Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines

54 | 2021
Landscapes and aesthetic spatialities in the Anthropocene

Indigenous Cinemas and Futurisms: How Indigenous Visual Arts Are Shifting the Narratives and Offering a New Relationship to Space and Landscapes

Sophie Gergaud

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ranam/862
DOI: 10.4000/ranam.862
ISSN: 3000-4411

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Strasbourg

Printed version
Date of publication: July 8, 2021
Number of pages: 151-169
ISBN: 9791034400935
ISSN: 0557-6989

Electronic reference
Sophie Gergaud, "Indigenous Cinemas and Futurisms: How Indigenous Visual Arts Are Shifting the Narratives and Offering a New Relationship to Space and Landscapes", *Recherches anglaises et nord-américaines* [Online], 54 | 2021, Online since 01 February 2024, connection on 07 February 2024. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ranam/862 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ranam.862

The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Indigenous Cinemas and Futurisms: How Indigenous Visual Arts Are Shifting the Narratives and Offering a New Relationship to Space and Landscapes

Sophie Gergaud♦

Indigenous peoples are often seen as "stuck" in the past. They are hardly ever represented as contributing to the present time. Defined by their tragic past and largely denied a thriving present, Indigenous peoples are thus absent from non-Indigenous present-day worlds and imagined futures. These twisted representations can largely be blamed on mainstream films and media which have long looked at Indigenous characters through a one-dimensional lens and frozen them in a "pseudo-history" (Kilpatrick, 1999: 47), a period that "spans barely the three decades running from 1850 to 1880. […] There is no 'before' to the story, and there is no 'after'" (Churchill, 1998: 168). In addition to creating damaging and negative stereotypes, the depiction of North America in films has also largely contributed to emptying the supposedly "new" and "discovered" territories of their first inhabitants: to become fully American or Canadian—to be considered and perceived as such—, the conquered spaces had to be given a new aesthetics and value that deprived them of their former Indigenous components, whose very existence was denied.

For decades now, Indigenous filmmakers throughout the world, and in particular in North America, have been working hard to make sure their visions be seen, their aesthetics be (re)considered, and the shaping of the landscape by their ancestors recognized, thus correcting the old western narratives while producing portrayals of Indigenous peoples as complex human beings and societies, engaged in real and contemporary life, entangled in space and inseparable from their territories. A new

♦ Sophie Gergaud, *Visual anthropologist/Independent film curator (Indigenous cinemas)/Translator.*

generation of Indigenous artists is now taking the creative world a step further, revisiting and shifting the narratives while taking a deliberate leap forward in time, reclaiming space within Indigenous futurisms.



Biidaaban: First Light by Lisa Jackson © National Film Board of Canada 2018.

After briefly recalling the main characteristics of the depiction of the "New World" and its inhabitants in mainstream North American cinema, I will then focus on two Indigenous art pieces, *Smoke Signals* and *Biidaabaan: First light*, that both undertake to deconstruct this classic narrative and offer a new visual and audio interpretation of North American landscapes by reconnecting them to local Indigenous values and ancestral worldviews. *Smoke Signals*, an American long feature film, was internationally released in 1998 and completely reinvented the relationships between cinema, the American West and its Native American inhabitants. *Biidaabaan*, a Canadian immersive virtual reality film released in 2018, lets the viewer experience in a whole new way how the boundaries between nature and culture can be renegotiated in the context of the Anthropocene. The Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen is known for popularizing the term in its current iteration in the early 2000s, while the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), an interdisciplinary research group created in 2009, voted in 2016 to recommend "Anthropocene" as the new geological time defined by the significant impact of human behavior on Earth's ecosystems and atmosphere. But this proposed definition has raised some major issues among Indigenous peoples who denounce its western-centrism. Thus art pieces like *Biidaaban* invite us to decolonize the Anthropocene itself, by taking into account Indigenous knowledges and ancestral ways of interacting with today's landscapes.

As a French independent researcher, as well as a White film curator specialized in the field of Indigenous cinemas, I will here mainly draw upon works and analyses by scholars and art critics who have been involved in and have contributed to the theorization of the Indigenous "visual sovereignty" movement. The term was first coined by Jolene Rickard, a Tuscarora scholar, artist and curator. In "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand," an essay published in 1995, she states that "sovereignty is taking shape in visual thought as [I]ndigenous artists negotiate cultural space," and explains how images and photographs by Indigenous makers are the documentation of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty, both politically and spiritually (Rickard, 1995: 51-54). In the wake of this groundbreaking article, the concept of "visual sovereignty" has slowly gained currency in the wider context of Indigenous peoples' artworks and films internationally. In *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens*, published in 2001, film critic Beverly Singer (Tewa/Diné) brings a new dimension to the paradigmatic tool proposed by Rickard within the framework of Indigenous photographic analysis and broadens its application parameter to film and video productions. She uses the term "cultural sovereignty" to refer to "a social movement […] which involves trusting in the older ways and adapting them to our lives in the present" (Singer, 2001: 2). A decade later, in *Sovereign Screens* (2013), Kristen Dowell asserts that there is a specific form of cinematic expression, a cultural autonomy shown by Indigenous communities. While her study is very locally anchored in Western Canada, it shows that the dynamic at work is the same as in the US context mostly studied by Rickard and Singer, and thus illustrates the more global dimension of this transnational movement of self-representation and self-determination through visual arts. Drawing on Rickard's work, Dowell defines visual sovereignty

