From Labrador to Leipzig: Film and Infrastructures along the Fur Trail

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ABSTRACT

Background: Since 1919, the Hudson's Bay Company has sponsored films to document and advertise its trading operations. Films such as Hudson's Bay Company Centenary Celebrations (1919), The Heritage of Adventure (1920), and Leipzig Exhibition footage (1930) offered views of North American landscapes and Hudson's Bay Company trading posts and department stores alongside ethnographic footage of Indigenous Peoples.

Analysis: Drawing on archival research conducted at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and textual film analysis of these “fur films,” this article theorizes their production and circulation within settler visual culture.

Conclusions and implications: Tracing the films’ paths from the Eastern Arctic to Montréal, and from London, England, to Leipzig, Germany, this article demonstrates how these moving pictures participate in the entanglement of settler and infrastructural projects that characterize early twentieth-century Canada.

Keywords: Hudson's Bay Company; infrastructure studies; film history; fur trade; industrial exhibitions; media studies; labour; colonialism

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte : Depuis 1919, la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson a commandité des films pour rendre compte de ses opérations commerciales et pour faire connaître celles-ci. Des films comme Hudson's Bay Company Centenary Celebrations (1919), The Heritage of Adventure (1920), et Leipzig Exhibition Footage (1930) offrent des perspectives sur des paysages nord-américains et sur les postes de traite et les magasins à rayons de la Compagnie ainsi que des scènes de peuples autochtones à valeur ethnographique.

Analyse : Cet article se fonde sur une recherche menée aux Archives de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson et sur une analyse textuelle de « films à fourrures » pour examiner la production et la circulation de ces derniers dans un contexte de culture visuelle colonisatrice.


Introduction

For commuters passing through the Gare Centrale de Montréal, the cavernous hall of the city’s central train station offers a glimpse into the industrial development of Canada. Completed in 1943 by the Canadian National Railway, the station is part of a centuries-long infrastructural project to facilitate the transportation of goods, people, and ideas across this settler colonial state. The architectural design of the interior concourse, with its high ceiling and elegant azure and white bas-reliefs adorning the upper walls, projects an air of mid-century international modernism. The bas-reliefs, in particular, are eye-catching (see Figure 1). Designed by Canadian artist Charles Comfort in the art deco style and realized by Sebastiano Aiello (Parks Canada Agency, n.d.), the friezes depict industrious individuals engaging in a variety of economic, scientific, and cultural activities: prospecting for gold, gazing at the night sky by telescope, harvesting wheat, swimming, composing music, manufacturing locomotives and airplanes, and preparing for war. Each wall, labelled according to the cardinal directions, participates in the cultural production of the idea of Canada by representing a region—“Est,” “Ouest,” “Sud,” and “Nord”—through stylized depictions of arts and industry since the earliest days of European colonial settlement.

Figure 1: Bas-reliefs adorning the concourse of Montréal Central Station (Québec)
The concourse’s back left wall, which presides over a fast-food restaurant and restrooms, visualizes the country’s colonial fascination with Northern landscapes and settler myth-making. Romanticized images of fur trappers and dog sleds intertwine with those of fashionable modern ladies donning furs, an igloo, and scampering minks. Undergirding these activities are the lyrics to “Ô Canada,” which would become the national anthem almost four decades after the artwork’s installation: Ô Canada! Terre de nos aïeux, ton front est ceint de fleurons glorieux. Notably, these imaginary scenes of “Northern” life in Canada position fur as its material epitome. Fur is at once a product and reminder of the fur trade’s once-prominent position within Canada’s cultural, economic, and political development. Within settler Canadian and Western cultures, fur has also become a luxury object, passing in and out of fashion and controversy depending on societal levels of discomfort with the hunt.

Similar to other historical and cultural sites across the country that memorialize the experiences of the Québécois voyageurs, Indigenous trappers, and other moments of colonial contact, Montréal’s Central Station is a concrete marker of the industry’s profound impressions on Canada’s settler infrastructures and visual culture. These imprints of fur and ice on settler imaginaries and myth-making extend across media—including, popular culture, architecture, public art, and fashion. This article turns to a collection of silent films produced and collected by the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) that similarly participated in and contributed to the political and cultural economy of fur captured in the Comfort bas-reliefs. Chartered as a British Crown corporation in May 1670 with exclusive trading rights over the Hudson Bay watershed, the HBC operated as a fur-trading business for several hundred years, exporting furs to American and European markets well into the mid-twentieth century. Today, the HBC is perhaps most well-known for its chain of department stores: The Bay/La Baie.

