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The Indian thereby driven back into the ghetto, into the glass coffin of virgin forest, becomes the simulation model for all conceivable Indians before ethnology. The latter thus allows itself the luxury of being incarnate beyond itself, in the “brute” reality of those Indians it has entirely reinvented—savages who are indebted to ethnology for still being Savage: what a turn of events, what a triumph for this science which seemed dedicated to their destruction!

—JÉAN BAUDRILLARD, “The Precession of Simulacra”

In the archives of film history, traces and fragments of disappearing films occasionally surface in “restored” versions. If experimental ethnography relies “on the use of past texts as sounding boards”¹ for a revision of ethnographic method, the restoration and recovery of “lost” films provides a particularly rich site of analysis. In this chapter, one particular film from 1914 will be analyzed as an instance of retrospective ethnographic history. In the Land of the War Canoes is an authentically inauthentic text, a restoration of one of the earliest ethnographic films, a film that observes very few principles of objectivity or reliable fieldwork. It is a rare example of a premodern ethnographic film that anticipates many of the elements of postmodern ethnography. To return to it as an experimental film, rather than as an anthropological film, is to trace the effects of fragmentation and historical distance on the representation of culture.

Nonfiction films of the second decade of the twentieth century are in many ways a caesura in film history. Neither actualities within the aesthetic framework of the cinema of attractions, nor “documentaries” in the style initiated by Flaherty in 1922, they constitute a wealth of cul-
tural documentation that has only recently begun to be recognized by scholars and archivists. The 1994 Amsterdam Workshop was devoted to this material, and in the published record of the discussion of a program of “Fictional Anthropology,” the participants were struck by the way that native peoples appear to “perform” themselves for the camera.\(^2\) With the development of cinema, culture immediately becomes a representation, in which people participate with different degrees of complicity. Performances for the camera can occasionally be read as forms of cultural resistance,\(^3\) especially once this cinema has become an archival text, and the tensions between the body and the machine become tangible. In the*Land of the War Canoes* exemplifies the role of performance in documentaries of this period, although in its particular combination of anthropology and Hollywood melodrama, it is an anomaly of film history.

In 1914, Edward Curtis, in close collaboration with the Kwakiutl Indians on Vancouver Island, attempted to make a “photoplay,” or narrative drama, that would be both entertaining and educational. An enormous failure on both counts, the film quickly disappeared. In 1973 two anthropologists, Bill Holm and George Quimby, restored the film in collaboration again with the Kwakiutl, adding a soundtrack and changing the title from Curtis’s original *In the Land of the Headhunters* to *In the Land of the War Canoes*. We really have two films under consideration, the first of which, *Headhunters*, is virtually unknown and unseen.\(^4\) Its theatrical run was extremely brief,\(^5\) and by the time the film came to be restored, neglect and fire damage had destroyed entire scenes and numerous frames.\(^6\) My remarks on the original are somewhat hypothetical, based on the fragmentary glimpses made available in the “restored” film. They are also made with a view toward a redemptive form of ethnography inspired by the virtual reappropriation of *Headhunters* by the Kwakiutl people. The 1973 version of the film features a soundtrack of Kwakiutl dialogue, chanting, and singing—none of it subtitled—as well as drumming and natural sound effects of birds and water. Made in consultation with fifty surviving cast members, the “restored film” functions as a kind of prism through which the 1914 film might be glimpsed in fragmentary form.

*War Canoes* is on one level a kind of repossession of *Headhunters* by and for those whom it was ostensibly “about.” However, Holm and Quimby’s restoration of the film also destroys the narrative flow of Curtis’s original, replacing all of his intertitles with their own, reducing
Still from Edward Curtis’s *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1914) showing the effects of deterioration of the original print.

the total from forty-seven to eighteen. Brad Evans, one of the few people to have viewed Curtis’s original footage, argues that the reediting of the film destroys its sense of storytelling, “leaving us much more with a ‘cinema of attractions’ than Curtis ever imagined.” The result is a curious hybrid of a “photoplay drama” and primitive cinema, in which the anthropologists have reproduced an earlier cinematic language in the remnants of Curtis’s experiments with narrativity. Although Curtis’s original film may have had a narrative coherence comparable to the fiction filmmaking of the early teens, in Holm and Quimby’s restoration, *War Canoes* still retains the traces of early (pre-1907) cinema.