> as the articulation of Aboriginal people's distinctive cultural traditions, political status, and collective identities through aesthetic and cinematic means. I locate Aboriginal visual sovereignty in the act of production. […] I contend that an Aboriginal filmmaker's act of creating a media work is an act of self-determination. Speaking back to the legacy of misrepresentation in dominant media is an act of cultural autonomy that reclaims the screen to tell Aboriginal stories from Aboriginal perspectives. (Dowell, 2013: 2)

This "legacy of misrepresentation in dominant media," which brings together a whole set of distorted visual images inherited in particular from mainstream cinema, constitutes what Michelle Raheja calls "virtual reservations," alluding to the reservations established by treaties in the 19th century—fragments of ancestral territories now scattered across North America. In *Reservation Reelism*, she defines virtual reservations as "the imagined and imaginative sites produced by the cinema"

(Raheja, 2010: xii), and it is precisely from these places of imaginary distortion that Indigenous visual sovereignty has emerged to offer a counter-narrative. So let us thus take a short detour through the landscapes of these virtual reservations before further exploring the re-appropriation of space and the new relationships with landscapes offered by the two selected Indigenous art pieces.

Landscapes of The "New World": Aesthetics of a Conquered Emptiness in the "Films d'Indiens" Over-genre

In *Invisible Natives*, American researcher Armando J. Prats draws attention to "the American tendency to *spatialize* its history, to define itself continually in terms of the land or of reference to the struggle for the land." He goes on to quote Howard Mumford Jones for whom the Western landscape "dims our eastward vision; the immigrant […] put the past behind him, with the result over decades, whether radicalism or conservatism reign, that the American people are a people in space rather than a people in time." (Prats, 2002: 85). Springing from this observation that he confronts to the Indian[1] context, he further underlines in a particularly interesting and discerning way the "paradox whereby the Indian acquires his being in *time* for losing it in *space*. His expulsion defines his historicity" (Prats, 2002: 124). Through his different film analyses, Prats shows that for this allegedly "New World" to become fully American, landscapes had to be emptied—both literally and figuratively—of their original Native components. Thus addressing the very occidental tension between man and landscape, the Western film genre had to visually prove that *culture* (Americanness in all its modernity) has succeeded in subduing *nature* (Indigenousness in all its primitivity). Now conquered, it is merely reduced to a manageable wilderness. And deserted landscapes are the images of "the Indian absence, envisioned on screen in various forms, including 'empty lands' or 'open frontiers'" (Hearne, 2012: 6).

Most Western films open with an iconic panoramic shot offering breathtaking views over desert-like landscapes stretching as far as the eye can see, where not a single soul is in sight—that is, until a caravan of settlers or a lonesome cowboy enters the frame. Then, and only then, can the story (and History) begin. This classic film opening is not the prerogative of old Western films during the golden age of the genre, it is still largely found in recent Westerns like *Cowboys & Aliens* (2011) or

1 In this article, the term "Indians" has been deliberately chosen to refer to stereotypical representations that are precisely to be deconstructed. The terms "Native Americans" or "Indigenous peoples," on the other hand, are used when referring to the Indigenous nations and peoples of North America. "Indigenous" is capitalized to clearly point to its more recent definition that accounts for political and historical realities. (Weeber, 2020)

The Ballad of Buster Scruggs (2018), to name only a few (Gergaud, to be published). But this depiction of an empty (emptied) landscape ready to be filled with new life and meaning is not restricted to Westerns either. Most Hollywood and independent North American films, which I gather under the "films d'Indiens" over-genre, are built upon the same narrative structure within which Indians seem to be doomed to disappear (Gergaud, 2019: 58-59). Seen as belonging to a permanent state of primitivism—close to *nature*—, they therefore belong to the past and are condemned to give way to *culture*, the progress of modernity on the move. Hence in films, a good Indian will always be a dead Indian… or rather an ever-dying Indian.

Ultimately, whatever the time of production and genre, mainstream American cinema never stops killing its Indians, whether physically or symbolically (Gergaud, 2019: 46-49). In the 1920s, Hollywood gradually freed itself from the Native presence on screen as fewer and fewer Indigenous casts were hired to play Indian roles (Hearne, 2012: 11). "Redfacing" can be considered as the first death of the Indian in cinema as it has largely contributed to what Singer calls a "visual genocide" (Singer, 2001: 62). And as actors and actresses from different Native American nations throughout the country were slowly replaced by non-Natives decked out in make-up and wigs, their corporeality and all the possible variations of their physical incarnations disappeared from the screens—and also from the original (Indigenous) territories they belonged to, connected and engaged with. Western films too often became condemned to the bare scenery of the South-West and the inevitable setting of Monument Valley, which most of the time meant relocating "real" tribes to improbable destinations. Indians in films are thus strange "creatures of a particular place," confined in landscapes "known generically as the 'West'" while generations of moviegoers were then led to believe that "the environments of the Comanches and Cheyennes were indistinguishable from that of the Apaches," in total denial of how culture and space are interconnected (Churchill, 1998: 170-171). And while choices in casting, location, attires, and accessories were made in order to fit in with the new aesthetic of a generic cinematographic "West," little concern was given to accuracy. What Oneida humorist Charlie Hill called a "weird sort of Indian stew" emerged (Churchill, 1998: 175).