Starting in 1919, as part of the commemorative activities celebrating the company’s 250th anniversary, the HBC turned to cinema as a tool to document, advertise, and celebrate its corporate activities in Canada and abroad. As visual documents and material traces of settler and Indigenous relations during the early twentieth century, these “fur films” assumed a range of forms, from travelogues to short films to corporate pictures with limited release. These include sprawling, theatrical-length sponsored pictures, such as *Hudson’s Bay Company Centenary Celebrations* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1919) and *The Romance of the Far Fur Country* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) and its counterpart for British release, *The Heritage of Adventure* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920); film advertisements designed for international exhibition, such as *Leipzig Exhibition footage* (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930); and amateur productions, such as *To the North, “Nascopie” Voyage* (Mills, 1937), recorded aboard the HBC supply ship. Documenting the continent’s varied landscapes, modern life in burgeoning Canadian cities, political visits by corporate and
governmental officials to Indigenous communities and trading posts, as well as the operations of the fur trade itself, these films offer a rare view into settler societies in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The HBC, alongside the federal government, the Grenfell Mission, and religious organizations, such as the Anglican Church, used film, scientific and tourist photography, magic lantern shows, oil painting, publications such as The Beaver, and other media forms to produce the North as an object for scientific analysis, a means to nation-build, and an ethnographic spectacle for southern viewers. Corporate image-making became an established component of the Nascopie's seasonal supply runs, with wealthy tourists, artists, and filmmakers frequently making the voyage and recording their journeys in oils, photo emulsion, and the written word (Geller, 2004). American cinematographer Richard Finnie and his wife, Alyce Finnie, for instance, shot footage aboard the 1937 supply run of the Nascopie for Patrol to the Northwest Passage (1937), an unreleased silent picture sponsored by the federal Department of Mines and Resources. The HBC’s public relations department, along with the American Wildlife Institute, also sponsored American nature photographer Lorene Squire, funding her travels through northwest Canada in 1937 in collaboration with the HBC’s corporate magazine, The Beaver (McManus, 2015). The HBC continued to financially support the production of shorts and feature-length films for promotional purposes and internal use well into the 1980s.

As an institution, the HBC is also noteworthy for its deep archive, meticulously collected and maintained for over three hundred years. Records of its corporate operations, expansion, land sales, and public relations date back to the late seventeenth century. According to the website of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (HBCA) (Manitoba, 2021), the company’s head office in London, England, started organizing and describing its records in the 1920s for internal and scholarly use; in 1974, four years after the HBC moved its head office to Canada, the company loaned the records to the Archives of Manitoba. Today, the HBCA holdings include more than 140 film and videotape recordings; hundreds of sound recordings; around 13,000 photographs, maps, and architectural drawings; a small art collection; and a vast collection of corporate and private textual records, which were officially donated to the Manitoba in 1994 (Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, n.d.). The films analyzed here were donated by the HBC to the British Film Institute in London in 1956. Archival prints of The Heritage of Adventure (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920), Hudson's Bay Company Centenary Celebrations (Wyckoff & Derr, 1919), and Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930) were repatriated to Canada in 2011, when the British Film Institute donated them to the HBCA (n.d.).

This study of the HBC’s fur films fits into a broader conversation about the relationships between empire, cinema, and the archive. Many prominent film scholars have written about the colonial film archive as a visual corpus and epis-
temological institution, about the ways that colonial and ethnographic filmmaking participated historically in the racialization of non-Western and non-white peoples, and strategies employed by Indigenous and racialized scholars to remediate visual archives and “speak back” to these histories of colonial violence (Amad, 2013; Grieveson & MacCabe, 2011a, 2011b; Rony, 1996). In their two-volume project on British colonial cinema, Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (2011a) argue that turning to the archive destabilizes previously insular histories of “Britain” (p. 8) and those of its colonies. Such sustained archival work makes clear that the “history of British cinema is the history of empire” (p. 9), just as documentary—a mode employed by the Empire Marketing Board under John Grierson (who later founded the National Film Board of Canada)—“can only be understood in relation to the complex legacy of imperialism” (p. 11).