Curtis’s inspiration was the huge success of the Indian film genre, which was most popular between 1908 and 1913. He intended his film to be commercially competitive with the Hollywood-produced Indian film because it would be more authentic, featuring actual Indian actors and real props, customs, dances, and activities. The vehicle of this authenticity, however, was a convoluted narrative of romance, intrigue, and adventure, which Curtis wrote and had the Kwakiutl act out. In *War Canoes*, the anthropologists have added intertitles that are elliptical and highly condensed, making the story absolutely impossible to follow. The plot has become an odd supplement to the images, which
bear little resemblance to the narrative events announced in the titles. It
is possible that in the 1970s the Hollywood photoplay was felt to be an
inappropriate vehicle for ethnographic documentation, and so in the
interests of social science, the narrativity of the original was dismantled.
The effect is a radical separation of the text of the performers and the
text of the author-filmmaker. The Kwakiutl, now dubbed in on the un-
translated soundtrack, seem to have one film, and the anthropologist
and non-Kwakiutl spectator have quite another.

In the attempt to provide an “authoritative” text of visual evidence,
the anthropologists may have been less interested in narrative con-
 tinuity than in preserving images of Kwakiutl culture, and yet they
actually reshot one spectacular death scene in which a dummy body
is thrown off a cliff after a dramatic struggle (echoes of The Great
Train Robbery). With very little cutting within scenes, and infrequent
close-ups, most of the action unfolds uninterrupted in front of single
static camera setups. Besides many instances of mismatched screen
directions, War Canoes includes a vision scene, a popular convention of
early cinema. Small camera movements are occasionally used to re-
frame action, but the frame serves for the most part as a static prosce-
nium with little depth of field. The restored film includes Curtis’s still
portraits of the lead actors in costume as a means of introducing the
characters, but these were not used in the original, and there are few
close-ups to maintain character identification. All of these characteris-
tics of War Canoes link it to the period that Noël Burch calls “primitive,”
before the fall of cinematic language to the limited conventions of nar-
rative realism.

The 1973 version is designed to show off as much ethnographic data as
possible about Kwakiutl life, and it is very much a process of “showing
and telling,” which André Gaudreault has identified as the privileged
narrational form of early cinema. In the absence of Curtis’s dialogue
titles, the native actors lose a great deal of their characterization and
become objects to be seen. If for Curtis the all-native cast was a sign of
the film’s authenticity, in the restoration, the anthropologists have
stamped the film with a different sign of authenticity. A long string of
credits notes all of the institutional and museum personnel involved,
as well as all the native informants and cast members. They have also
privilegied the canoes as the centerpiece of the film, in order to down-
play the savagery implied in Curtis’s original title.

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“Vanishing Races” and the Performance of Culture

The exploitation of “head-hunting” in Curtis’s title and story line aligns even the original film to some extent with the cinema of attractions. Among the actualities of early cinema, one can find a whole range of “Indian pictures” with titles such as Teasing the Snakes (Edison, 1901) and Circle Dance (1898) in which exotic images of Native Americans were exploited for white audiences. Curtis’s early motion picture footage entered mainstream circulation in this manner, as an extension of his pursuits in commercial photography.13 Despite Curtis’s ambitions for a theatrical release for Headhunters, its narrative interruptions of ceremonial dances and displays, along with the other traits of early cinema, suggest that it combined the “attraction” of the spectacle of otherness with dramatic narrativity. The incorporation of a museological gaze may help to explain the film’s failure at the box office.

In all his various photography, film, and research activities, Curtis took it upon himself to document the native cultures that he saw as dying, and he perceived his work as an urgent task. His photography of Native Americans is consistently tinged with a romantic sense of loss, but that sense of inevitable decay is significantly absent from Headhunters, although to make the film, he undertook a massive recovery project of traditional Kwakiutl culture. All of the architecture, totem poles, masks, and costumes were prepared specially for the film. All signs of nonnative culture were carefully eliminated from the mise en scène to create the impression of an untainted Indian culture.