The second death of Indians in cinema, this time in the literal sense, occurs anytime their bodies fall under the fire of the enemy's rifles during the battle scenes that abound in Westerns. Those iconic and long-awaited sequences have contributed to defining the aesthetics of the American West as a vast battlefield and a place of fierce struggles in order for white settlers to win the conquered land. The third death of the Indian in films is symbolic: although physically still alive, the Indian is nonetheless already dead in the collective imagination. This is the myth of the Vanishing Indian (Kilpatrick, 1999: 27-32), the "single most pervasive public fiction" (Hearne, 2012: 5) of the recurrent evanescent Indians who, in order to survive, have no other choice but to let go of their culture, unsuited to progress and modernity,

and therefore to kill their Indianity. They are hence condemned to leave their traditional—but hopeless—homeland and to move to an urban and modern area—where ultimately any remaining Indianness in them will be diluted and whitewashed.

The closing scene of *Hostiles* (2017) is, in that regard, exemplary. Traumatized after witnessing the massacre of her husband and children by a violent Comanche band in the opening sequence, Rosalie Quaid then slowly sinks into despair, bordering on madness. She rebuilds herself throughout the film and regains her status as a mother when she ends up taking under her wing the young Little Bear, grandson of Chief Yellow Hawk and the only surviving Indian of the whole Cheyenne family we have been following during their epic journey from New Mexico to Montana. Watching Rosalie and Little Bear as they wait for the train that will take them to Chicago, far away from the ancestral homeland of the child, one cannot help but think that this choice in the scenario is not trivial. As much as *Hostiles* promotes itself as being a revisionist Western, the film ending still suggests that the Indian way of life inevitably had to come to an end, that the only chance for the younger generation was to accept progress (symbolized by the gleaming train and the promise of urban life). At the turn of the 19th century, integration into a burgeoning American society that had so much to offer was apparently the only viable option. In *Hostiles*, Rosalie Quaid and Little Bear together embody the future of the nation: a white woman—representing motherhood, protection, and the transmission of cultural and social values—saving an uprooted Indian orphan. Moving to the city—the future—, they both leave the West—their traumatic past—behind. In doing so, they contribute to the emptying of the American western landscapes and their wilderness where no life can thrive and the fate of which is to endure as necessary remnants of a distant History.

If the Indians in films never stop dying, it is precisely because their narrative role is to justify their being cut-off from those landscapes, the inheritance of which they offer to white settlers who thus become legitimate guardians. It is of course the case in iconic films like *Dances with wolves* (1990) or *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). They are both still considered today as a real revolution in the Western genre, as they brought complex characters to life and undoubtedly took the image of the Indians in films to another dimension. The landscapes were also given a new and more substantial cinematographic treatment. Far from the "weird sort of Indian stew" mentioned before, *Dances with Wolves* replaced the Lakota back in the heart of their ancestral territory of the Great Plains, while *The Last of the Mohicans* counts as one of the rare Westerns taking place in the North-Eastern corner of the country, in the Appalachian wilderness. Both films rely on grandiose cinematography and visually reveal the spectacular scenery of those less-known landscapes. Far from depicting them as empty and barren, they on the contrary show their diversity and abundance, while paying a great tribute to the breathtaking beauty of their vastness and magnificence.

Revolutionary as they may be, both films contribute however to continuously and indelibly inscribing in the minds of a large international audience the image of

the forever vanishing Indian. In the final shot of *The Last of the Mohicans*, the three surviving characters are seen gazing far into the distance. The alignment of their faces is very symbolic: first the profile of the beautiful Cora, then that of Nathanael, known as Hawkeye, and finally that of his adoptive father, Chingachgook. Fierce in the foreground, the white couple represents the strength of the future, the hope of an announced progeny. Relegated to the background, Chingachgook embodies the past, the end of a brutally interrupted bloodline. Because it extensively shows them overlooking and surrounded by the majestic landscape, the shot also symbolizes its very future: Cora and Hawkeye are clearly the heirs of the land, handed down to them by the rightful owner but last of his kind, the last of the Mohicans. The Indians have disappeared and the white saviors, guardians of the landscapes, survive them because they represent the only possible future in a world shaped by whiteness. Worthy heirs, white heroes in films even make better Indians than the Indians themselves (Kilpatrick, 1999: 145; Churchill, 1998: 186). The film even cultivates ambiguity all along as to who the last of the Mohicans really is: the Indian patriarch Chingachgook or his Indianized adoptive son? In any case, there is no doubt, when watching the film, that the white character Hawkeye is the real hero. A perfect fighter, hunter, and tracker, he is in almost all the shots. Yes, his adoptive father taught him everything he knows—but he now far surpasses him and he is, for sure, a much better Indian than the Indian himself.

In some respects, *Wind River* (2017) seems to offer a different narrative. The plot is set in contemporary America and Indians are therefore not condemned to the fixed temporality of the Conquest. The film also aims to raise awareness around a tragic topical phenomenon: the exponential disappearances and murders of Indigenous women in North America (Gergaud, 2020; Walter, 2014). But the film is still based on the same classic narrative structured around the Vanishing Indian and the White Savior tropes (Hughey, 2015), which, contrary to what one might think at first glance, it takes to the extreme (Gergaud, to be published). At the very beginning of the film, we see the white hero Cory Lambert teaching horse-riding to his son. When, after showing his bravery, the young boy tells him "That was pretty cowboy, eh?," Lambert replies "No son, that was Arapahoe". It is he, his white father, who asserts himself as the guarantor of cultural transmission, instead of his Indian ex-wife or any of his in-laws. His Indian ex-wife Wilma is from the area, but at the beginning of the film it is he who tells her which way to drive to her appointment to avoid the roads made dangerous by the storm. Lambert is a professional game tracker and obviously knows better how to hunt and orientate himself on the Wind River reservation than all the Shoshone and Arapahos around him, even though these Indigenous nations have been living on these territories for centuries. It is he to whom the white FBI agent asks at the beginning of the film: "How well do you know that land?," to which he replies "Like it's my job. Cause it is." She does not ask this to any other tribal police officer present on the crime scene with her, nor does she even consider the tribal police chief Shoyo whom she is in fact turning her back to. And when she asks