In a similar vein, this article examines an early collection of sponsored films from the HBCA, held in Winnipeg at the Archives of Manitoba, that evidence the colonial foundations of Canadian film culture. The emergence of non-theatrical and what Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson (2011) term “useful cinema” (p. 2) practices in Canada are bound up in the country’s layered histories of white settlement; the territorial dispossession of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples; and extractive resource economies (Jekanowski, 2018, 2019). The HBC fur films can be read through these multiple, intersecting frameworks of useful and settler filmmaking practices. As corporate films, their production was certainly motivated by a desire to help manufacture the HBC’s public image using the new, mass communication technology of cinema, capitalizing on the industry’s association with modernity, mobility, and spectacular motion. These texts were also “useful” in that the spectacles of modern luxury, wilderness adventure, and Indigenous ethnography in which they trafficked could help bolster the longevity of the HBC as an institution (Acland & Wasson, 2011). Similar to later documentary and non-theatrical films produced by the National Film Board of Canada,3 the HBC films perform a “colonizing discourse,” contributing to a visual language within British Canadian culture for representing and making sense of Indigenous people, the natural environment, and white settlement (Gittings, 2002). Filmmaking in Canada is intertwined with these mutually constitutive projects of settler nation-building and extraction as a resource colony.

In attending to the workings of the fur trade—its logistics, labour, and many supply routes—the HBC fur films offer useful entry points for historians and media scholars into the imbrication of transportation and communication infrastructures along the fur trail. At the same time, they offer important glimpses into the early years of non-fiction, amateur, and advertising film shot in Canada for audiences in southern cities—Montréal, Calgary, Edmonton, Vancouver, New York, Boston—and overseas. In what follows, research conducted at the HBCA is drawn on to analyze the film texts within their production and circulation contexts as
examples of the corporate and ethnographic visualization of Indigenous peoples, animals, and environments in non-theatrical motion pictures. At the same time, this visual discourse analysis draws parallels between the strategies employed in the HBC films and other advertising media from the period, most notably in a 1930 public fur exhibition. Unpacking the visual representations of other forms of production within and adjacent to the fur industry makes it possible to map some of the many interconnections between mercantile, settler, and communication infrastructures during the 1920s through the entanglement of film and fur. This includes the production of colonial space, the rendering of animal remains as capital and energy, the extraction of Indigenous labour, and the production of settler imaginaries about the East Arctic and Indigenous peoples. I approach this research as a white settler film scholar; I am as much a visitor to these mercantile histories as to the archive itself.

This article loosely traces the pathways and networks of fur mapped out on celluloid by the HBC between 1919 and the 1930s. Departing from the city of Montréal, which European settlers erected on lands known to the Mohawk Nation as Tiohtia:ke, the article then moves northward to sites of fur production in the Eastern Arctic on Baffin Island, Nunavut (then still part of the Northwest Territories), and Nunatsiavut (Labrador) to trace the expansion of fur infrastructures as settler infrastructures. The second section continues this movement east, across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, landing in the warehouses of London, England, to examine the production of trans-Atlantic intimacies through gendered labour along the fur supply lines. The article concludes with the trade shows of Leipzig, Germany, where filmic advertisements for the HBC also served to advertise the former British empire, Canadian modernity, and the transformation of animals into energy infrastructures. Mapping the transnational commodity lines of fur through film foregrounds the concomitantly material and imaginary forms of production that these films facilitate.

Labrador: Fur infrastructures as settler infrastructures
In July 1934, Sir Patrick Ashley Cooper, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, and his wife, Kathleen, set sail for the eastern Canadian Arctic aboard the Nascopie. Departing from the port of Montréal amid much fanfare, the couple would accompany the ship on its annual supply run to HBC trading posts in Nunavik (northern Québec), Labrador, modern-day Nunavut, and the coast of the Hudson Bay. As the Nascopie steamed down the St. Lawrence River, camera operators quickly recorded the scene: the ship, the procession of bagpipers, the cheering crowds. The Hudson's Bay Company would use this footage of the governor's official tour in two 16mm films later that year: Governor's Trip to Eastern Canadian Arctic (1934a) and Trading into Hudson's Bay (1934b).

In July 1919, fifteen years prior to Sir Ashley Cooper's journey northward, American cinematographers Harold M. Wyckoff and Bill Derr of Educational Films
Corporation also left Montréal, hired by the HBC to make a film commemorating its 250th anniversary. On what would become known as the “Moving Picture Expedition,” Wyckoff and Derr traversed the Eastern Arctic by ship, travelled inland across the prairies to Winnipeg, Calgary, and coastal British Columbia, and ended in the Athabasca region of northern Alberta in the winter of 1920. They produced about eighteen hours of footage of the land, fauna, Indigenous communities, and the HBC’s diverse operations, which Educational Films used to create what would become one of the earliest feature-length documentary pictures: *The Romance of the Far Fur Country* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920).