The collecting of trophy heads in war had not been practiced by the Kwakiutl for several generations, but within this version of the salvage paradigm, the Indians were depicted as full-fledged savages. Not only do they triumphantly wave fake trophy heads around, but a couple of scenes also feature human skulls decoratively arranged in the lair of an evil “sorcerer.” Given the theatricality of these scenes, in terms of both performance and mise en scène, the head-hunting can be perceived as a narrative device, a practice performed only allegorically by the Kwakiutl descendants of ancient warriors. And it is in terms of allegory, in the way that the Kwakiutl perform their culture and their traditions, that the film constitutes a resistance to ethnographic authority. Underscoring the savage violence is a violence of representation that challenges the colonialist mandate of the film. Headhunters is not a text of mourn-
ing but a text of the triumph of good over evil, in which the repressed violence of Curtis’s noble savage photography is unleashed.

The inauthenticity of the film’s ethnography is not simply due to the incorporation of script, performance, and props. Curtis freely invented names and mixed elements of different rituals and ceremonies together. He spent four years preparing for the film and from his fieldwork produced one volume of his mega-opus, *The North American Indian*, on the Kwakiutl. He did make an effort to reproduce all of the masks, totem poles, canoes, and other objects of Kwakiutl life quite faithfully, and yet the requirements of the photoplay demanded an imposition of a foreign narrative form and a blatant disregard of the subtleties of Kwakiutl culture. The difference between Curtis’s meticulous research and his carelessness in film production is indicative of a faith in cinematic representation as a transparency—based partially in the aesthetics of the actuality and partially in those of the new narrative realism. It was presumably enough that the Indians were played by Indians and that the props were made by them for the film to be “authentic.”

In 1912 Curtis had assembled his photographs and early motion picture footage together as an illustrated lecture that he toured with orchestra, under the title “The Vanishing Race.” Curtis’s ethnography was produced on the margins of academic anthropology, as a sideshow informed equally by the entertainment market for exploitation curiosities and by a serious sense of commitment to cultural documentation. Curtis was notorious for supplying costumes and props to create a noble savage effect for native peoples long since separated from their ancestral heritage. The sense of urgency behind Curtis’s project was produced within a romantic sensibility that entitled him to take artistic license of some scope in what he called his photographic art-science. To his credit, at least he represented an embodied culture and linked native peoples with the signs of their ethnicity, even if his pictures are inflected with a melancholy sense of loss. Only seven years after *Head-hunters* was released, the Kwakiutl potlatch ceremonies, outlawed since 1885, began to be raided, and the ceremonial artifacts confiscated by the National Museum in Ottawa.

Curtis’s own description of his intentions in *The North American Indian* is telling. His twenty-volume photographic record “represents the result of personal study of a people who are rapidly losing the traces of their aboriginal character and who are destined ultimately to become

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assimilated with the 'superior race.' ”17 The last two words may be in quotation marks, but Curtis’s fascination with native peoples was firmly based in the racist presumption that cross-cultural encounter was necessarily a contest subject to evolutionary laws of survival. By insisting on the otherness of native peoples in his photographs, he cultivated a mystique of Indianness that could only contribute to the racist preclusion of cultural diversity. Otherness could only be valued in its specificity on the verge of its extinction. The exotic value of Indian pictures was in direct proportion to the elimination of lived native cultures. In the frame, on the page, and on the screen, Native Americans were made safe, a process that Edward Curtis, with the benevolent support of Theodore Roosevelt, was instrumental in aestheticizing.

The Northwest Coast native peoples played an important role in the ideology of “vanishing races.”18 Curtis was not alone in being attracted to a culture that, in the early twentieth century, was still quite isolated from European society and had retained many indigenous arts and customs.19 The Kwakiutl figured prominently in Franz Boas’s anthropology, a body of work that was far more significant than Curtis’s in altering racist views of native peoples. Curtis acknowledges Boas in his introduction to his own Kwakiutl ethnography, but the more important link between these men is their mutual “informant,” George Hunt.

