Naida. The Sorcerer’s use of stealth, intermediaries and what audiences would think of as ‘black magic’ all demonstrate his negative moral status. In deliberate contrast to the Sorcerer, Motana, the young warrior and son of village leader Kenada, is introduced through a series of scenes in which he seeks spiritual power alone on a peak. Thus Motana’s attempt to gain spiritual and social power – staged on a mountaintop – is depicted as morally and geographically on the ‘up-and-up’. Motana’s vigils are interrupted twice by romantic entanglements. First, Naida appears to him in a dream and he leaves his quest to woo her; later, the Sorcerer’s daughter tries and fails to seduce him. In an attempt to make Motana sick, the Sorcerer uses a neck ring and a lock of hair stolen by the spurned lover. Describing the witchery, the intertitle reads: ‘The Plotters, anticipating Motana’s death, “mourn” him as his hair, stuffed into the bodies of toads, smokes over their fire.’ The Sorcerer and his helpers sit beneath a tree, surrounded by skulls. The Sorcerer’s status rests in human machinations, his selfish desire to claim Naida and destroy Motana, not in spiritual power. He is a flimsy obstacle to Motana and Naida’s romance, and is dispatched early in the film; it is his brother Yaklus, another warrior, who is the more formidable foe. The melodramatic action offers audiences images of Kwakwaka’wakw spiritual beliefs that are both exotic in surface detail and deeply familiar in narrative structure. Curtis’s narrative imagines a fake Sorcerer and an authentic, transcendent Warrior; his story attempts to contain, aestheticize and market both figures through a cinematic ‘museumification’.

In Curtis’s film, Kwakwaka’wakw identity and the land itself are associated with headhunting in the original title ‘In the Land of the Head-Hunters’, and scene after scene contains men waving the heads of their...
enemies. In fact, while heads were sometimes taken in the past as war
trophies, ‘headhunting’ was never an important aspect of
Kwakwakawakw ceremonial life. Curtis’s emphasis on vision-quests
and on headhunting distracts viewers from such central aspects of
Kwakwakawakw life as the potlatch, which was in 1914 already banned
by the Canadian government. Potlatches are complex, lavish,
communal ceremonial events involving gift-giving. Prior to 1885,
potlatches were a central feature of Pacific northwest tribal cultural life.
Over several days of feasting, singing and storytelling, the potlatch host
distributed and sometimes destroyed possessions in a display of
abundance that both accrued social status to the giver and redistributed
wealth throughout the community. Potlatches could also establish or
transfer land claims, hunting and fishing rights, and ownership of specific
images, stories and songs. Perceived by outsiders as wasteful and
heathen, the potlatch was banned by the Canadian government from 1885
until 1951.

Perhaps the most dramatic and far-reaching instance of the link
between anthropological display and cultural suppression is the
Canadian government’s trial of Dan Cranmer for hosting a potlatch in
1921. The potlatch was raided by the Canadian Royal Mounted Police
led by the Indian agent William Halliday, and the participants were given
the choice of serving jail time or giving up the gifts and regalia to
museums in Ottawa, Hull and New York City. The system of traditional
potlatch ceremonies, central to Kwakwakawakw life, was greatly
diminished as a result of these events. The case serves as an example of
the way the enshrinement of objects in museums worked in tandem with
governmental regulation of Indian identity and prevented
Kwakwakawakw communities from asserting the living indigeneity
‘imagined’ and ‘spoken’ by the potlatch.

While the filming of people, objects and dances in War Canoes did
freeze their images in time, enacting the strategies of containment and
‘museumification’ ongoing in salvage ethnography, the film’s production
also generated objects. The filmmaking provided the opportunity and
economic incentive – though for a limited time – for Kwakwakawakw to revisit and relearn skills in making ceremonial objects and clothes,
thus indicating how film production might serve as a site of cultural
revival and renewal rather than an instance of vanishing. Curtis’s early
attempt to ‘do it right’ – to depict correctly precontact cultural details –
was also successful in many respects. For example, the witchcraft
practised by the Sorcerer was immediately recognizable as such by
Kwakwakawakw viewers in the late 1960s, although it was coded as
ineffectual in the film’s narrative. For all the problems of representation
characteristic of Curtis’s images, the Kwakwakawakw actors in War
Canoes apparently enjoyed the filming immensely, and were able for a
brief space of time to make and use items that were normally
prohibited.