As visual records of company operations across vast stretches of Canada, these films notably and persistently attend to the various ways in which the filmmakers, as well as the commodities and peoples they documented, moved across the land and waterways. The footage of portage routes, dog sleds, airplanes (both from the ground and the sky), railways, canoes, and steamships structure the narrative progression of many of the fur films. Some scenes in particular were arranged so that the cinematographer could shoot his own crew as they packed up or travelled by canoe. Like Sir Ashley Cooper and the film crew of the Moving Picture Expedition, the mobility of certain (white) individuals, film images, and goods underpin the text, impetus, and production of the fur films—both financially and logistically. The result is a visual corpus that is indexed to the social and physical infrastructures of the early twentieth-century fur trade.

As with many other former British colonies, Canada functioned as a producer of raw materials and a market for British manufactured goods, an economic relationship well-documented in the fur films. However, as a settler society, Canada—then and now—occupies the lands and waterways of Indigenous nations. The British Crown, religious institutions, corporations such as the HBC, and later the Canadian state employed a range of policies and strategies to dispossess, assimilate, and suppress Indigenous Peoples (as well as their land claims and cultures) and dispossess them of territory that European settlers sought to inhabit and remake (Veracini, 2010). Infrastructures, according to Brian Larkin (2013), “are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (p. 328). Made possible through the creation of physical networks, such as trading posts and transportation routes—as much as by more intangible systems, such as finance—the fur trade can be understood as a foundational infrastructure for the nascent settler state.

Like the railways that served as a national infrastructure following Confederation, the HBC and its competitors, such as the Northwest Company, established a web of transportation routes and settlements, some of which became permanent (Young, 2017). Harold Innis (1999) famously theorized the fur trade as a staples economy, along with the cod fisheries and other extractive industries. In his staples thesis, Innis (1999) argues that Canada’s economic development oc-
curred in relation to European economies, as the country’s resources were extracted and then shipped abroad as “staples” (p. 383) to be manufactured in metropolitan centres in exchange for processed goods. This model of the staples economy reordered Indigenous economies and social orders, as well as ecosystems, as this imperial system connected what empire considered to be a “peripheral zone” to industrialized centres of commerce by way of the “extraction, transportation, and exchange” (Young, 2017, p. 240) of a single resource.

The route taken by the HBC’s Moving Picture Expedition roughly structures the narratives of several pictures emerging from the HBC’s short-lived partnership with Educational Films, and also parallels the centre-periphery model of Innis’ (1999) staples thesis. The first reel of Hudson’s Bay Company Centenary Celebrations (Wyckoff & Derr, 1919), for example, begins with a brief, congratulatory history of the HBC’s founding and then cuts to present-day Montréal with a title card announcing, “Two hundred and fifty years later.” Touristic views of downtown Montréal recorded from the famous Belvedere lookout point atop Mont Royal Park are leisurely followed by shots of the Montréal Harbour and shipping warehouses, where labourers load supplies onboard the Nascopie (see Figure 2). From here, according to the film’s title cards, the Nascopie will set sail for the icy coasts

Figure 2: Dock workers loading supplies aboard the Nascopie in Montréal (Québec)

Source: Courtesy of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, Hudson’s Bay Company Centenary Celebrations, 1919, F119
of Labrador to supply remote communities, such as Port Burwell on western Killiniq Island (in contemporary Nunavut). As a settled community of company employees and Inuit, the town of Port Burwell developed around the post constructed by the HBC to source and transport furs (see Figure 3). Panning shots of Port Burwell recorded by boat showcase the port’s harbour filled with local fishing boats and ice floes, as well as company buildings, a warehouse, and a church on-shore. From here, precious furs will be packed and transported south for sorting and wholesale in industrialized centres such as London, New York, or Leipzig, some of which will finally reach Canadian shoppers in fancy new department stores in Winnipeg and Montréal.