The son of an Englishman and Tlingit Indian, Hunt was trained as a field-worker by Boas and guided both men through the Kwakiutl culture and language in which he grew up. Jeanne Cannizzo has argued that “George Hunt is one of the most important originators of our current view of 'traditional' Kwakiutl society; he is a primary contributor to the invention of the Kwakiutl as an ethnographic entity.”20 Hunt played an instrumental role in the production of Headhunters. Not only were most of the actors Hunt’s own relatives, but photographs of the shoot suggest that he was Curtis’s assistant director, holding a megaphone and instructing the performers.21 This figure of the informant as assistant director may be an instance of what Trinh Minh-ha calls the “Inappropriate Other,”22 or what James Clifford describes as an exemplary cultural traveler.23 Unlike the ethnographers Curtis and Boas, Hunt is neither insider nor outsider, but a slippage between positions that unfixes them both. As assistant director, his role as translator and interpreter is revealed as one of anthropological creation and, literally, direction.

Both Boas and Curtis were engaged in totalizing, exhaustive documentation enterprises that were necessarily doomed to incompletion.
Curtis's work was explicitly framed as art-science but fell in between both camps, into the realm of popular culture. Boas's work was equally problematic as a "science," though. James Clifford notes that while Boas may not have subscribed to the "vanishing race" theory of cultural evolutionism, his conception of culture was nevertheless one in which "culture is enduring, traditional, ... a process of ordering, not of disruption. ... it does not normally 'survive' abrupt alterations." Like Curtis, Boas "wrote out" of his account all signs of Kwakiutl adaptation to European culture, attending only to the pure elements of traditional life.

Boas introduced methods of fieldwork that were designed to be "as free as possible from the certain self-contamination of the data by the ethnographer himself." To understand culture on its own terms, to "present Kwakiutl culture as it appears to the Indian himself," one can do little more than transform it into "data." Helen Cordero notes that "Boas has been charged with being indifferent or hostile to the proper scientific goal of formulating scientific laws ... that his ethnography is an arid accumulation of fact upon fact." Boas himself filmed the Kwakiutl in 1930 but never edited the footage. Rosalind Morris has suggested that the "raw footage" was in fact more in keeping with Boas's ethnographic method: "For much of Boas's written ethnography reads like the footage for [a film]: numerous sequences of detailed images strung together one after the other with only minimal theorization. Moreover, while he occasionally discussed anthropological uses for the footage, these did not include the production of an edited 'film.'"

To make "a film" from raw footage necessarily implies a narrative structure or form, which Boas may have been reluctant to impose. Curtis, on the other hand, by using the narrative model closest at hand, that of the Hollywood photo play, forces the natives into the twentieth century. Boas's ethnography may have been an important step toward the eradication of scientific racism, and yet in objectifying culture, it leaves little room for the subjective space of native peoples. It is a far cry, in other words, from "how culture appears to the Indian himself." Boas's contribution to ethnography was instrumental in transforming the stereotype of the primitive, and yet Curtis's profoundly primitive attempt to dramatize Kwakiutl culture represents on some level a recognition of native subjectivity.

The myth that Curtis devised for Headhunters is composed of Oedipal desires, repressions, conflicts, and triumphs. In the original scenario of the film, the hero, Motana, transgresses a "divine" law by dreaming of a
Still from Edward Curtis’s *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1914). Motana, the hero, sneaks into the enemy’s home to rescue the princess, Naida.

woman when he is supposed to be fasting; a rival suitor steals a lock of Motana’s hair, but Motana fights the magic spell and beheads the evil sorcerer to win the maiden, Naida. After a series of adventures, battles, kidnappings, and rescues, Motana triumphs over evil and takes the place of Naida’s father, the chief. Instead of a monotonous collection of “data” that was the downfall of the contemporary travelogue, Curtis positioned the natives within a discourse of desire. Clearly modeled on the contemporary photoplay scenario, which might be considered a powerful mythology of middle-class America, the story nevertheless, in principle, allows the native character to assume the Oedipal role.

In the film as it has come to us via *War Canoes*, an allegorical subjectivity is produced through a multilayered performance style. Curtis says that he was attracted to the Northwest Coast Indians because “their ceremonies are developed to a point which fully justifies the use of the term dramatic.” The Kwakiutl had a whole range of dances and roles that individuals and families exchanged ceremonially. The potlatch system involves the distribution of wealth, and this economic structure is closely bound up with a dramatic structure of mythologically based costumes, masks, songs, dances, roles, and even dialogue. The winter
ceremonial that occurs toward the end of Headhunters is an annual event that Boas describes as a “great impressive ceremony of sanctifying the tribe.” He also notes that the Kwakiutl name for the ceremony, *tsleʼtslequa*, means “to be fraudulent, to cheat.”

