

Industrial films as a glimmer of hope? Extractive industries and Indigenous resilience and resurgence in northern Quebec

THE ROAD OF IRON

After discovering iron ore in northern Quebec in the 1940s, the Iron Ore Company of Canada (IOC) decided to extract it. Because no road led there, the parallel construction of the mine, a mining town called Schefferville, and a 356-mile railroad was necessary. The four-year-long construction was filmed, and after the project's completion in 1954, several films based on this footage were released. Schefferville and the railroad have attracted filmmakers since their creation, resulting in a corpus retracing their stories. This article will shed light on important films from this corpus to trace a shift of focus from colonial to Indigenous perspectives.

The most relevant example from the early productions is *Road of Iron* (Hewitson, 1955). The film tells of the railroad's construction within a colonial narrative: white men free the iron ore held captive by the vicious, dangerous nature of the North. Their battle against nature is justified by technological superiority, monetary investment, and economic thinking. The North is represented as a vast and empty space of nothingness, through which the frontier between civilization and wilderness is pushed. The Indigenous populations whose hunting territory the railroad is built through are mentioned only once in the film as "the occasional Montagnais Indian" (Hewitson, 1955, 6:10–6:12). Surprisingly, the film was not produced by the IOC but by a national institution, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Following the westward expansion and the myth of the frontier in the United States as a role model, the NFB instrumentalized the mining project to build a Canadian iden-

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tity on the myth of the North and the colonial story it mediates.

COLONIAL POWER RELATIONS FOR CHILDREN

A few years later, the NFB went even further with the fictional children's film *Ti-Jean in the Land of Iron* (Garceau, 1958). In this film, the folklore character Ti-Jean, a very strong young boy, sets out to explore the Iron Ore Country. The little adventurer, wearing a fringed leather jacket and a feathered hat, makes his way up to the mine of Schefferville, saves it from disaster, takes control of production, makes numbers explode, and—when he gets bored—leaves on the iron ore train. On his journey, Ti-Jean meets

a "young Indian girl [who] knows her country well" (7:22–7:25), so he asks her for directions. However, he ignores her answer and makes his own way. Although the boy's jacket calls to mind Indigenous influences in Canadian culture, he obviously is a white Canadian character. Besides clearly differentiating between the white hero and the "Indian dreamer," the film visually emphasizes the power relations between the two children—the small barefoot Indigenous girl on the beach looks up admiringly to the tall adventurous white boy on his white horse. Thereby, the film reproduces settler-colonial stereotypes and views—stereotypes that were produced from the white perspective within this power relation—in an educational children's short.

TWO POPULATIONS IN ONE TOWN

Le dernier glacier (Frappier & Leduc, 1984), also produced by the NFB, was made when the shocking decision to close the mine of Schefferville was taken in 1982. The film, which is framed by the train ride from and to Schefferville, mixes documentary and fiction; it intertwines archival footage, contemporary news footage, interviews, on-location shots, and the story of miner Raoul losing his job, his ex-wife Carmen, and their son Benoît. It tells the story not only of its main characters but also of the daily lives of the population, both white and Indigenous, including men, women, and children. During a hockey match, Jacques Gautier is presented to the audience as the best player on the ice, whose team from the reservation is vanquished by the grocery store's team that night.

Industrial films as a glimmer of hope?, page 21

Industrial films as a glimmer of hope? continued from page 20

Gautier is then shown ice fishing in a series of uncommented-upon shots before the commentary explains that he turned down an offer to play in the National Hockey League, unwilling to leave the paradise of Schefferville. Although the film does feature the Indigenous population, there is still a distinction made between white and Indigenous, and it becomes clear that the white population is linked to civilization while the Indigenous population is linked to the wilderness of the North.

