

The Native Forum and Related Films at

THE 2003 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

By Christine L. McDonald



Danielle Hall and Damien Pitt in Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds*

At the opening of the 23rd Sundance Film Festival on January 17, 2003, Robert Redford introduced the first film and made passionate remarks about the relationship of the creative process and the current political climate, which he views as compromising the artist's (filmmaker's) freedom of expression. He reminded the filmmakers why they were at Sundance. He said that anyone new to this experience needed to know that he created the festival as a place and a "mechanism" where new artists could come together to "screen their works without the pressures of commercial dogma and to work in an independent atmosphere."

As he looked back over the 22 years, he said if Sundance hadn't taken risks, hadn't been experimental, or if the experiment had proved to be irrelevant, he would have stopped. What he found was that the "benefits speak for themselves." He eloquently addressed how the nation has been affected and continues to be influenced by the events of September 11, 2001: "We wondered—what's going to happen?—especially to freedom and freedom of expression. If ever that should be threatened....We are so blessed to have it....It's a year later...and things are better. There's still anxiety, still threats—threats in the fringes of political life, threats to expression—that, being equated with undemocratic." His concluding remarks led back to the role of the filmmaker in a free society. The filmmakers, who he considers his colleagues, will continue to see the evolution and change in the film community reflected in Sundance's commitment to independent film. He also emphasized how vital a part the audience plays in the Sundance process. Redford ended by saying, "We are very relevant today. It's more important than ever to keep freedom alive. It's all meant to be fluid and open and for diversity. Because of this diversity, Sundance is a good place to come."

In fact, the 23rd Sundance Film Festival was one of the most compelling I've attended because of the content and context of the films. It was clear that the films included in this year's festival had been carefully selected with Redford's themes in mind.

N. Bird Runningwater, programmer for the Native Forum, introduced the filmmakers, many of whom had shown work at previous Sundance Festivals, including Alanis Obomsawin and Shirley Cheechoo. Australian filmmaker Ivan Sen came to Sundance for the first time with his first feature. In the written introduction to the Native Forum, Runningwater emphasized the unique perspective of the Native filmmakers who use the lens to bring indigenous stories to the world.

Is the Crown at War with Us?

Alanis Obomsawin, Director

Distributor: National Film Board of Canada
Canada, 2002, 96 min., color, 16mm

In English with Mi'gmaq, Abenaki subtitles

In introducing Alanis Obomsawin, Bird Runningwater acknowledged that she is the most prolific of Native filmmakers, a role model and mentor for him. The gift she gave him was the oral history of film. Since she first documented the Mohawk uprising at Oka, Obomsawin has been preoccupied with the stories surrounding what she portrayed in *Kanehsatake*. Many of her films since then have viewed the events from other perspectives—mainly from the viewpoint of the participants.

Is the Crown at War with Us?, with its provocative title, leads us to what has consumed Obomsawin's filmmaking for years—the persistent memory of what her people had to endure at the hands of the Canadian government and

their non-Native neighbors and the unanswered question of “why?” Like the Chippewa in Wisconsin that Sandy Osawa [Makah] documents in *Lighting the Seventh Fire*, Obomsawin documents the struggle of the New Brunswick Esgenoopetitj Mi’gmaq First Nation people known as the Burnt Church to keep their fishing rights—rights that were affirmed in the courts and are being abridged by the same courts. These rights are not being respected by either the government or the non-Native community. Members of the community at Burnt Church have retained their language and are passing it on to their children even as they struggle to retain the right to fish, the historical foundation of their livelihood.

In shocking footage taken by Obomsawin from a Mi’gmaq fishing boat, we watch as a Canadian government boat rams and sinks the Mi’gmaq boat. And, we see this happen more than once. Obomsawin has stood with Mohawk warriors at Oka as she documented the terror and the siege there. Like the footage in *Kanehsatake* and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*, her camera bears witness to the racism that surrounds the issues of First Nations people’s rights. After the attack on the boat, Obomsawin interviewed Mi’gmaq children, witnesses to these events, who expressed their fears of being destroyed by the government. The Mi’gmaq speak to the camera, telling their stories and lamenting that the 11,000-year-old fishing traditions of their people cannot be passed on to future generations because of government attempts to interdict their ancient rights. Randall Lambert, who grieves that his people are losing the right to teach their children to fish and to pass on their culture, says on camera that he is willing to go to jail to defend the tribe’s right to fish.

Part of the strength of Obomsawin’s films is her research to recover the history of indigenous people in Canada. She goes beyond the visual testimony of the Mi’gmaq to include the history of the controversy that dates back in the courts to the 1752 Peace and Friendship Treaty between the Crown and the Mi’gmaq. The Treaty gave the Mi’gmaq “free liberty of hunting and fishing,” and was renewed in 1759. One Mi’gmaq, arrested in 1993 for catching eel out of season, was able to appeal the decision up to Canada’s Supreme Court, where six years after his arrest the 1752 Peace and Friendship Treaty was affirmed. That didn’t mean the authorities would honor the decision. The fishing rights of the Mi’gmaq community have been whittled down to their being limited to 34 licenses to fish for seven days only. Since the community fishes to live, these limitations will force some families to leave the community. While the community is divided over accepting or rejecting what the government offers to them as rights, both sides are victims of government duplicity, since the original treaty has been effectively nullified.