**Figure 3: Entry to Port Burwell on Killiniq Island (Nunavut)**

An early scene from the now-lost *The Romance of the Far Fur Country* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) similarly records what is presented as the mundane operations at one of the HBC’s many remote warehouses. On Charlton Island, located at the mouth of the Rupert River in James Bay, workers unload supplies from the *Nascopie*, transporting them by trolley cart to a warehouse emblazoned with a large HBC crest (see Figure 4). This tiny island, a title card informs the viewer, is a distribution point for the James Bay district. The only visible structures are a few wooden saltbox houses and the corporate warehouse. Remote trading posts and distribution sites that are accessible only by ship are depicted in other scenes as well. These locations are presented as evidence of the HBC’s geographical reach and corporate success, boasting a vast network of footholds across the waterways and topographies of the continent. Considering Innis’ (1999) analysis of the roles of transportation and communication technologies in the production of space, the routes travelled by fur (and the HBC Moving Picture Expedition) perform a kind of space-making as well. The centrality of transportation to the film’s production and narrative produces a mercantile geography that is represented on screen through the fragmented depictions of the extraction sites, markets, and trails these mobile commodities passed through.
Infrastructures also constitute the “architecture” (Larkin, 2013, p. 328) of modern societies. Modernity is, of course, highly uneven, unspooling across geographies and societies in unequal forms, embedding different types of economic, political, and technological inequalities in the process. In Canada—as part of the former British empire and a contemporary colonial power founded on the dispossession, removal, and assimilation of Indigenous Peoples—the nineteenth and early twentieth-century expansion of modernity also facilitated new forms of land grabs, white settlement, and legislated Indigenous assimilation. Central to these intersecting colonial practices was the expansion of transportation and communication infrastructures, such as the transcontinental railway and telegraph system, which Innis (1971) details in A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Settler jurisdiction is both actualized and legitimated through these communication systems and infrastructures (Cowen, 2018). Pointing to the cyclical logic of settler colonialism, Deborah Cowen (2018) reminds us that “the infrastructures of settler colonialism are in fact, settler colonial infrastructures” (n.p.) because the lands on which these structures and systems are built were never ceded by Indigenous Peoples in the first place. As a technology frequently associated with modernity and increasing mobility, early cinema (especially 16mm) helped to cap-
ture and promote new urban developments, nation-building and infrastructural projects, and settlers’ social lives. At the same time, cinematographers—including those behind the HBC fur films—also turned to the continent’s varied landscapes and “wilderness” as subjects of wonder or concern, sites of conquest, and places for imagining and legitimating Anglophone and Francophone settler identities. Films such as *The Romance of the Far Fur Country* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) and *Governor’s Trip to Eastern Canadian Arctic* (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1934a) forged a kind of “photographic encounter” (Geller, 2004, p. 5) between settler society and Indigenous communities, between the imagined urban spectator and the distant environments of Baffin Island, Hudson Bay, and the places in between.

While the HBC fur films examined here never received broad distribution in Canada or elsewhere, they nevertheless contributed to the expansion of settler infrastructures and land ownership in material ways. Starting in 1919, the HBC sought to use its financial interests in Educational Films Corporation to promote its real estate operations in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. In 1870, the Government of Canada purchased Rupert’s Land from the HBC, a vast territory that constitutes a third of what is now Canada (including parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Northwest Territories, Ontario, and Québec). As part of this deal, the HBC maintained title to its many trading posts and five percent of the arable lands within its former holdings. By the 1910s, the HBC controlled approximately three million acres of what it termed “undeveloped farming lands” (The Beaver, 1920, p. 10). Seeking to avoid further taxation on these holdings, the HBC sought to sell this land to what a 1920 article published in its corporate magazine *The Beaver* (1920) called “*bona-fide* settlers only,” supporting the “steady, helpful development of Western Canada’s agricultural interests” (p. 10). According to archived corporate memos, the HBC board of directors debated whether cinema might be a useful tool to “stimulate the public interest in the Hudson’s Bay properties” (Manitoba, 1919, n.p.). Although the scope of the HBC’s experimentation with sponsored filmmaking fell short of that imagined, the board clearly understood cinema as a means of “advertising the Company, and incidentally its lands, without appearing to do so” (Manitoba, 1919, n.p.). In seeking to leverage cinema’s affective and spectacular qualities to reduce the HBC’s tax burden, the strategy also implicitly furthered the colonial transfer of lands from Indigenous to settler hands.

**From Baffin Island to London: Labour’s trans-Atlantic intimacies**

In Labrador and the Eastern Arctic, unlike the territories in Western Canada that were under treaty, the fur films intersected with a different assemblage of economic interests and colonial practices. Government policies of the period sought to enforce the settlement of Inuit communities, often in ports formed around HBC posts or religious missions. While infrastructures may serve to “build and sustain human life” (Cowen, 2017, n.p.), these systems also serve to extract and consume the vitality of certain lives for the benefit of others. The HBC fur films trace a ma-
terial intimacy between fur and flesh, animal and human bodies, that extends from the East Arctic to centres of commerce and the former British Empire. Tracing these material relations can reveal how the colonial infrastructures of the fur trade also radiate from cities such as London. The location of the HBC headquarters as well as many of its warehouses, London appears as a site of corporate wealth and material excess in several films, including *The Heritage of Adventure* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) and *Leipzig Exhibition footage* (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930).