The Kwakiutl, in other words, were experienced actors, which may explain the ease with which they were able to follow directions without having seen a motion picture themselves. The acting in the film ranges from naturalistic performances of activities such as canoeing and clam digging to melodramatic hysteria and, given the prevalence of long shots, can be readily compared to primitive cinema’s reliance on gesture, costume, and setting for characterization. Curtis had all the actors wear wigs and costumes, which enabled them to pose as their ancestors rather than themselves, even when performing the nonceremonial activities such as hunting and paddling. The actors do not completely fill their assigned roles, partly because the characters are so clearly foreign to their culture, and partly because of their histrionic performance style. The integration of their own ceremonial dances, in which people are dressed as animals and birds complete with masks, furs, and feathers, only enhances this sense of the doubleness of the performance style.

If allegory is one of the principal means of inverting the salvage paradigm that informs conventional ethnographic praxis, performative doubling is a valuable cinematic technique. Realist aesthetics demand a disappearance of the social actor into his or her “role” in the film; the veracity of the aesthetic precludes any indices of “acting.” Performative strategies that enable social actors some distance from their “image” are means of pointing to another reality outside and beyond the discourse of visual knowledge. The Kwakiutl performances in War Canoes/Headhunters constitute a rare display of the allegorical structure of native performance and might be described as a form of postcolonial translation, as proposed by Homi Bhabha: “The power of the postcolonial translation of modernity rests in its performative, deconstructive structure that does not simply revalue the contents of a cultural tradition, or transpose values ‘cross-culturally.’ . . . It is to introduce another locus of inscription and intervention, another hybrid, ‘inappropriate’ enunciative site, through that temporal split—or time-lag . . . for the signification of postcolonial agency.”

Headhunters (as seen through the prism of War Canoes) challenges the purist implications of primi-

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ativism because it is designed so clearly as a spectacle of the primitive. Its allegorical fantasy of otherness seems to be modeled on nothing less fantastic than *Voyage dans la lune*.

**Ethnography and Silent Film History**

Within the history of film, the allegorical style of *Headhunters* needs to be recognized as being somewhere between Georges Méliès's *Voyage dans la lune*, made twelve years earlier, and Fritz Lang's Niebelungen films, made ten years later. The proscenium-framed ceremonial sequences and the crowding of the frame by rows of agitated, costumed people are reminiscent of the opening shots of *Voyage dans la lune*, and the prominence of skulls and trophy heads as decor and fetishes also echo Méliès's overdecorated and prop-laden *mise en scènes*. The primitivism of Curtis's visual style translates Kwakiutl exoticism into the language of magic and adventure initiated by Méliès, and as we have seen, Méliès's science fiction is itself an ethnographic cross-cultural fantasy articulated in the language of colonialism and tribalism.

The parallel with *Siegfried* (1924) and *Kriemhild's Revenge* (1925) is a little more oblique, and I certainly do not want to suggest that Lang may have in any way been influenced by Curtis's film. Lang was immersed in the European modernist discovery of primitivism and incorporated many tropes of African art into the expressionist sets and costumes of these films. Although he uses far more close-ups, Lang's characters are just as completely enveloped in costumes, wigs, and headresses as are the Kwakiutl in *Headhunters*. Both Lang's and Curtis's films feature monumental proscenium-framed sets, and the action is often staged either in front of stylized architectural facades or in pastoral nature settings. The Niebelungen films are also about romance, power struggles between families, revenge aided by magical powers, marriage ceremonies, savage tribes (the Huns in *Kriemhild*), and tests for the hero to undergo. The parallels are testimony to Curtis's imposition of European culture onto the Kwakiutl, but at the same time, they indicate the strength of the "primitivist" analogy in experimental film praxis.