Lambert if he would be willing to assist her, Shoyo is out of the picture—literally (he is off-screen) and symbolically (he is out of the game). The framing of another early sequence is also meaningful in the way it informs Lambert's character and his relationship with the territory. At the tribal chief's request, his ex-father-in-law takes him to the forest where he last spotted what he thought were two mountain lions. We hear the old man off-screen talking but Lambert is the only one we see in action. With his white hunting outfit, he is barely visible. As if superimposed on the snow, his body blends with the whiteness of the scenery, and they become one. Lambert *is* the landscape, he is nature, *he is America*. It is because he knows the territory like the back of his hand that it is he who finds the inert body of the young Natalie in the middle of nowhere. It is because he knows perfectly the surrounding wildlife that it is he who can analyze the clues and tracks left on the crime scene. It is because he knows better than anyone the extreme climatic conditions of the area that it is he who guesses before any medical examiner the cause of Natalie's death: her lungs burst because of the frozen air she breathed while running away from her aggressors.



"Lambert is the landscape, he is nature, he is America." Still from *Wind River* (T. Sheridan, 2017) © Metropolitan Films.

In one of the final scenes which constitutes the climax of the film as he is confronting one of the white rapists, Lambert personifies the messenger of the Indian people whom he avenges. On the snow-capped peak facing a breathtaking panorama, it is he and he alone who recalls all the tragedy of Indian History: "My family's people were forced here, *stuck* here for a century. That snow and silence, that's *the only thing* that hasn't been taken from them" (emphasis is mine). By summing up the "Indian condition" in this way, he implies that these landscapes which are "all they have left," where they are now "stuck," only amount to vast stretches of snow and silence, to emptiness. Films like *Wind River*, *Dances with Wolves*, or *The Last*

of the Mohicans do glorify the scenic beauty of North American landscapes but the narrative that accompanies those landscapes proclaims that only the white characters can dominate and master them, and therefore are their only legitimate guardians. When they remain Indian, territories are systematically depicted through aesthetics of misery, inertia, and poverty. As a matter of fact, the contrast between the shot at the beginning of *Wind River* when we enter the reservation and that of the climax ending scene is striking: while the first one takes us on a slow drive through a gloomy and greyish area filled with old trailers falling apart, the outstanding majesty of the panorama explodes in the ending shot, as Lambert has finally gotten rid of the criminals and all the threats plaguing the reservation. The upside-down and torn-apart American flag that was floating sluggishly on a piece of dispiriting music in the first shot, like a sad symbol of a lost American dream, is long forgotten in the ending sequence and the saved landscapes, shining in all their snowy and blinding whiteness, can again display their restored dignity with pride.

Reclaimed Spaces: The New Aesthetic Value of Contemporary North-American Landscapes in Indigenous Cinemas

Stuck in the tormented history that shaped the very nature of White and Indigenous relationships and became deeply engraved in North American landscapes, North-American cinema still struggles to create Indian characters that are not the symbol of a lost ideal, doomed to decline and despair. It is (among other reasons) in reaction to these long-lasting misrepresentations that Indigenous cinemas emerged, as films conceptualized, produced and/or directed by people who self-identify as Indigenous—hence as films whose narrative is effectively mastered by Indigenous people (Wilson, 2008: 2; Nickerson, 2018: 30; Gergaud, 2019: 17-23). And while it is true that more funding opportunities are opening up to Indigenous filmmakers around the world—especially in Canada where public grants for Indigenous artists have been made more available for the past couple of decades—, as the co-writers of the recently published Canadian report *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways* (2018) cautiously remind us, there is still much progress to be done and narrative sovereignty remains a daily struggle for Indigenous storytellers:

> Sovereign nations must have control over [their] own stories. To assure sovereign notions and support truly Indigenous projects, Indigenous peoples must have decision-making control over the funding and the creative sides of production; protect Cultural Property Rights and interests; and ensure appropriate consents, access to, and control of Cultural property. […] This is one of the reasons that the concept

> of narrative sovereignty is so important. […] While the vision of narrative sovereignty is aspirational at this point, efforts to support the development of the Indigenous screen sector and build the necessary capacity are underway and remain a focal point for screen content creators. (Nickerson, 2018: 15-16)

What is really at stake in Indigenous cinematography is cultural sovereignty and respect for the right to self-representation which stems from it. To question cultural sovereignty in the field of cinema therefore amounts to asking who controls the narratives behind the films that are being made, who decides how minority peoples are represented and on whose lands.

