

# Freeze frame: Alaska eskimos in the movies // Review

Fienup-Riordan, Ann; Kassam, Karim-Aly S. Arctic ; Calgary Vol. 50, Iss. 1, (Mar 1997): 77-78.

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Freeze Frame studies the role of culture in establishing, maintaining, and perpetuating stereotypes about the "other." While Fienup-Riordan concentrates on film representations of Alaska Natives from the early 1900s to the 1990s, this work lends itself to a wider analysis of the role of culture and its relationship to imperialism. Around the world, outsiders—using film, painting, novels and other forms of artistic expression—have made representations of indigenous people. In this sense, Freeze Frame has scholarly application for comparison to other parts of the world. Despite the significant diversity within their culture, film images of Alaska Natives have been monolithic and exotic. Fienup-Riordan explores the fundamental themes emerging from these images and examines the motivations of those constructing them. Why do producers visit their fantasies of the "Eskimo" on the Alaskan landscape? Often a landscape had to be artificially fabricated in Alaska to suit the "authentic" image producers desired: for instance, the igloo is alien to many aboriginal communities of Alaska. What is the meaning of this search for the authentic "Eskimo," purified of any European impact? Both the early ethnographic films and the populist films for movie theatres maintain a rather evangelical devotion to the "pure Eskimo." Hollywood production companies went to great lengths and cost to manufacture this construct.

Freeze Frame is not only a narrative of film constructs of the "Eskimo," but also a response by Alaskans to images that are banal at best, and racist at their worst. An emancipation of sorts has emerged through the very medium that began the constructs. It is through film that the heterogeneity and complexity of the lives of Alaska Natives can be seen. Since the 1970s, coinciding with the oil boom, documentaries, ethnographies, and television programming have increasingly put the power of the media into the hands of Alaska's various communities. Experiments in participatory production of films have had varied success. Fienup-Riordan points out how film has been used by communities to draw attention to social issues. Nonetheless, the development of locally based filmmaking is juxtaposed with the continuing monolithic construct driven by Hollywood and market concerns. The irony is not lost on Fienup-Riordan, who points out that the search for "authenticity" helps more and more Alaska Natives get parts in films today. While the "Eskimo" image of Alaska Natives is not significantly transformed in these films, the participation of Alaskans has increased. A film aimed at mass entertainment has a larger audience appeal than a documentary made by Alaskans. This brings to light yet another irony: in today's marketplace, the "Eskimo" is not just a product of Hollywood, but a consumer of Hollywood products.

## FULL TEXT

Freeze Frame studies the role of culture in establishing, maintaining, and perpetuating stereotypes about the "other." While Fienup-Riordan concentrates on film representations of Alaska Natives from the early 1900s to the 1990s, this work lends itself to a wider analysis of the role of culture and its relationship to imperialism. Around the world, outsiders—using film, painting, novels and other forms of artistic expression—have made representations of indigenous people. In this sense, Freeze Frame has scholarly application for comparison to other parts of the world. Despite the significant diversity within their culture, film images of Alaska Natives have been monolithic and exotic. Fienup-Riordan explores the fundamental themes emerging from these images and examines the motivations of those constructing them. Why do producers visit their fantasies of the "Eskimo" on the Alaskan

landscape? Often a landscape had to be artificially fabricated in Alaska to suit the "authentic" image producers desired: for instance, the igloo is alien to many aboriginal communities of Alaska. What is the meaning of this search for the authentic "Eskimo," purified of any European impact? Both the early ethnographic films and the populist films for movie theatres maintain a rather evangelical devotion to the "pure Eskimo." Hollywood production companies went to great lengths and cost to manufacture this construct.

This preoccupation tells us more about the American psyche than about the Alaska Natives, who are presented as primitive on the one hand and noble on the other. This representation achieved a dual purpose. First, the American industrial culture saw itself as the pinnacle of civilization, having emerged from primitive roots through the European Enlightenment to find its "manifest destiny" on the North American continent. Self-affirming and self-congratulatory, this view was not sufficient for the American self-image: American culture also had its corrupting influences, and these warts on the self-portrait also had to be acknowledged. Like the modern-day fundamentalists who want to return to some mythical past, the filmmakers did this by going back to a time when society had not yet felt the impact of civilization. Showing life drained of its modern complexity, the films would instruct viewers in the noble qualities of a primitive society. Thus, the second and equally important function of the image of the "Eskimo" was self-criticism of American society. Fienup-Riordan effectively uses frozen frames from films to drive home her written observations. The pictures are a visual testimony to her analysis. One not only reads about the image of the "Eskimo" but sees it.

The intellectual roots of the notion of the "noble primitive" are found in Ancient Greece. More recently, the idea found renewed currency among the thinkers of the French Enlightenment such as Rousseau. In the twentieth century it has gained a strong foothold in North America.