Whereas comparing *Headhunters* to the work of Méliès and Lang is an important means of indicating the ethnographic discourse latent in the history of experimental fiction filmmaking, comparing it to Flaherty demonstrates the subversive potential of experimental ethnography. In 1915 Robert and Frances Flaherty met Curtis in Toronto and had a pri-
vate screening of Headhunters. Flaherty also screened his 1914 footage of the Inuit, his first motion picture attempt that was destroyed by fire before Nanook of the North was made. In Frances’s comparison of the two films in her diary, she says that Flaherty’s images “in all their crudity . . . stood out human, real, convincing and big in contrast to the spectacular artificiality of Curtis’s. . . . As Mr. C. himself said of our pictures, there was an intimacy about them; but he also criticized them as monotonous.”35 In 1914 Flaherty’s footage was shot and assembled in the travelogue mode popularized by expedition films such as Herbert Ponting’s 1911 film of the South Pole, The Great White Silence, although even Flaherty’s first Inuit footage featured a single protagonist and his family.36 From Curtis, Flaherty learned the importance of narrative and the commercial doors it might open as a means of financing ethnographic filmmaking. Frances Flaherty also notes that Curtis was having trouble marketing his film because it was regarded as too “highbrow.” Ironically enough, by replacing Curtis’s “photoplay” melodrama with an existential drama of human survival, Flaherty was able to reach the audience that Curtis himself missed.

The difference between Nanook and Headhunters lies not only in the kind of story but more crucially in the narrative form in which the story is told. The vehicle of Flaherty’s humanist intimacy is a tightly edited narrative in which close-ups individualize the natives as characters, and extreme long shots locate these characters in the picturesque and radically foreign Arctic setting. A careful integration of titles and images naturalizes the narrative and cloaks the colonialist perspective with a tone of familiarity. In the full-fledged “institutional mode” of the narrator system, or interiorized film lecturer,37 Nanook’s story appears to tell itself. It may well have been progressive in comparison with the “curio” approach of contemporary travelogues such as those of Martin and Osa Johnson, and indeed Flaherty was quite conscious of wanting to create a more “intimate” portrait than had been done in any other ethnographic motion picture.38 The subjectivity that Flaherty creates for his characters is, however, extremely limited. The simplicity of the raw struggle between man and nature in Nanook imputes an existential simplicity to the performers, who are identified completely with the roles they were asked to play.

Both Curtis and Flaherty chose to depict their respective native communities in the eternal present tense of the ethnographic “salvage paradigm.” Flaherty was perhaps motivated less by an ethnographic con-
cern to document the ways of a “vanishing race” than by a concern for dramatic content. The early scenes in the film that juxtapose the Inuit with the white man’s world of gramophones and cod-liver oil do more to primitivize the Inuit than any of Curtis’s head-hunting, precisely because of the heightened realism of Flaherty’s visual style. It is because of Flaherty’s naturalized narrative realism, created through his “mastery” of film language, that he could be charged with faking scenes, a charge that only authenticizes the realist context of the staging. This realism is promoted by the performances of the Inuit, as well as the drama of everyday life that they were asked to enact.

With the removal of all signs of acting and theater, Nanook could be more fully accommodated into the aesthetic realm of cinematic realism and, through John Grierson’s endorsement, become instrumental in the development of documentary codes of authoritative authenticity. Flaherty’s still photographs of the Inuit are in much the same style as Curtis’s Indian photography, but that romantic stylization is more acceptable as realism when the still pose is animated in “moving pictures.” Nanook is in a sense the cinematic equivalent to Curtis’s photographic romanticism in its stylized aestheticization of native life. It completely fulfills the modernist predicament of recognizing the cultural purity and integrity of the ethnographic other while keeping that culture at a safe distance. The distance is made safe by representing native culture as outside of history, stuck in an eternally present tense. Both Nanook and Headhunters blur the distinction between the native performers and their ancestors, and yet the failure of Headhunters as narrative realism invites that historical difference to be read back into the film.

Headhunters is a film that forces ethnography into a wider discussion of film history. The theatrical aspect of Headhunters supplements narrativity with a discourse of the ethnic body (“tribalism”) that can be traced to many other films of the first thirty-five years of film history, including the Hollywood Indian pictures that were Curtis’s inspiration.39 Nanook has become a privileged instance of art cinema precisely because its universal humanism subjugates the ethnic subject to the authority of realism. In Headhunters the stereotype of the primitive redeems the ethnic subject in a discourse of specificity and historicity. Its peculiar mix of art and science needs to be recognized as a prototypical experimental film with a complex spectatorial address.
Ethnographic Spectatorship

The Kwakiutl dances and ceremonies in *Headhunters*, like Curtis’s earlier actuality footage of Navajo and Hopi Indians, are shot from a single camera setup with no editing within continuous actions. Compared to the actualities, the Kwakiutl are much more exhibitionist in their presentation of their culture. This theatricality, both in their performances of Curtis’s melodramatic characters and in their own mythical characters, is what makes the film such a different form of ethnography. The address to the spectator is thus somewhat different.

