

Decolonizing Space: Indigenous Counter-Mapping in Documentary Cinema

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Since its inception, cartography has been an instrument of power. Used to chart the unknown territories of the New World, it served to map the resources to be extracted by imperial European powers, as well as the people living on the land. Imposing borders where none existed before, map-making became a tool of colonial domination and oppression in Canada and the United States.

Since the late 1960s in Canada, indigenous artists and communities began to re-appropriate this weapon against its intended purpose. Cartography, in indigenous hands, worked to re-introduce a Native presence and experience on the map of the nation, as well as to claim ancestral rights to the land. Maps became tools of subversion and resistance, allowing indigenous communities to return the colonial gaze and “produce new ways of seeing” (Kaplan 1997).

This paper will take these counter-mapping initiatives as its topic, from the prism of documentary cinema and its activist potential. How does cinema provide a fitting tool for an embodied and more subjective account of space and the land? How can indigenous filmmakers provide alternative cartographies, avoiding a colonial framework of representation? How do questions of ownership and control problematize the very notion of “counter-mapping”? This paper will seek to answer these questions through an analysis of several indigenous films that take space and borders as their subjects.

Author’s Bio

Lola Remy is a doctoral student in Film and Moving Image Studies at Concordia University, Montréal. She holds a Master’s Degree in Art History from the Université de la Sorbonne, Paris. Her research focuses on the appropriation of indigenous knowledge and artefacts by artists and anthropologists in postwar-America. She is interested in the connections between ethnographic collections and artistic practices of assemblage.

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