In the discussion, Obomsawin said that when she screened the film, the morale of the Mi’gmaq improved. They saw the film as an affirmation of what they had endured. With their rights severely restricted, the Mi’gmaq legitimately ask the world the question Obomsawin poses in the title of her film. It’s a question First Nations people have been asking of governments throughout the world, and in that way *Is the Crown at War with Us?* connects with the struggles of all First Nations people.

Pikutiskwaau (Mother Earth)

Shirley Cheechoo, Director

Canada, 2002, 52 min., color, HD Cam

Cree with English subtitles

Distribution information from:

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Director/producer Cheechoo worked with the Cree School Board, who acted as executive producers, in James Bay, Canada, in the filming of *Pikutiskwaau*, translated as *Mother Earth*. The elders of the community made aesthetic decisions about what would be filmed and reacted to the script and artwork produced by Cheechoo and Blake Debassgie. The cosmology of the Cree and the oral traditions are woven into the fabric of this film, which is an elegy to Mother Earth as interpreted by the Cree. Mother Earth is both an abiding reality for the Cree and a metaphor in modern days for the ancient ways, the traditions of their people. The Cree words and the images create a powerful call to Native people to preserve their traditions. The images of nature, the Cree, and their children build on the poetic language utilized in the script.

The script is a long poem of interconnected thoughts about the life-affirming belief in Mother Earth as a giver of life. It is a Cree prayer to Mother Earth. When Cheechoo revealed in the discussion that her own mother had died during the project, her words reinforced the elegiac feeling of the piece and brought forth its personal meaning for Cheechoo both as daughter and as a member of the tribe. Her own loss gave a feeling of abiding love and concern to the film, making it at once a homage to her mother and a call for the Cree to protect and preserve their Mother Earth. The cumulative effect of the film connects us, the viewers, to our own sense of the mother in our personal lives and then to the universal experience to the love of Mother Earth as the giver of all life in nature and the foundation of our communities.

There are lovely images of Mother Earth, who has four seasons and thus four dresses and “every time she changes her dress, she is beautiful.”

Pikutiskwaau was filmed in James Bay, Quebec, northern Ontario, and British Columbia. Cree elders chose these places because of the shots of nature they wanted included and, in the case of British Columbia, because they wanted the mountains to be in the film. In response to a comment that non-Native children are not interested in what the elders have to say, Cheechoo commented that it is the Cree elders who take the children out to the land and her film is for the ones who can’t get to the land.

Robbie Matthew, a Cree elder, spoke these words during the discussion: “The film represents the lifestyle of our people. We are having a struggle in our lands over hydro development. Thirty years ago a child was last born out on the land—now we have hospitals and that means we have to bring back our own teachings to connect our young people to their Mother Earth and past. Our language and culture are not helping us if we lose our connections since first contact. We were told that how we lived was not ‘true.’ Our children must be taught. This teaching was also to be provided in the

classrooms. Our current school system connects to the residential schools—I was a victim of that. Me and my wife took young people on the land. Some of us have almost lost our identity. Once they [the children] connect with our culture and language, they start to cooperate. The film was meant for our young children to understand. Our teachings will help them to understand that we must walk this earth as one.”

Beneath Clouds


Ivan Sen, Director/Screenwriter

Australia, 2001, 85 min., color, 35mm

Distribution information: Melanie@axiomfilms.co.uk

Sen has constructed a complex narrative for his coming-of-age film, set in New South Wales, Australia, of two teenagers whose lives intersect by chance. Sen explores how their Aboriginal roots inform their meeting, friendship, and destiny. The filmmaker is himself the child of an Aboriginal (Gamilaroi) mother and a German father; his father abandoned the family. His screenplay draws from his own experience in the development of the character of Lena (Danielle Hall), and his depiction of Vaughn (Damien Pitt) is a composite of his cousins. In searching for actors, Sen wanted to use non-actors. Danielle Hall has, in real life, an Aboriginal mother and a European father and comes from a small town in New South Wales where she acted in high school plays. Damien Pitt is Aboriginal and was studying and making Aboriginal art when Sen found him.

Beneath Clouds won the Best Debut Film at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival as well as Best Young Actress in a Leading Role for Hall. Lena, a high school student, has blond hair and a dark complexion, which she inherited from her Irish father. She is seen in her community as Aboriginal. One day she decides that she has had enough of life in rural Australia and that she will reject her Aboriginal heritage and find her father so she can embrace her Irish past. She sets off for Sydney where her father was last seen. Vaughn, like many Aboriginal teens, is in a minimum-security prison work camp. Denied permission to visit his dying mother, he plots his escape. When Lena misses her bus, she starts walking and eventually meets up with Vaughn, who is also headed for Sydney to see his mother for the last time. They are both without the means to make the trip, yet they find what they need along the way through their shared roots and friendship. What gives this film its heart and soul is the intense and truthful dialogue between Vaughn and Lena. Vaughn never lets Lena forget that her skin color gives her privileges he will never experience. On the trip they use this to their

advantage. Lena is sullen at times—her anger and resentment flowing from having been abandoned—as she attempts to renounce her Aboriginal past. Vaughn, who first assumes she is white, comes to understand how their mutual histories have thrown them together. He challenges her fantasy about her Irish father as she learns what it means to grow up as a full Aboriginal when they have violent encounters with the police. The film succeeds in drawing the audience into the story through the amazing interplay of the two teens and from the achingly beautiful landscape that stands in contrast to the real  of everyday life in Aboriginal communities.

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