The sets where the ceremonial dances are staged are designed as proscenium-framed platforms, with totem poles on each side and a curtain behind the performers. In one scene, the curtain drops to reveal another row of costumed dancers. In another, a front row of dancers face the camera, a second row have their backs to the camera, and behind them a row of painted boards are raised and waved about. Holm and Quimby say that these boards “represent a supernatural being, and are described as being dangerous to look at.” Their explanation is surprising because the film lacks any sense of supernatural or mystical forces. The presentational aspect of these ceremonies and their indication of the theatricality of Kwakiutl culture suggest that they were designed precisely “to be looked at,” but not by the camera, or by the white ethnographer and his audience. Curtis’s single wide-angle lens cannot even represent the depth of field necessary for the full effect of the spectacle. Again, the image is an allegorical one, slightly distanced from the “magic,” precisely because of the structure of the “attraction” that keeps spectacle and spectator very separate. The sacred aspect of the ritual is essentially protected from filmic appropriation.

Curtis claims that he had to enter into intensive negotiations in order to cast the film, as it had to be determined that each actor and actress was “entitled” to play his or her designated part. In the end, Motana was played by George Hunt’s son; three different women played the female lead, Naida; and one actor played two of the principal male leads. When Holm and Quimby screened the uncensored remains of Curtis’s film in the 1960s, some Kwakiutl spectators who recognized actors and actresses could not follow the story line, which arbitrarily identified individuals as characters. They likewise saw locations as familiar places rather than as the places named in intertitles. Insofar as the Kwakiutl
spectators read the images indexically rather than symbolically, theirs is a resistant reading, against the metaphoric grain of the text.

Instead of a “photoplay,” Kwakiutl audiences may well see a documentary of their performance in a white man’s movie. The film constitutes a living memory of both the traditional practices and the colonial containment activated by the rigorous framing and “photoplay” conventions. As a text of cultural memory, the film is formally allegorical, enacting several layers of representation. The contact between the 1914 performers and the 1972 soundtrack is in itself a vibrant historical correspondence, an inscription of the distance between generations, and the echoing sense of community between them. The peculiar mix of fiction and documentary that is War Canoes invites a broad spectrum of readings and meanings. The fictional aspect enables the documentary to be read differently, to be “displaced” and made ambiguous, giving the viewer more control. Dai Vaughan argues that once the boundary between fiction and documentary is perceived as being more fluid, ethnographic film style can and should be wide open: “Superficially reasonable demands that our films be comprehensible are often in effect demands that the viewer be browbeaten into sharing our understanding of them. Documentary’s images are, ideally, not illustrative but constitutive. They are constitutive of the viewer’s meanings, since it is the viewer who constitutes them as documentary.”

It is only recently that Headhunters became a documentary through its second life as War Canoes. Originally, it was apprehended as a fiction, constituted by quite a different audience than that of the anthropology and native communities. In Moving Picture World in 1914, Stephen Bush enthusiastically described the film as “a gem of the motion picture art.” He praised its epic quality and compared it to Wagnerian opera. Film theorist Vachel Lindsay described the representation of the Indians as “figures in bronze.” These critics confirm the affinities of ethnological primitivism and modern art that were so prevalent during this period, but they also point to the highly allegorical nature of the film. Even for these viewers, the actors represent their own nobility, savagery, and spirituality without becoming fully identified with the primitivism they enact.

Nanook of the North has also lent itself to reappropriation by the Inuit community. Zacharias Kunuk’s Quaggiq (1989), a videotape made for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, is a kind of remaking of Nanook by
and for Inuit actors. The community television aesthetic and amateur acting retains exactly the sense of doubleness conveyed by the histrionic performance style of *Headhunters*. Claude Massot’s documentary *Nanook Revisited* (1990) features contemporary Inuit audiences laughing at and critiquing *Nanook*, but also exhibiting a certain fascination with its romanticism. The apparent persistence of *Nanook* in Inuit culture as a site of re-viewing, remaking, and rereading suggests that while the salvage paradigm is an ethnographic allegory of colonialism, it may also preserve a utopian form of memory of some historic value to native communities.