A landmark in the development of Indigenous cinemas globally, *Smoke Signals* (1998) bears witness to an era just as much as it operates a real turning point in the history of relations between cinema and Indigenous peoples. A veritable phenomenon upon its release, a "genuine breakthrough in terms of perception," *Smoke Signals* took on a very particular symbolic significance for Indigenous peoples (Hearne, 2012: 128-141; 176) and that is why it remains emblematic today. When they decided to co-produce the film together, Cheyenne filmmaker Eyre (who also directed it) and Spokane writer Alexie (whose screenplay is adapted from one of his then recently published short stories) both had in mind to precisely deconstruct Indian stereotypes in films and to share the complexity of contemporary Native American cultures with a wide audience. They began working on the script in 1994, in the midst of the Western revival in Hollywood: the impact of *Dancing with Wolves* was still tangible and only reinforced by the success of *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1992. But it was also a time when independent American cinema was booming and the Sundance Institute played an important role in shaping *Smoke Signals* (Runningwater 1998; Hearne, 2012: 50-52). If it is not the first film in North America with a narrative entirely controlled by an Indigenous team, it is definitely the first to benefit from a wide distribution and to experience such a success both artistically and commercially.

Smoke Signals meticulously deconstructs the classic narrative structure of mainstream films with Indian characters, including some key elements that have been formalized and analyzed by Indigenous critics and academics like Kilpatrick (1999) or Singer (2001), and that I later consolidated as the "films d'Indiens" over-genre of which Smoke Signals stands as the perfect antithesis (Gergaud, 2019: 160-167). While the plot of many "films d'Indiens" condemns them to the past, *Smoke Signals* definitely takes place in the present—and in landscapes that assume their contemporary aesthetics. This asserted temporality is in particular embodied in the expression that regularly punctuates the film, "It's a good day to be Indigenous," a nod to the expression "It's a good day to die" often attributed to Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull and used excessively in westerns or dime novels to show the courage and

pride of Indian troops, but also to recall the fatal outcome of the Indian wars leading to the conquest of the land and the birth of the United States. Replacing "It's a good day to die" with "It's a good day to be Indigenous" is symbolic of this inscription of the film in the present.

Smoke Signals puts an end to the dominant ideology of the Vanishing Indian with humor and irony: not only are its Indians characters not disappearing, but there are many of them, reclaiming all the visual and sound spaces. By relying on an entirely Indigenous cast, *Smoke Signals* steps away from the inevitable White/Indian relationship dynamic and the White Savior syndrome. The film tells first and foremost the epic story of two young Native adults, Victor and Thomas, who live on a reservation in Idaho and must travel to Phoenix, Arizona, to retrieve the ashes of Victor's father. Their journey across West America thereby inscribes the film in the classic Hollywood road movie genre that "inherited from the Western the feature of movement across the continental landscape" (Hearne, 2012: 97). *Smoke Signals* consciously appropriates the conventions of the genre, in particular through the choice of its locations. The French marketing of the film is in that regard interesting. While in the United States the poster focused on the casting, the French one used a shot of the film where the two main characters are shown in the middle of a desert, typical of the West. The framing being clearly at the advantage of the road and the landscape, it helps to immediately identify the film as being part of a long tradition of American road movies. But in this shot, Victor and Thomas are seen walking carrying their backpacks, in jeans and T-shirts, while as Indians portrayed in such a setting one would usually expect them to be on horseback, in buckskin clothing. And that is not the only time director Eyre and screenwriter Alexie twist a classic visual element of cinematographic language. Their main characters' travels take them from Plummer, on the Coeur d'Alene reservation, to Phoenix—hence from North to South, instead of the more traditional East to West route, which is both fundamental in the history of the country and associated with its inevitable march of progress.

By situating most of the action outside of a Native reservation and by making the characters cross the whole country, Eyre and Alexie surround them with landscapes that are usually not associated with Native Americans and allow them to reclaim that space, to "indigenize" it (Hearne, 2012: xxxi). This is the case of urban centers in particular, but *Smoke Signals* also offers other largely unknown Native countrysides. There are no generic representations in *Smoke Signals*, no "Indians" but only members of various, strong, and assertive tribal nations who were not chosen randomly. If Navajo, Apache, or Plains Indians are constantly represented in cinema (even if not accurately), *Smoke Signals*' main characters are Coeur d'Alene, a nation unknown to the majority of viewers when the film was released. As the film opens and closes in the less seen contemporary Northwest corner of the United States, with scenes shot in the states of Idaho and Washington on the ancestral Cœur d'Alene and Spokane territories, it familiarizes its audience with new landscapes. Images of rushing water

at Spokane Falls (a highly symbolic place for the local tribes), the special relationship with the river and the food it provides, the verdant lush environment stand in stark contrast with the usual aesthetics of the "films d'Indiens," with its dry and reddish emptiness. But *Smoke Signals* also reinvents the South-West desert which, instead of the usual site of loss for Indians, becomes a place of rebirth and regeneration for Thomas and Victor (Hearne, 2012: 117).

The fact that the cast is entirely Native American is a snub to the redfacing practices by which, still today, non-Indigenous actors and actresses get hired to play Indian roles but it is also a way to reclaim space, by repopulating and inhabiting American landscapes again. *Smoke Signals* reclaims the visual space and landscapes of the American West from which mainstream cinema has excluded Indigenous nations, first casting them as unwanted intruders and then having them vanish, endlessly. By locating itself within this rich cinematographic heritage and positioning itself as a "historic intervention in mainstream images of Indians" (Hearne, 2012: 158), *Smoke Signals* purposely leaves a new visual imprint on the American landscapes as these originally Indigenous territories are being repopulated by Native Americans onscreen.