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24 See Rony, The Third Eye, p. 97.
25 See James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
26 See Coming to Light.
Although significant differences exist between Canadian and United States Policies towards indigenous peoples, my discussion frequently crosses this national border in order to follow Curtis’s work, cross-cultural indigenous film making strategies, and structurally similar patterns of colonization, oppression and resistance. Curtis’s search for authenticity articulates an ambivalence towards modernity and a longing for escape from or transcendence of tensions between agrarian and industrial conditions and Christian and scientific models of thought. The rhetoric of democracy so at odds with the moral problem of conquest, racial hierarchy and land theft in US history created a ‘moral illegibility’ that drove a desire to mystify the past through melodramatic frontier narratives and the ‘imperialist nostalgia’ so prevalent in representations of Native people and the American frontier.

Thus, the collaboration and tension between realism and moral ‘excess’ in melodrama correlate with the collaboration and tension between the ‘realism’ of the documentary image, with its scientific anthropological authenticity, and the theatricality, or artifice, of the ‘love triangle’ story Curtis invented. His film was meant to display the sacred objects, songs and dances of the Kwakwakawakw, but his narrative undermines that very belief system by envisioning the Sorcerer as a fraud whose magic fails to affect his intended victim.

Curtis’s film is only one example of several films made during the second decade of the twentieth century that express the tension between the desire for an increased realism or authenticity in the depiction of Native peoples and the melodramatic mode through which popular audiences accessed such information and images. Audiences of the time were steeped in melodrama and brought expectations in relation to this narrative mode with them into the theatres, and were deeply invested in ‘going native’ as an expression of ambivalence toward modernity. In the same time period, for example, the ‘Indian drama’ subgenre of the silent Western was enjoying its heyday and French film companies such as Pathé Frères that dominated the genre came under increasing industry criticism for their inauthentic images of the American West. James Young Deer (Winnebago), the first Native American film director, had been in the business for several years and another Native director, Edwin Carewe (Chicasaw), was hopping freight cars westward with Jack London, headed for Hollywood. Mary Austin, who contributed so significantly to the literary, modernist interest in and incorporation of the idea of the ‘primitive’, was writing ‘Indian dramas’ for the stage. This rich interchange between writers and directors led to a cross-pollination between documentary and melodramatic impulses. Westerns picked up an aura of historical and ethnographic authenticity, and the nascent documentary genre was influenced by a popular culture deeply invested in both constructions of Indianness and the drive for ‘moral legibility’ inherent in the didacticism of melodrama.

Curtis’s technologically enhanced ‘popular ethnography’ involved documenting cultural practices, collecting artefacts from Native
informants and keeping in good standing with ethnographers, but was also concerned to produce material for an elite – wealthy and educated – non-Native public. He benefitted, for example, from his connections with influential men from a variety of social arenas, including industrial capitalist J. Pierpont Morgan, President Theodore Roosevelt (for whom he took family portraits), environmentalist John Muir, filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille and ethnographer Franz Boas. He decontextualized the masks, dances and other emblems of Kwakwaka'wakw culture and then embedded them in a story of vanishing already implicit in the minds of the film’s contemporary audience. In fact, one might say that the story of this film is also a history of the transfer and redefinition of objects.

Costuming goes to the very heart of Curtis’s contradictory representation of the Kwakwaka’wakw and their crafts. The objects – masks, costumes, totem poles, traditional houses and other ceremonial and everyday materials – have been the subject of scrutiny and critical debate. Here the scholarly sources are conflicting. Fatimah Tobing Rony asserts that objects for the film were taken from museums for the filming and returned to the tribe: ‘they literally take the large, beautiful, striking masks . . . off the museum wall and put them in their natural settings’.30 According to Bill Holm and George Quimby, however, many of the items were purchased from Kwakwaka’wakw community members by Hunt for Curtis’s collection and for use in the film, and many of these objects later turned up in museum collections in British Columbia, Vancouver, Seattle and Milwaukee.31