*War Canoes* and *Nanook* represent exceptional moments in film history because they are already so highly intertextual, representing the salvage paradigm as a form of narrative desire. The ideal of cultural autonomy and integrity is represented in these films as an ideal, and on some level, they do answer to the narcissism of film spectatorship, to see oneself or one’s ethnic group on-screen, occupying the space of a privileged subjectivity. Despite the imperialist paradigms in which these silent ethnographic films were made, native viewers need to be credited with the ability to read against the grain of colonialism. In the attempts of native communities to maintain cultural identity through traditional languages and activities, the films offer a unique image of the previous generation’s attempt to do exactly the same thing.

Interviewed in *Box of Treasures* (Chuck Olin, 1983), Gloria Cranmer Webster, a Kwakiutl museum curator, points to the monumental canoes in motion as the most valuable aspect of the film, which to her is otherwise “hokey.” Obviously, we cannot impute readings or viewings to native audiences, and the playfulness that for me raises the film far above the hypocrisy of so much scientific and aesthetic ethnography may ultimately be just another academic argument. And yet Webster’s explanation for why the Kwakiutl so eagerly took part in Curtis’s film is that it was, quite simply, a lot of fun. If the film can teach us anything about postmodern ethnography, it might be in the very perversity of the “photoplay” intertext of entertainment and the “primitive” cinema of attractions. As an antirealist discourse, it frees ethnography from the burden of authority and from the weight of a historiography of loss. *War Canoes* is a many-layered film about a vibrant, living, native community with strong ties to both its colonial and precolonial past. The film, in its many layers and fragmentary survival, is a unique example of a post--
modern document of cultural memory. Instead of representing a dying culture, Curtis’s film inscribes death into the reenactment of a culture whose cinematic documentation becomes a form of redemption.

Primitive Cinema and “Free Play”

Within the history of ethnographic film, Headhunters may be the primitive moment, the primal ethnographic style that is so politically incorrect that it is perfectly legible as an allegory of colonialist practice. The beauty of the film is in its perverse inauthenticity, its stylized artifice and theatricality. Its allegorical structure points to that which cannot be represented, that which lies outside the domain of the white man’s camera. Curtis’s artistic aspirations were far more commercial than those of the avant-garde that came to identify with early cinema, and yet it was his artistic license that enabled him to challenge the fiction and travelogue conventions of his day. Especially in its contemporary form, as an archival text, the film can be aligned with the avant-garde and its re-reading of primitive cinema. However, In the Land of the Headhunters is best situated somewhere between Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and Josephine Baker in its attempt to capitalize on Curtis’s ethnography by means of Hollywood film conventions. In the sheer perversity of the project, the film may provide a model for a postcolonial, postmodern form of ethnographic representation.

The affinities between the American avant-garde and early cinema lie in the discovery and rediscovery of film as a language of representation. From the perspective of gender relations, Judith Mayne has suggested that the alterity of “primitive” cinema has been a rich source of inspiration for feminist film practice. She points out that “the inquiry into ‘primitivism’ is very much connected, not to the dismantling or bracketing of narrative, but to its reconceptualization.”47 In the case of primitive ethnography, we have a similar opportunity that might restore the utopian thrust of primitivism to a postcolonial narrative. Although Curtis’s original film may have moved beyond the forms of early cinema and included some of the devices of continuity editing associated with the nascent codification of narrative realism, the “restored” version of the film interrupts that narrativity and displays it as an archival series of fragments. Despite the different terms of authenticity informing the original and the remake, the Kwakiutl survive their cinematic (mis)treatment as performers. If Curtis’s still photography
preserved native people in a perpetual perspective of disappearance, his turn to melodrama repositions the native in the role of agency and desiring subjectivity. In its present state, as a film that is neither a documentary (because it is so inauthentic) nor a fiction (because the narrative is so incomprehensible), *Headhunters/War Canoes* is a key instance of the survival of a “cinema of attractions” beyond the parameters of early cinema. The imbrication of cinematic and ethnographic primitivism ultimately produces an excessive discourse of native subjectivity.