Indigenous Futurisms: Decolonizing the Anthropocene and Reinventing a New Relationship to Tomorrow's Space and Landscapes

Indigenous cinemas express a vital need to address and correct misrepresentations. Eyre and Alexie's film is a textbook case of the dominant narrative deconstruction but other films since then have achieved the same purpose in a less demonstrative and more stealthy way. And beyond the reappropriation and indigenization of past and contemporary mainstream North-American landscapes, a growing number of Indigenous artists have over the past decade been inventing possible futures and imagining new aesthetics for the landscapes of tomorrow. The Indigenous futurism movement stands in response to the colonial imagination that only views Indigenous peoples as relics of the past, frozen in time, and on the verge of extinction. This body of work is a blatant proof that contemporary Indigenous artists are no outsiders to the technological world and that they have long appropriated and mastered the tools of futuristic storytelling.

The term "Indigenous futurisms" was coined by Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon when she edited the first anthology of Indigenous science fiction *Walking the Clouds* in 2012. Informed by Afrofuturism, it is intended to be open to interpretation by all Indigenous creatives: the book indeed included contributions by Native

Americans, First Nations, Aboriginal Australians, and New Zealand Māori authors. But as Anishinaabe artist and researcher Elizabeth LaPensée specifies, "[Dillon] does share that, from an Anishinaabe perspective, her interest is in work that doesn't seek to imagine futures in which we leave Aki (Earth), but rather always relates back to the wellbeing of Aki and reinforcing nationhood." (Lone Fight, 2019) Hence, the anthology provides a "deconstructive critique of conventional science fiction with its traditional colonialist emphasis on conquering 'alien' territories while highlighting the speculative and time-traveling traditions that had always informed Indigenous legends and oral storytelling" (Longfellow, 2019: 14).

Indigenous futurisms largely differ from conventional science fiction but also from post-apocalyptic imaginaries increasingly inspired by climate change and mainstream discourses of the Anthropocene which, "while drawing attention to current and impending ecological disaster, serve to reinforce the colonial and Enlightenment [centering] of 'man' at the apex of planetary transformations and history" (Longfellow, 2019: 15). Though still not officially adopted as a new geological epoch by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the Anthropocene is now—at least informally—widely used as a term referring to the first time in history when human activity is the main force of change, surpassing geophysical factors. But Indigenous scholars and environmental activists have called for a widening of the concept of the Anthropocene beyond its current Western and Eurocentric framing that does not significantly differentiate between peoples, ideologies and ways of life. They indeed question the reference to "anthropos," the generic human being, which implies a universally-shared responsibility whereas the changes observed can largely be attributed to the Western world and its socioeconomic system. Davis and Todd (Métis/otipemisiw) also argue that "a start date coincident with colonization of the Americas would more adequately open up these [contemporary conversations of the Anthropocene]," adding that, to most Indigenous peoples,

> the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years. […] [T]he ecocidal logics that now govern our world are not inevitable or 'human nature', but are the result of a series of decisions that have their origins and reverberations in colonization. (Davis & Todd, 2017: 761-763)

Hence if the Anthropocene is defined by a visible and massive impact of humans' activities on earth, deeply affecting its ecosystems, for most Indigenous peoples it indeed started with the severing of their relation to their environment induced several centuries ago by settler colonialism, which "was always about changing the land, transforming the earth itself, [as] colonizers did not only seek to overcome

unfamiliar and harsh climatic conditions, but rather to transform them" (Davis & Todd, 2017: 770). This specific moment in history when Indigenous communities experienced the end of their worlds as they had previously known them is referred to by some Indigenous futurism authors as the "Native Apocalypse." It extends beyond the usual scenarios of the Apocalypse stemming from the Euro-western biblical tradition as, for Indigenous peoples, the apocalypse has historically already occurred and, maybe more importantly, as they have overcome this ordeal and survived (Dillon, 2012: 8-10; 149). This experience shapes Indigenous approaches to the future with the confidence that Indigenous people "possess the resilience, wisdom, and skill to survive future apocalyptic iterations. These insights certainly inform and shape the embodiment of Indigenous Futurism" (Longfellow, 2019: 16). Hence, contrary to many non-Indigenous science fiction works that predominantly envision the end of the world as a tragic event yet to come, scenarios imagined by Indigenous futurisms mainly focus on an optimistic reversal of a situation that has already happened, a reversal that implies mending the previously severed relationships with the environment, including languages, laws, and livelihoods that are deeply intertwined.

To the question of what happens once western civilization and present-day society have disappeared, *Biidaaban: First Light* (2019) answers that far from being the end of the world, it is on the contrary a beginning with new possibilities to be imagined. Lisa Jackson's (Anishinaabe) enthralling futurist artwork, an eight-minute room-scale virtual reality experience, is one of those Indigenous futurism art pieces that makes space for discussions about the Anthropocene and its impacts from an Indigenous point of view. Co-created with Canadian environmental designer Mathew Borrett, it was first launched in downtown Toronto, precisely where its action takes place. In Jackson's own words,

> *Biidaaban: First Light* places the user in a future Toronto, set in and around Nathan Phillips Square. It projects a possible future where nature has begun to reclaim the city and where humans are living in keeping with the knowledge systems of the original people of the territory […]. The piece is concrete and poetic, using both practical imagery and metaphorical symbol to communicate a worldview that is rooted in Indigenous thought and accessible to any user while offering added meaning to those who are familiar with the languages and thought systems of the original people of this land. (Jackson, 2019: ii)