While this fetish with the primitive and noble is relevant to American society, it was pure fantasy with regard to the reality of Alaska Natives. The primitive image is essentially racist, and the noble image is romantic. Indeed, the tragic irony does not go unnoticed by Fienup-Riordan. From the 1920s on, as filmmakers were busily preparing a so-called "authentic" representation of the Eskimo in the "harsh Arctic," significant changes were occurring in the material culture of the Alaska Natives. For instance, equipment used for hunting changed, reindeer herding was introduced, and communities were being devastated by an epidemic of tuberculosis. None of these events received the attention or consideration of the filmmakers. Should the films have reflected the real condition of Alaska Natives? If we use the criterion of the market, namely, what sells at the box office, the answer is No! It is not the responsibility of the filmmakers to represent the "reality" of Alaska Native life. But if we step away from the criteria of the market system and look at these films from a liberal democratic perspective, we see fundamental challenges to liberal ideals in America. Arguably the 1920s to the 1940s were characterized by separation of races and fascist obsessions with some mythical purity of races. These ideas were ripe not only in Germany, but also in Italy and later in South Africa. They were also alive and well in the United States and the European colonies. Edward Said, in his discourse on culture and imperialism (1993), asked how otherwise decent people could accept colonization of the masses in other regions of the world. Culture, he maintains, is a key vehicle to make occupation of others' lands acceptable. Drawing upon the relationship between culture and empire, Said would label the noble primitive construct of the Alaska Natives as the "anti-imperialist irony." The "anti-imperialist irony," in this case, is to argue that the significance of the superiority of American society arises when it is contrasted to the life of the "primitive" Eskimo and at the same time maintain that there is "nobility" in this primitive condition worthy of emulation. Both constructs, the "primitive" and the "noble," are products of filmmakers who are at liberty to visit their fantasies upon Alaska's Natives. From such a viewpoint, aboriginal people have no life, history, or culture of their own worth representing without American industrial civilization. It is noteworthy that some of the filmmakers arrived in Alaska after having completed productions of Tarzan and other films about safaris in Africa. Like the European Tarzan in Africa, often the leading actors in the films were not Alaska Natives (Ray Mala being a notable exception). The aboriginal people constituted the extras on the set; they had little impact upon the story, but were there to lend artificial authenticity for the benefit of southern audiences.

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that are banal at best, and racist at their worst. An emancipation of sorts has emerged through the very medium that began the constructs. It is through film that the heterogeneity and complexity of the lives of Alaska Natives can be seen. Since the 1970s, coinciding with the oil boom, documentaries, ethnographies, and television programming have increasingly put the power of the media into the hands of Alaska's various communities. Experiments in participatory production of films have had varied success. Fienup-Riordan points out how film has been used by communities to draw attention to social issues. Nonetheless, the development of locally based filmmaking is juxtaposed with the continuing monolithic construct driven by Hollywood and market concerns. The irony is not lost on Fienup-Riordan, who points out that the search for "authenticity" helps more and more Alaska Natives get parts in films today. While the "Eskimo" image of Alaska Natives is not significantly transformed in these films, the participation of Alaskans has increased. A film aimed at mass entertainment has a larger audience appeal than a documentary made by Alaskans. This brings to light yet another irony: in today's marketplace, the "Eskimo" is not just a product of Hollywood, but a consumer of Hollywood products.

Freeze Frame also provokes many engaging questions that are worthy of further research and analysis. How does private-sector funding tied essentially to nonrenewable resource use enable filmmaking by Alaskans for Alaskans? Keeping in mind the boom-and-bust cycles of resource industries, is this funding source sustainable? Who controls the film media, and what are the political implications of this control among Alaskans? To what degree are the early film constructs of "Eskimo" identity influencing Alaska Natives today? Are young people perceiving these images as the way life used to be? What are the implications for new constructions of identity using film? Now that Alaskans are documenting their traditional knowledge through film, who has copyright over that knowledge? To what degree is community participation in filmmaking a genuine objective rather than a means of getting things done in an increasingly (though superficially) politically correct climate for Native and non-Native relations? Would I recommend this work to others? I would particularly recommend this book to the readers of this eminent journal. Whether we are social or natural scientists, working in a northern context or seeking to do so, this work teases out the hidden stereotypes about northern societies and the romantic urges for the exotic which we may hold subconsciously as a result of a long and steady diet of manufactured images. It may help us see in ourselves some of the self-indulgent tendencies of the Hollywood filmmakers. What to us may be a frontier, to be conquered through study, is in fact a homeland to diverse cultures. This realization can only lead to more meaningful and collaborative work in the North.

#### REFERENCE

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## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Native peoples; Mythology; Motion pictures; History & criticism; Book reviews
<b>Location:</b>	United States Alaska United States
<b>Classification:</b>	9172: Canada
<b>Publication title:</b>	Arctic; Calgary
<b>Volume:</b>	50
<b>Issue:</b>	1
<b>Pages:</b>	77-78

<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	1997
<b>Publication date:</b>	Mar 1997
<b>Publisher:</b>	Arctic Institute of North America
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Calgary
<b>Country of publication:</b>	Canada, Calgary
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Geography, Biology, Earth Sciences--Geophysics, Sciences: Comprehensive Works
<b>ISSN:</b>	00040843
<b>e-ISSN:</b>	19231245
<b>Source type:</b>	Scholarly Journals
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	Book review-No Opinion
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	197713454
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/freeze-frame-alaska-eskimos-movies-review/docview/197713454/se-2?accountid=10267">https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/freeze-frame-alaska-eskimos-movies-review/docview/197713454/se-2?accountid=10267</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Arctic Institute of North America Mar 1997
<b>Last updated:</b>	2013-02-22
<b>Database:</b>	Agricultural & Environmental Science Collection, Earth, Atmospheric & Aquatic Science Collection

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