Thus, in one scholarly story about Curtis, the film’s objects circulate from museum back into the community, and in another they move from the community into private collections and museums. Curtis was praised in his own time for displaying ethnographic materials using actual Native figures, rather than the clothed wax models and ‘life groups’ in museums. Vachel Lindsey called Curtis’s cinematic figures ‘bronze in action’, a phrase that has both racial and sculptural overtones.32 Both possibilities support scientific models of racial classification – what Fatimah Rony would call ‘taxidermic display’ – that also enabled the government’s discourse of ‘blood quantum’ as a physical index of eligibility for authentic Indian identity.33 Further, the objects collected and displayed in museums were not meant to be worn, used or given away and this form of appropriation for ‘non-use’ parallels Franz Boas’s ethnographic texts. David Murray writes of Boas’s Kwakiutl Texts that: ‘Whites did not know the [Kwak’wala] language, and Native speakers could not read it . . . So we have a text in which half the page is there not to be read. One of the functions is to act as the “other” of the English, and in addition, it acts as repository of evidence, a . . . silent corroboration’.34 The text’s silence is further politicized when we remember that Kwakwaka’wakw youth were losing their language at boarding schools. Almost a hundred years later another audience, though a very small one, has emerged for Boas’s bilingual texts – Kwakwaka’wakw who are literate in Kwak’wala and English and can access the entire text both to revive older traditions
and stories and to research the history of ethnographic encounters with their relatives.

Curtis’s work influenced the evolution of the documentary genre towards a narrative or theatrical presentation of ethnographic material. Although the film itself quickly fell into obscurity, Curtis had a strong influence on Robert Flaherty, who in the process of making Nanook of the North (1922) visited Curtis’s New York studio for a special screening of In the Land of the Headhunters, and afterwards maintained a correspondence with Curtis. Later documentaries and docu-dramas also present ethnographic material via a melodramatic plot, including films such as Carver and Burden’s The Silent Enemy (1930), in which the medicine man plots to marry the Chief’s daughter, who must be rescued by a warrior figure. The melodramatic characteristics of television nature specials derived, in part, from exploration films such as 90 Degrees South (Ponting, 1933), which sentimentalize animals while narrating their subjugation to Darwinian ‘laws of nature’ so that predators and prey play out the drama of the threatened family. Other trends in ethnographic filmmaking moved away from the ‘connected story’ technique aimed at popular as well as scholarly audiences, and focused instead on scientific discourses in representing cultural patterns. Franz Boas corresponded extensively with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America or ‘Hays Office’, but in the end did not produce the ethnographic films planned; however, Boas clearly manifested a belief that ‘surfaces and visual fragments’ could carry ‘the imprint of cultural patterning’. In the 1930s Boas wanted to preserve only the parts of Curtis’s film that depicted ceremonies and dances (such as the wedding party in the giant war canoes), separating and discarding Curtis’s ‘connected story’, abstracting artefact from narrative and transforming narratives into artefacts. This impulse to preserve the fragments or icons perceived to be scientifically valuable was in keeping with his own fieldwork and ethnographic technique, which involved publication of ‘representative’ texts without contextual information, thus ‘turning a temporal process, a flux, into a form that can be fixed and then returned to at leisure and studied’.

James Clifford asserts that classical ethnography employs ‘fables of rapport’ to disguise relationships of unequal power between informant and ethnographer. The relationship between Franz Boas and George Hunt is instructive; throughout their 40 years of work together, correspondence indicates that ‘Boas is clearly both directing the overall shape of Hunt’s activities and dependent on his knowledge and his initiatives’. In a letter to his wife, Boas states ‘I tell Hunt what I want and he brings the people to me. . . . He would always find my victims, whom I then pumped dry’. Boas’s and Curtis’s field techniques were somewhat similar in that they were more interested in collecting large quantities of material than in the now-common practice of reflecting on fieldwork experiences, relationships with informants and methodologies. While Boas resituated ethnographic materials in a discourse of scientific

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35 See Holmes and Quimby, Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes.
37 Murray, Forked Tongues, p. 101.
38 Ibid., p. 102.
objectivity, Curtis recorded (and recoded) them as educational popular entertainment using melodrama.