In *Biidaaban*, the whole world has not collapsed but civilization surely has: "The Sheraton Centre and the CN tower survive in the background as pathetic and decrepit reminders of commercial boosterism, now a sad reflection of mortal hubris" (Longfellow, 2019: 22). In this vision of Toronto long after the world as we know it now in all its excesses has ended, life is however still present and landscapes are far

from being empty and void. Fauna is coming out of the city's collapsed infrastructure, trees are cutting their way through cracks in the asphalt and vegetation is now covering the walls of the crumbling buildings. But if nature has taken over its rights, humans have not disappeared: they are simply not the main characters in the story. Not in the center, they do not dictate where the action should be or go but they seem to co-exist with the other elements of the environment, integrated into the landscape. We only see a woman in one sequence: spotted in the distance, she seems to be digging in the soil. She then looks up as a crow flies over her head. Everywhere else, in all the other shots, humans are not seen directly through their physicality but their presence is delicately suggested through visible signs of their discreet activity—such as homegrown vegetables on skyscraper roofs or canoes docked at the metro platform (the city being flooded, metro tracks have become river beds and canoes are needed to commute).



Biidaaban: First Light by Lisa Jackson © National Film Board of Canada 2018.

This unobtrusive human presence contrasts with the rationale at work in the "films d'Indiens" over-genre previously discussed, where North-American settlers are depicted as making better use of the land—that is, transforming it according to human needs and expectations, extracting resources in order to continue on—while Native people barely survived in an empty wilderness. Thus, according to Smiles (Ojibwé),

> This myth tells us that what we know as the modern world was built through the hard work of European settlers; Indigenous people had nothing to offer or contribute. The ultimate aims of settler colonialism

> is therefore the occupation and remaking of space. […] This is mated with a viewpoint of landscapes prior to European arrival as *terra nullius*, or empty land that was owned by no one. (Smiles, 2020)

In Jackson's *Bidaabaan*, humans do not "make use" of the landscape but they fit in nonetheless, they are part of it. Through this VR experience, the filmmaker attempts to reconcile the different elements of the landscape, human and non human alike. The land itself is not portrayed as empty spaces waiting to be filled but they appear as what Dillon calls "deeply situated social and ecological environments," "a self-sustaining vessel" requiring "participation from all its interwoven inhabitants," a "common pot" to be shared (Dillon, 2012: 6-7). Watching the futurist landscape unfold through a VR headset, experiencing this deep immersion into a reconciled universe, one cannot help but think that the "egosystemic" culture of modern industrialized nations as theorized by writer Louis Owens' (Choctaw/Cherokee) has finally been replaced by what he calls the "ecosystemic" culture of Native peoples who feel neither removed from nor superior to nature, recognizing themselves as an essential "part of that complex of relationships we call the environment" (Dillon, 2012: 150-151).

In *Biidaaban*, futurist landscapes take on a new aesthetics as Indigenous presence (human *and* nonhuman) is in every nook and cranny, reclaiming every bit of space. If colonialism is understood as a severing of relations, *Biidaaban* offers a reconciled vision of the world we all share, with restored relationships with one another. And this includes two spaces in which mainstream society usually has a hard time imagining Indigenous peoples. Firstly, Jackson voluntarily located *Biidaaban* in an urban setting: the city of Toronto/Tkaranto[2] is easily identifiable and is purposely being reclaimed as Indigenous[3]. "What does it mean when we 'Indiginize' a city?" she asked at the opening of the exhibit in Toronto, noting that most people tend to think of First Nations as being part of nature, trapped in rural reservations, while more than half of them in North America now live, evolve and thrive in metropolitan areas (Knight, 2018). *Biidaaban* suggests that even in cities, survival can be sought thanks to ancient knowledge, indigenous to the area and still relevant for the future. And that is when another reclaimed Indigenous space comes into play: part of this new aesthetics of futurist landscapes is contained in the sound space, filled with nature's vibrations and sonorities, but also with words in Indigenous languages. The VR piece is a "love letter to the First Peoples in the Tkaranto area" (Hardawar, 2018) as there's no English

2 Tkaronto is an Haudenosaunee word meaning "where there are trees standing in the water" and from which derives the current colonial name of the Canadian metropolis.

3 In March 2014, the City of Toronto officially acknowledged that it stands "on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples." (City of Toronto's official website, consulted 07/02/2021)

spoken in the film at all. Instead, we hear Mohawk, Wendat, and Anishinaabemowin, three Indigenous languages that were once the only human words heard on these territories. Languages which, according to Jackson, "grow on this land in the same way that plants do. The languages have been spoken here for thousands of years; they capture this land more than any other languages" (Johnson, 2018). We first hear a woman's voice who asks "Änen shayo'tron' Shonywäa'tihchia'ih sentiohkwa'?" later translated into text: "Where did the Creator put your people?" The sound space is then filled with a Haudenosaunee thanksgiving address expressing gratitude for all that sustains life and reminding us of the interconnected relations between humans, non-humans, and all of creation while exhorting us to humility and to face our ethical responsibility (Longfellow, 2019: 23-24). We hear these Indigenous words but we see (and read) them too, as they appear beautifully on screen and blend into the landscapes, before gently evaporating.