In *The Heritage of Adventure* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920), one such scene narrates the processing of fox skins into fur commodities by stitching together footage of Inuit women from Baffin Island (in modern-day Nunavut) with staged images of white female shoppers in urban department stores (see Figure 5). The sequence opens with the title card: “Women turning white fox skins, worth their weight in gold….” Four Inuit women are seated in a row outside, dark fox skins drying on a line behind them, meticulously turning cured pelts inside out to process the leather. The pelts are long and delicate; their bright white colouring only punctuated by the darkened holes where the animals’ eyes once looked out. As the camera pans to the right, more women working the pelt line are revealed. They work quickly and industriously, although no sign of their skill is given. Their linear positioning implies that they are seated this way for the camera, although their gaze remains primarily on their work.

*Figure 5: Labour along the supply line for white fox furs*

Source: Courtesy of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, *The Heritage of Adventure*, 1920, F122

Another title card interrupts the scene to pick up the story of the pelts’ production, explaining that the “men press the pelts into bales ….?” The next scene returns to the group of Inuit women, who are now hanging the furs on a drying line with pelts from several larger animals. Husky dogs play underfoot, and the camera’s pan left reveals the press mentioned in the text. Next, two women are depicted sewing up the bales of fur, first in a long shot and then in a close up as they stitch. These bales will be shipped off to “London market.” The next scene enacts a remarkable geographical and temporal leap, metaphorically following the pelts from Baffin Island to “the great fur warehouses.” The tightly packed bales of fox fur are suddenly revealed to be only some of the millions of furs exported to urban markets for resale. Within the warehouse, several white men hang, tote,
count, and unpack piles upon piles of furs: white fox, red fox, beaver, muskrat. Fur bleeds into all corners of the frame, draped over handrails in the foreground, suspended in massive bundles along the walls. The workers are dwarfed by the enormous quantities they handle. From this charnel house of skin and hair, fine women’s attire emerges, or as the case might be in the final scene, a white fox fur muff and shawl. A smiling white woman poses for the camera, turning round to display her matching furs. Her stylish dress, along with the decor of the furnished showroom, appeals to an upper class (or aspiring upper class) viewership, thus bringing the scene’s cycle of labour to a close.

Viewed through this montage, the international supply chains for commodities such as white fox fur relied heavily on women’s racialized labour, as both producers and consumers. Writing about ethnographic visualization on screen prior to World War II, Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) observes how ethnographic and scientific cinema racializes Indigenous peoples, displacing them temporally from Western civilization and consigning them to an early stage in the “history of humankind” (pp. 7–8). The juxtaposition of the Inuit and white women in these scenes, and the forms of labour they enact, serves to naturalize social categories of race and gender as well as the women’s respective stations within this supply chain. While the Inuit women’s skill, labour, and knowledge are put in service to a colonial-extractive economy of fur (one that threatens the survival of Inuit communities, even as it depends heavily on them), the white woman in the department store models one of the final products of the trade. As either an upper-class consumer of luxury products, or a retail worker imitating one for the benefit of the film, she stands in as another type of worker, one whose labour is hidden behind her imagined purchasing power. Unlike the Inuit workers, the department store girl is highly feminized, gazing directly at the camera as she nods and winks knowingly. Her impeccable make-up, whiteness, youth, and fashionable attire place her in a social class and lifestyle that implicitly benefits from racial capitalism and settler colonialism, even while white women’s suffrage in Canada remained limited across the country. The sequence expands the boundary of the extractive zone from spaces where animals are trapped and processed, such as Baffin Island, to the storerooms of London and city department stores, sites in which other types of racialized and gendered labour grease the wheels of capital.

Although the women at the beginning and end of this sequence (and commodity supply line) remain anonymous to one another other, the film nevertheless constitutes the white fox fur as a type of cinematic contact zone between these workers and bodies. As a circulating point of contact—material yet also difficult to trace in the pelts’ standardized sameness—the skins become sites of encounter, between bodies along commodity and colonial frontiers. Framing the fur trade in Canada as a sexual economy of nation building, Chantal Nadeau (2001) argues that the “social and historical encounter between skin and pelts” (pp. 8–9) shaped
notions of gender as well as sexualized nationalist narratives. The beaver, Nadeau (2001) argues, functioned in the Western cultural fabric as more than an exchange commodity or “symbol of the French and British colonial enterprises” (p. 9); it was also a marker of the nation’s “sexual economy” (p. 9). By extension, the white fox fur, similar to that of the beaver, ties race and gender to imperial economies as much as it binds the human body across transnational supply lines.