_Nanook of the North_ (Flaherty 1922) is much more frequently cited as the first ethnographic documentary, and offers a contrast to Curtis’s earlier film while demonstrating the filmmakers’ shared ideologies in imagining indigenous peoples as ‘primitive man’. In a famous scene, Nanook (the actor Allakariallak), encounters the white trader’s gramophone, explained to him (and to the viewer) in the intertitle as ‘the way the white man “cans” his voice’. Nanook’s amazement and childish behaviour towards this recording technology implies an ‘authenticity’ that is coded as antimodern and non-technological. Further, as Rony has suggested, it ‘engrains the notion that the people are not really acting’ when in fact the Inuit community ‘served as Flaherty’s film crew’. The film seems oblivious to its own metanarrative of the ‘canned white voice’, but recent filmmakers have reflected more consciously on the relationship between recording voices on film and imagining Native identities.

Curtis’s film itself was repatriated when in 1967 Bill Holm and George Quimby showed the footage to Kwakwaka’wakw audiences, many of whom had been participants in the filmmaking. Some of these participants contributed to a new soundtrack for the film in 1972, adding another layer of verbal reinterpretation to the images that had previously been defined only by intertitles. Thus the film functions as a mediated product whose return to the Native community has significance in itself. In 2000, Anne Makepeace’s documentary _Coming to Light_ highlighted another repatriation as the ancestors of the Native people Curtis photographed have ‘re-recognized’ the photographs as family portraits by identifying those pictured by name. Photos encountered on calendars and postcards are decoded and recoded by comments such as ‘That’s my mother, making piki’, or ‘I always see her picture . . . Every time I look at the books, she’s there. But they never use her name, just “Hesquiaht woman”. But I know her name. It’s Virginia Tom.’

Such specific identifications resituate the portraits as private and tribal rather than anonymous and commercial. Other Native viewers have used the photos to revive cultural traditions rather than to document their loss, as happened when Piegan men revived the Sundance on their reserve after forty years, partly inspired by Curtis’s photographs of the ceremony. Makepeace’s documentary offers a Native counter-voice that is far less damning of Curtis than are most scholarly assessments of his work. For example, George Horse Capture (A’aninin Gros Ventre) values the photographs as concrete triggers for memories and asserts that ‘when people start criticizing stereotypes, I look at my great-grandfather—he’s not a stereotype. He can’t stage that . . . the eyes, the determination.’ Theoria Howatu (Hopi) is not bothered by criticisms of Curtis’s artifice: ‘We have these pictures to show us how they really were back then’.


41 See Chadwick Allen’s analysis of indigenous ‘re-recognition’ of colonial discourses as an alternative strategy to deconstruction, in _Blood Narrative_, p. 18.
42 Quoted in _Coming to Light_.
43 Quoted in Clifford, _Routes_, p. 129.
44 Quoted in _Coming to Light_.

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discourse of tradition close to (but not the same as) Curtis’s own vision of authenticity and one that rewrites scholarly criticism of Curtis’s artificiality for the purposes of constituting and consolidating Native identity and family history.

Filmmaker David MacDougall characterizes recent shifts in ethnographic filmmaking toward ‘multiple voices’ as ‘intertextual cinema’, anticipating more productions that ‘re-deploy existing texts and incorporate parallel interpretations’. For example, surveying Australian ethnographic films by non-Natives, MacDougall suggests that the films become ‘compound works’ when interpreted according to Aboriginal cultural structures. Films that depict rituals and regalia become ‘emblems’ subject to the same rules as other ritual objects, and landscape views denote instances of ‘showing and seeing’ – an education in geography for Aboriginal youth – that constitute a ‘charter’ or assertion of land rights.

Taking up MacDougall’s focus on films as objects with ‘multiple identities’, Faye Ginsburg proposes the term ‘parallax effect’ to describe the way indigenous media can productively challenge ethnographic filmmaking based on a new cultural positioning of the filmmaker. Ginsburg’s attention to film production, circulation and viewership as sites of social and political action suggests that such a ‘change in position’ can work towards ‘mediation of ruptures of cultural knowledge, historical memory, and social relations between generations’.