While futurist works in general are regularly depicted as post-apocalyptic and terrifying worlds, Indigenous futurisms call our attention to the "utopic flowering within dystopia" (Amadahy, 2019). In works such as *Biidaaban: First Light*, there is no sense of loss but rather a sense of addition and inclusion. Words, sounds, songs, and stories are informed by reclaimed Indigenous lands which are given a new aesthetic value. Past thriving stories are incarnated again and enriched through those new visual narratives. Indigenous languages, which have existed for thousands of years but have been dramatically lacking on screens for over a hundred years, are now incorporated into films and digital media works, and finally, form an integral part of the landscape again. Nature and culture can be renegotiated in the context of a decolonized Anthropocene, with nature taking its rights back but not excluding humans. Indigenous futurisms enable us to dive into artistic visions about Indigenous places and spaces in the future and their role in shaping a common, collective, and diverse destiny for those landscapes. Indigenous futurisms in cinema and visual arts show how powerful, prolific, and different Indigenous imagination can be. By questioning what being Indigenous in that future space means, who Indigenous people want to be, and who they can be, Indigenous futurisms as an artistic movement is becoming a mighty tool to assert visual sovereignty, the right to self-determination, and to self-imagination. They have become an amazingly up-lifting force among Indigenous communities and especially for Indigenous youth.

References

• AMADAHY, Z. (2018): "Biidaaban First Light: Seeing with Renewed Eyes," *Muskrat Magazine*, <http://muskratmagazine.com/biidaaban-first-light/> (accessed 27 November 2020)

• CHURCHILL, W. (1999): *Fantasies of the Master Race. Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 261 p.

• DAVIS, H. & TODD, Z. (2017): "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16(4), Prince George, University of Northern British Columbia, 761-780.
• DILLON, G. (ed.), (2012): *Walking the clouds. An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*, Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 272 p.
• DOWELL, K.: (2013) *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 296 p.
• GERGAUD, S. (to be published): "Le Sauveur blanc dans le sur-genre du film d'Indiens : le triomphe de la blanchité au cinéma," in KAC-VERGNE, M. & SANDEAU, J. (eds.), *"Représentations de la blanchité dans la cinématographie et les séries anglophones,"* *Revue Miranda*, Université de Toulouse.
• GERGAUD, S. (2020): "Femmes autochtones disparues et assassinées au Canada," *Différences*, Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples.
• GERGAUD, S. (2019): *Cinéastes ~~autochtones~~. La souveraineté culturelle en action*, Laval, Éditions WARM, 224 p.
• HARDAWAR, D. (2018): "The surprising beauty of nature reclaiming Toronto in VR," *Engadget*, <https://www.engadget.com/2018/04/20/biidaaban-vr-tribeca/?guccounter=1> (accessed 27 November 2020).
• HEARNE, J. (2012): *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 280 p.
• HUGHEY, M. (2015): "The Whiteness of Oscar night," *Contexts Blog, American Sociological Association*, <https://contexts.org/blog/the-whiteness-of-oscar-night> (accessed 27 November 2020).
• JACKSON, E. (2019): *Biidaaban: First Light*, Master's Thesis, Department of Fine Arts, Toronto, York University, 63 p.
• JOHNSON, R. (2018): "Anishinaabe artist's new VR experience takes an Indigenous futurist look at Toronto," *CBC* <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/lisa-jackson-biidaaban-vr-future-toronto-1.4619041> (accessed 27 November 2020).
• KILPATRICK, J. (1999): *Celluloid Indians, Native American and Film*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 261 p.
• KNIGHT, C. (2018): "How Biidaaban imagines a future in which the First Peoples have reclaimed their territory," *National Post* <https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/movies/how-biidaaban-imagines-a-future-in-which-the-first-peoples-have-reclaimed-their-territory> (accessed 27 November 2020).
• LONGFELLOW, B. (2019): "Indigenous Futurism and the Immersive Worlding of Inherent Rights/Vision Rights, 2167 and Biidaaban: First Light," Paper presented at the FSAC Annual conference, Department of Cinema and Media Arts, Toronto, York University, 28 p.
• LONE FIGHT, D. (2019): "Interview with Elizabeth LaPensée on Indigenous Futures, Video Games, and Art as Resistance," <https://www.darrenlonefight.com/news/2019/10/23/interview-with-elizabeth-lapense-on-indigenous-futures-video-games-and-art-as-resistance> (accessed 27 November 2020).

• NICKERSON, M. (2018): *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories*, Toronto, ImagineNative Institute, 81 p.
• PRATS, A. J. (2002): *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 317 p.
• RAHEJA, M. (2010): *Reservation Reelism. Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 358 p.
• RICKARD, J. (1995): "Sovereignty: A Line in the Sand". Strong Hearts : Native American Visions and Voices, *Aperture*, 139, p. 50-59.
• RUNNINGWATER, N. B. (1998): "Smoke Signals," *Yes! A Joumal of Positive Futures*, Winter 1998/1999, p. 1-5.
• SINGER, B. (2001): *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens. Native American Film and Video*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 128 p.
• SMILES, D. (2020): "The Settler Logics of (Outer) Space," *Society and Space*, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-settler-logics-of-outer-space> (accessed 27 November 2020).
• WALTER, E. (2014): *Sœurs volées. Enquête sur un féminicide au Canada*, Montréal, Lux Editions, 224 p.
• WEEBER, C., (2020): "Why Capitalize 'Indigenous'?," *Sapiens*, 19/05/2020.
• WILSON, P. & STEWART, M. (eds.) (2008): *Global Indigenous Media. Cultures, Poetics, and Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 376 p.