A DECAYING GHOST TOWN

Les enfants de Schefferville (Alleyn & Hayeur, 1996) shows the town's situation more than a decade after the mine's closure. It features interviews with locals and visitors who address problems, including colonial power relations. Although there are only about 50 white inhabitants left in the dying town, facing more than 1,200 Indigenous people, they remain in power: "Despite their overwhelming majority, the Montagnais have no control over the infrastructures. The sway of the whites is still strong: only two individuals share all the businesses" (6:42–6:55, translated by the author). An Indigenous interviewee hints at experiences he had as a child with the white colonizers, as he explains: "When I was young, I was always told: 'Forget! Forget your language, forget your traditions, forget, forget everything. . . . Even so, once I returned home, my parents didn't understand me. Then, I was lost" (10:43–11:13, translated by the author). He further explains that he only managed to regain self-value and identity in the North, where he grew up, by following family traditions, hunting, canoeing, fishing—in this very place.

TSHIJETIN

The idea of finding or rediscovering their own, Indigenous identities is also addressed in *Tshiuëtin* (Monnet, 2016). "Since december [*sic*] 1, 2005 and for the first time in Canadian history, a railway is owned by a group of First Nations" (0:37–0:43). Against this background,

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passengers and employees are interviewed during the aesthetic black-and-white train ride on the Road of Iron. The train conductor explains: "Those who get off the train in the woods, they come to find a certain identity that they surely lost" (4:46–4:55). Hence, the train, which is now run by Indigenous peoples, helps those who got lost in the South rediscover their identity in the North. By setting the film on the train and not in Schefferville, the Indigenous perspective is broadened through the passengers not living on their land (anymore), and their newly gained importance from the railroad is underlined.

A SYMBOL OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY

Train du Grand Nord (Chaumel, 2016), which was made and produced by Indigenous players, also addresses the ties that a journey to the North can establish. One passenger says: "It takes me back to my past, where I went hunting in those places with . . . my family" (4:35–4:43, translated by the author). Looking back to earlier films, such activities had ceased being practised as result of the intrusion of the railroad. However, these activities were revived and have again become tradition as the train offers the possibility to access the

North. Finally, the railroad is productively used by its passengers—the Indigenous peoples—to the benefit of their culture.

In summary, a railroad that symbolized colonial power and profit-motivated extractivism, and ignored Indigenous people in the 1950s, has been turned into a symbol of Indigenous resistance, resilience, self-determination, and identity. This is an identity that filmmakers have shown persistent interest in over recent decades, with an increasingly important presence in films on the Road of Iron. While early films neglected the Indigenous peoples on whose territory the IOC realized its project, later films have explored the colonial impact of the project through different perspectives, such as the perspectives of the white and Indigenous inhabitants of Schefferville, Indigenous residents and visitors, and the different Indigenous peoples of the North.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE?

The most recent feature on Schefferville, where mining activities resumed a decade ago, is *Nouveau-Québec* (Fortin, 2021). In this austere, almost chilling film about encounters and relations between white and Indigenous people

Industrial films as a glimmer of hope?, page 22

Industrial films as a glimmer of hope?

continued from page 21

in the North, the train takes over the role of a conspiring enemy in the way of the white protagonists. It seems as if the train went through a transition and is no longer an intruder subjugating the nature of the North but has become a part of it, in accord with the Indigenous peoples.

Although the resurgence of mining activities in the last decade has created jobs for the Indigenous population, the focus is on the danger of shifting back—from the Indigenous people to economic and extractivist interests. Old patterns of colonial logic and a vocabulary of numbers as promoted in *Road of Iron* can be observed in recent TV productions such as *Un train nommé Tshiuëtin* (Bruyère & Blais, 2019). It will be up to future directors not to fall back into a colonial perspective, and up to the mining companies to keep their promise not to repeat the errors made in the past. They will have

to stick to their set priorities, despite possible future economic changes, to prove that the justifiable doubts and fears of the Indigenous population—that history will repeat itself—are wrong, and to turn this glimmer of hope into a flame. 🍁

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