The script for *Atanarjuat*, based on a historical legend told among Inuit people in the northern Arctic community of Igloolik, was based on the versions of eight Inuit elders recorded by writer and filmmaker Paul Apak. Both Curtis’s and Kunuk’s films tell stories infused with melodrama featuring love triangles that focus on witchcraft, community division and young male heroes. Yet while Curtis’s film undermines the validity of a Native belief system by presuming its demise, Kunuk’s film demonstrates its power through the depiction of shamanic communication and reincarnation. Kunuk, who grew up in a traditional sod house until he was sent to boarding school at age nine, writes that ‘I first heard the story of Atanarjuat from my mother...[she] would put us to sleep at night with these stories about our ancestors, how they lived, and what would happen to us if we were like this one or that one when we grew up’. Kunuk’s film, like *War Canoes*, naturalizes social systems in part through its focus on the precontact past. However, in the context of tight governmental regulation of Native identities based on racialized discourses of blood quantum, a system which ensures a decreasing Native population through intermarriage, Kunuk’s film re-imagines and ‘appropriates the experience of his own ancestors’ to forge a collective identity based on narrative as well as on image.

In a striking scene at the centre of the film, *Atanarjuat*, returning from a hunting trip in his kayak, follows a path of sunlight on the water as he sings a love song that employs images of bedrock, rivers and mountains. He arrives at the shore and is greeted by his pregnant wife
Atuat; as he puts his ear to her belly the sun’s reflection on the water rests on the point of contact between their bodies and seems to bless the couple’s future child Kumaglaq, who will be the focus of the final scene. Atuat and Atanarjuat’s unborn son becomes heir to the land in an image that brings the couple together in both emotional and narrative terms for the viewer. Despite the similarities between Kunuk’s image and the canoe scene in War Canoes, there are subtle differences in the iconography: the family comes together rather than separates and the images of fertility and abundance (Atuat’s pregnant belly, the large seal on Atanarjuat’s canoe that will feed the family) envision an intact Inuit home in a material, emotional and narrative sense (the ‘bedrock’ in Atanarjuat’s song is echoed visually by the bedrock where his family is camped).

Certainly the melodramatic qualities of Atanarjuat’s characters – the innocent Atuat, virtuous Atanarjuat and villainous Oki – can be seen, like the characters in War Canoes, as a response to a post-contact world that has become ‘hard to read’. Shari Huhndorf sees the community disruption in the story as a ‘colonial allegory’, while Faye Ginsburg calls the story a ‘screen memory’, inverting Freud’s paradigm to describe indigenous uses of media ‘not to mask but to recuperate their own collective stories and histories’. Kunuk himself summarizes the change in terms of narrative: ‘People in Igloolik learned through storytelling who we were and where we came from for four thousand years without a written language . . . . Four thousand years of oral history silenced by fifty years of priests, schools, and cable tv? Atanarjuat is clearly available for multiple readings – as is Curtis’s film – that include a romanticized vision of primitive simplicity. Yet the activist context of the film’s production suggests that this is a strategic instance of cinematic ‘communion with ancestors’ through an ‘assertion of an unmediated relationship to indigenous land’ and a testimony to the power of the ‘continuation of oral traditions’ through which it is possible to define Inuit identity to those inside and outside of the film’s primary audience of Igloolik residents.

The film’s opening lines are uttered by the shaman, called ‘The Evil One’, who says, ‘I can only sing this song to someone who understands’. His words initiate the community division and at the same time assert a performative context for the telling of the Atanarjuat story on screen in a way that privileges an Inuit audience. Later, a voiceover of a storyteller reflects that ‘We never knew what he was or why it happened’ – the voice suggests a storytelling frame and the film’s ending visualizes the context for storytelling and group singing. The closing scene’s iconography of Atanarjuat’s reunited family, with a close up of his son Kumaglaq, the next generation and reincarnation of the camp’s former leader, rewrites governmental narratives of vanishing Native populations. Kunuk then cuts to the production shots and credits (including the dedication to the film’s screenwriter, the late Paul Apak), which pointedly depict another form of storytelling and which
simultaneously remember and modernize the Inuit on screen. The actors wear sunglasses, leather jackets and headphones, clothing that marks their full participation in the contemporary world of Native and non-Native viewers. The production footage foregrounds the technological apparatus of cinematic storytelling, a revelation of modernity that Curtis worked hard to conceal in his film and photographs and which Flaherty narrated as existing in opposition to his imagined primitive.

Kunuk and Cohn present their film as ‘going completely around film history’ and Kunuk himself is presented as largely self-taught (he sold carvings to buy his first video camera in 1981). However, Kunuk also describes living in Igloolik during his teens, carving soapstone to make money to see movies – John Wayne Westerns and Spencer Tracy romantic comedies. ‘What I learned in my education’, he writes, was ‘to think like one of the soldiers’ in a cavalry Western. ‘When I began to see myself as an Aboriginal person and a filmmaker I learned that there are different ways to tell the same story’. Kunuk’s activist filmmaking company works both with and against the film industry and apparatus that influenced him during his education in Igloolik.

Perhaps the most important site of resistance is in the Isuma production style. Cinematographer Norman Cohn describes the location camp and filmed set of Atanarjuat as looking and feeling virtually the same, so that the process of shooting itself was like ‘playing in a hunting camp’ that resembled the living conditions of the film’s characters. He notes that the Igloolik Isuma Productions filmmaking style is ‘non-military’, unlike the more hierarchical Hollywood systems, which he compares with the US military as it ‘swept through the American west’. The production of the film itself, then, worked to sustain and revive the Inuit skills and social values that the story of Atanarjuat was meant to reinforce, or as Norman Cohn put it, ‘We implant these values – our collective process – in our filmmaking process; community support and participation are qualities of production we make visible on the screen.’

Much of the film’s plot hinges on Inuit belief in reincarnation and the alternative kinship networks set in motion by naming practices. Among many Inuit groups, babies are named after other members of the community and the namesake is perceived to have the attributes of the name-giver. These ‘name–soul’ relationships – called saunik – have been described by ethnographers as ‘surrounded by a magical aura’ while overlaying everyday address between generations with an alternative intergenerational connection. Jean Briggs writes that ‘in a sense, [the named person] becomes the previous owner or owners of the name’, and sometimes takes on the name-giver’s family relationships. In Atanarjuat, naming relationships account for the intimacy between the matriarch Panikpak (Madeline Ivalu) and the young bride Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu) – who is named after Panikpak’s mother – and between Panikpak and Atuat and Atanarjuat’s son, Kumaglaq, the youngest child in the camp, who is named after Panikpak’s husband (the group’s leader, killed in the
first scenes of the film by a strange shaman). Ancestors remain present with living generations through their namesakes in the film, and the closing scene derives its resonance from this when Panikpak looks at the child Kumaglaq and hears the voice of her late husband commanding ‘wife, sing my song!’ The medium shot that frames Atanarjuat, Atuat and Kumaglaq together suggests a reunited and re-formed family, sustained in part by the performative context of storytelling and singing. The last frame of the film is a long closeup of Kumaglaq’s face as he listens to ‘his’ song. In this way he becomes an emblem of continuity, bringing together the past and future of the tribe through his literal and spiritual embodiment of a previous generation. Family relations are carried over into the casting as well, since the child Kumaglaq is played by actor Sylvia Ivalu’s actual daughter Bernice Ivalu, lending continuity to the many images of familial intimacy between Atuat and her ‘son’ Kumaglaq in the film (see figure 2). ‘I know we were just acting’, Ivalu notes in an interview, ‘but you could actually feel it’.61

Name-sharing may have played a role in the film’s production and casting as well. According to cinematographer Norman Cohn:

when [Paul] Apak was writing the script we think he was sort of casting it in his mind, meaning that he was actually designing characters around real people. So unbeknownst to them he was casting them into the script, and then we would actually go after them, and they would be right because the character was ... written around their personalities. I think [of] the whole concept of Inuit naming, where the person is named after ancestors who have passed away ... people have several names, and the concept is that you are now carrying that spirit – it’s almost a form of multiple reincarnation. So Inuit people have a sense that actually the body they’re in, is made up of more than one personality, or competing personalities, of people from the past ... . This Method acting concept of find the person in you and be that person, seemed to be a natural process for Inuit to be able to do if the script and characters were believable enough that they were
actually going into their own historical past . . . I think that’s one of the ways in which people who had never acted before were able to do this essential acting thing, which is to lose yourself in your character, feel like they are this person, and the Inuit are like that all the time.\textsuperscript{62}

The relationship between Inuit naming practices and acting deconstructs the binary opposition between imagined and essential (or blood) identities, bringing us back to Vizenor’s notion of the pose as constitutive of both self-identification and outsiders’ representations. Reincarnation offers a powerful metaphor for both the content of \textit{Atanarjuat} and its production, representing what Gerald Vizenor calls \textquotesingle a new incarnation of native presence\textquotesingle that revises the figurative and material \textquotesingle vanishing Indians\textquotesingle of Hollywood filmmaking.\textsuperscript{63} Catherine Russell suggests further that \textquotesingle performative doubling\textquotesingle in \textit{War Canoes} – the slippage between \textquotesingle real\textquotesingle and representation when amateur actors pose as their ancestors – challenges both the politics of salvage ethnography and the universal humanist aesthetic which \textquotesingle subjugates the ethnic subject to the authority of realism\textquotesingle.\textsuperscript{64} Bill Holm and George Quimby also point out that Curtis was obliged by the Kwakwaka’wakw community to match the social status of the actors and their roles, making the casting of his film extremely complex and specific to a local, tribal reading of the project. Yet the narrative dependence on the concept and consequences of naming and spiritual kinship in \textit{Atanarjuat} reframes the discussion of realism because the very \textquotesingle disappearance\textquotesingle of the actor into the role forces the viewer to engage not with Euro-American narratives of technologically inept, vanishing primitives, but with Inuit cultural narratives, dramatic idioms and family systems. The acting thus also moves the community members of Igloolik closer to their own models of cultural performance. The filmmakers then pointedly pull the viewer away from this unification of actor and role during the credits, loosening the film’s ties to realism through its final focus on the methods and mechanics of simulation.

Vizenor’s understanding of the paradoxical nature of indigenous \textquotesingle simulations of survivance\textquotesingle is also helpful in thinking through Kunuk and Cohn’s use of ethnographic materials in \textit{Atanarjuat}. In order to recreate precontact Inuit life in Igloolik, the filmmakers turned to the earliest existing records of contact from the British Royal Navy expedition to the area in the winter of 1822–3 in search of the Northwest Passage. From Captain William Parry and co-Captain George Lyon’s diaries and sketches, Kunuk and Cohn took the designs for clothes, tattoos and implements, even replicating a kayak that Parry had sent to the British Museum. The expedition documents were their \textquotesingle blueprint\textquotesingle for the material artefacts, Cohn said:

In fact, a lot of the authenticity of the film is based on re-creating precisely the world that the British Navy found in 1822, on the assumption that that’s the world that hadn’t changed for about a thousand years. And of course that’s essential for the Inuit audience because . . . we don’t really see ourselves or the film in the backtrail of
the history of cinema . . . we’re not [in the] Martin Scorsese and D.W. Griffith tradition, we’re in the Inuit storytelling tradition. This story’s been told hundreds of times through generations of the past, and if we do our job it will be told hundreds of times in the future, and in every instance, if the details aren’t right, we’re not doing our job . . . . Historically . . . the only way information ever got passed forward is in the details. So it’s true that foreign filmmakers can use styrofoam igloos because they don’t really care and they can say well, it’s not really an important part of the story. But we care, because our film is designed to teach future generations, to make sure they know how to build igloos, or sealskin tents, or make these costumes. So our authenticity . . . comes out of having quite a different mission than just making a film. The fact that we do that . . . seems to make the film more entertaining—more convincing to a wider audience—is an interesting thing to discover—that universality is also in a way tied to an authenticity of detail.

David MacDougall similarly attributes investment in detail with a film’s ability to transcend cultural specificity and access what is universal in human experience—a phenomenon he calls transcultural cinema. He emphasizes the basic communicability of culture, the permeability of its boundaries rather than the boundaries themselves. My point is that, without the Inuit narrative structure and control over production, *The Fast Runner* could have resembled the ‘authentic’ or ‘pro-Indian’ films in the tradition of *The Vanishing American* (George B. Seitz, 1925), shot on location in Monument Valley. Michael Mann, for instance, invested enormous energy and financial resources in the accurate reproduction of the visual and material texture of eighteenth-century colonial life in his 1992 film version of *The Last of the Mohicans*, but he marshals these credible details in service of James Fenimore Cooper’s tale of noble savages, who, doomed to die, willingly bequeath the continent to worthy whites. Alternatively, one can imagine an ‘authenticity’ located outside of material historical detail, and indeed Shelley Niro’s comic film *Honey Moccasin* (1998) features a scene in which Mohawk teenagers model powwow costumes with traditional designs and novel materials (including bottle caps, tire rubber and other recyclables).

Many current Native American filmmakers concentrate on filming the process of storytelling itself, thus returning with visual media to longstanding problems in translating oral performance to page, indigenous language to English, context to text. Victor Masayesva uses his training as a still photographer and his skills of composition to translate the artistry of the story in his visual representation of the storytelling event. His 1984 documentary *Itam Hakim, Hopiit/We, Someone, the Hopi* depicts elder Ross Macaya telling stories of personal, clan and tribal history to an audience of four young boys. Many of his most beautiful shots are extremely slow-paced, and he uses techniques such as racking focus and posterization to render natural images – corn rows, corn
kernels and aspen trees – as abstract. Masayesva makes videos in Hopi for a Hopi audience and asserts that indigenous filmmakers have an aesthetic that ‘begins in the sacred’ and that is grounded in ‘accountability as an individual, as a clan, as a tribal, as a family member’.66

Masayesva’s belief in accountability and restraint in filmmaking leads him away from Hollywood and documentary practices intent on answering questions and revealing information. For example, Itam Hakim, Hopiit opens not with an establishing shot of the landscape or a head-shot of the storyteller Ross Macaya, but instead with a medium-shot of Macaya’s feet, clad in worn Converse sneakers, as he walks out to fetch water. Later closeups allow the viewer to see Macaya’s face and several times in the film Masayesva employs extreme closeups, racking focus and slow panning to depict the faces of the young listeners in detail. Masayesva’s images of the telling itself and of the Hopi landscape resonate with events in the stories, fusing story, teller and listeners through visual correspondence. The ancient story of the Hopi emergence through the centre of a bamboo reed (the sipapu) resonates visually with the small circular images of the full moon, a bubble blown by a child chewing gum and a hole in the wall behind storyteller Ross Macaya’s face as it slowly comes into focus. The images give Macaya a cosmic profile while situating the story in the present lives of Hopi youth.

These Native filmmakers return to and repatriate ‘old stories’, relocating ethnographic practices and Hollywood discourses to Native nations through visual representation of storytelling as a social practice. They expose the ‘fables of rapport’ which have concealed the production situations, ethnographer/informant relationships and recording and filmmaking apparatus that characterized early ethnographic and popular representations.67 Using generative cultural stories, they have again taken possession of objects and images that originated in Native communities, but which over decades became fused with Euro-American scenarios. At the same time, they narrate an alternative ‘rapport’ between children and grandparents, contemporary listeners and ancestors, in the storytelling context and content: Panikpak, Atuat and Kumaglaq; Ross Macaya and his audience of Hopi youth. Their films contest earlier power dynamics by locating the Native partner in a position of authority (such as director and producer) and their productions work to renew and revive ‘old stories’ by locating them in modern times and familiar places. Ultimately, the indigenous reconstruction and dramatization of tribal stories on screen reconnect Native audiences with early tellers, translators and actors such as George Hunt and Allakariallak, and return to these ancestors as storytellers in their own right.