At the same time, there remains a level of ambivalence within these depictions of the HBC’s relations with Indigenous communities on Baffin Island and within the Eastern Arctic. While films such as *The Heritage of Adventure* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) leaned heavily on racist stereotypes and ethnographic film techniques of the period, with scenes depicting their Inuit subjects as childlike and exotic, their depictions of relationships between HBC employees and Indigenous peoples are not reducible to them. Reading these images against the grain, the excessive documentation of fur trade operations across the continent (including miscellaneous and choppy montages of diverse landscapes and scenes, from Boreal forests to Atlantic ice floes; local towns; Indigenous traditional outfits and day schools; film crews’ transportation methods; ruined colonial forts; smiling infants; and packs of dogs) also opens space for counter-readings of animal energies, Indigenous resilience and expert knowledge, and the limits of settler control over the land.

It is not only women’s bodies that are made available as forms of labour and exploitable to varying extents. Fur-bearing animals were subjected to over-hunting and near-extinction over the course of the trade. As two forms of energy, productive human labour and reproductive animal labour, animal and human are made more intimate through the procurement of fur—using practices that also render these lives more precarious. Nicole Shukin (2009) describes the industrial processing and “recycling of animal remains” into commodities as a form of “rendering” (p. 20). For Shukin (2009), rendering indexes the “complicity” (p. 20) of industry and the arts in their production of wealth via the twofold “economies of representation” and “resource economies trafficking in animal remains” (pg. 21). Shifting from an analysis of the human labour required by this process of rendering animals into capital to the animals themselves, it is apparent how very few live animals are depicted in the scenes of the HBC’s supply lines. With the exception of scenes showing transportation animals, such as sled dogs and horses, and footage of bison herds on the prairie in a later reel, the majority of the animals that traverse the screen in *The Heritage of Adventure* (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) are already dead, bodies in motion through the exertion of human force. Frozen carcasses are pried from trappers’ snares and nets; skins are scraped, pressed, transported, and (finally) worn by fashionable ladies; a harpooned sea lion is hoisted on board the Nascopie as it steams north past Labrador. Such images reaffirm the integration of non-human animals into economic systems as a raw material, ex-
tracted from nature and processed into a portable commodity (see also Taschereau Mamers, 2020). Scenes of London warehouses brimming with furs and packed bales of dried pelts provide the only evidence in the films of the enormous scale of the trade’s subtraction of animal life. The scale of the dead and the ecological implications of this centuries-long commercial hunt are likely impossible to know, particularly since archival records and other company documents (including these films) offer only a partially accurate account of the number of pelts harvested (Hood, 2011). Moreover, this practice of rendering animal life into settler cultural capital extends to the manufacturing of celluloid film stock as well. As Shukin (2009) reminds us, early twentieth-century film stock was itself a product of rendered animal gelatin. The HBC fur films render animal life for elite consumption on multiple levels: as visual spectacle, as luxury commodity, and as raw material for mass motion-picture technology.

**Leipzig: Advertising a fur empire**

One fur film that did receive a wider audience was *Leipzig Exhibition footage* (Hudson's Bay Company, 1930), a bilingual (German and English) picture created for the HBC’s display at the 1930 *Internationale Pelzfasch Ausstellung* (IPA), or International Fur Trade Exhibition, in Leipzig, Germany. Produced to showcase its corporate activities, employees, and products to an international audience, the film also implicitly advertised the bundled practices of extractive capitalism, imperial ways of seeing, and colonial modernity through its attention to the infrastructures of the fur trade and the many peoples touched by it.

Designed to promote the Leipzig fur industry within Germany and abroad, the IPA (1927) ran from May 31–September 30, 1930; it was scheduled to coincide with the peak German, European, and American tourist seasons and Leipzig’s annual fur auction (Internationale Pelzfasch-Ausstellung Leipzig memorandum, 1927). Leipzig functioned as a crucial meeting place for North American and Eastern European markets during this period, funnelling pelts from across two continents to European auction houses. The IPA consisted of about a dozen exhibit stands from around fifteen countries, including dominant players in the industry, such as Great Britain, the Soviet Union, France, and the United States, and corporations such as the HBC (Declercq, 2017). It also featured a variety of other amusements to attract the public, including displays of live animals used to produce pelts (some of which were imported, others were provided by the Leipzig Zoo), fur fashion shows, art exhibits, science and technology displays, an amusement park, and restaurants. Hosting almost 800,000 visitors over the four months, the IPA had a broad appeal to members of the industry and the public, reflecting the growing popularity of fur as both a luxury product and mass commodity (Declercq, 2017). Connected to the event was an international hunting exhibition (*Internationale Jagd-Ausstellung*). The International Fur Congress, which sought to establish a regulatory body for the industry, coincided with the IPA.
As part of the German tradition of exhibition culture and urban trade fairs dating back to the medieval and early modern periods, the IPA sought to alternatively entertain and educate exhibition-goers (Declercq, 2017). Displays mounted by government agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fur manufacturers, retailers, and other stakeholders included dioramas and natural history displays (such as a panorama of the Arctic tundra), taxidermy and hunting trophies of “exotic” species (including zebras and giraffes in the southwest African exhibit and seals in the American exhibit), and, of course, films. In addition to Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930), a number of industrial and advertising films were commissioned specifically for the IPA. The promotional film Die Weltumspannende Bedeutung des Pelzes (The Global Importance of Fur), produced by the Leipziger Werk und Werbefilm (1930), for instance, served an important role in the IPA advertising campaign. Die Weltumspannende Bedeutung des Pelzes was translated in twelve languages and screened in cinemas across Europe (Declercq, 2017). While no extant copies remain today, like other exhibition advertisement films made in Austria and Germany during the 1920s, Die Weltumspannende Bedeutung des Pelzes represents the confluence of several historical phenomenon: the industrialization and professionalization of trade fairs, the emergence of film advertising, the hardening of modernity and industrial capitalism, and new models of film spectatorship (Cowan, 2014).

Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930) was screened to IPA attendees in a “daylight cinema” as part of the HBC’s exhibit. Letters and other internal records from HBC staff reveal that there were shipping delays with the film prints. Although the IPA opened at the end of May, the film did not arrive in Leipzig until mid-June, delaying the public screenings by a few weeks (Manitoba, 1930c). Three prints of the film were provided to the exhibitors, in case of wear and damage, with another copy kept in London at the HBC’s head office (Manitoba, 1930e). While precise numbers of how many people viewed Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930) are difficult to determine, documentation of the HBC’s exhibition at the IPA can provide some clues regarding the film’s potential reach. The leather-bound HBC Exhibition visitors’ book, for instance, is filled with attendees’ signatures from across Europe and parts of North America. The first page of the ledger, dated May 31 (the opening day of the IPA), records visits from distinguished guests, including British Ambassador Horace Rumbold and Consul General Otto Prager of Leipzig, alongside ordinary attendees from places as far afield as London, Brussels, St. Louis, Kassel, and Aberdeen (Manitoba, 1930b).

In addition to the film, the HBC’s exhibition stall included displays showcasing Canadian furs and views of North American landscapes, alongside materials narrating the company’s role in the fur trade and development of Canada. This materials included photographs of HBC department stores in Winnipeg, Vancouver,
and Calgary; an illustrated map of company trading posts; reproductions of the HBC’s original charter and company records documenting its connections to Germany; photographs loaned by the Canadian National Railway and Canadian Pacific Railway; a model of Hudson’s Bay House in London; and a curated collection of thirty oil paintings by Canadian painter John Innes, entitled “The Epic of Western Canada” (Manitoba, 1930a). Other display cases presented a variety of furs, including fox, ermine, mink, black bear, beaver, raccoon, seal, and wolf (Manitoba, 1930a). HBC staff working the exhibition were tasked with cleaning and maintaining the displays, handing out pamphlets and catalogues in German and English (including reprints of a short history of the company), operating the cinema, and obtaining signatures in the visitors’ book (Manitoba, 1930c).

It is likely that the exhibition-goers would have had little first-hand knowledge of Canada, let alone of the riverways, trading posts, and communities depicted. European spectators would have presumably filtered their understandings of the film through their own specific cultural and colonial lenses; particularly in response to ethnographic scenes such as that of “Labrador Trappers” and Inuit fishermen on Baffin Island, whose hunting practices are described for foreign viewers in the simple present tense (see Figure 6). Scenes of the HBC’s corporate headquarters in London at the end of Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930) might also have stood out to British spectators familiar with representations of Canada as part of the British Commonwealth.

Figure 6: Title cards in German and English describing Inuit society in the ethnographic present

Source: Courtesy of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba, Leipzig Exhibition footage, 1930, F1

A predominate theme woven through both the Leipzig film and exhibition is the use of ethnographic and imperial ways of seeing to frame these advertisements. The film’s opening title card, for instance, characterizes the HBC’s (1930) reach as extending “From Atlantic to Pacific, from Polar Sea to Southern Boundary of Canada”; an empire built on trade and consolidated in moving images and pictorial form. Significantly, the film’s depictions of Inuit and Chipewyan First Nations peoples were echoed in the wider HBC exhibition, which included a panorama depicting what company records called scenes of “Eskimo and Indian life” (Manitoba, 1930d).
These tableaus, according to one letter, were thought to complement the selection of animal pelts on display (Manitoba, 1930d). Offering views of two different landscapes (forested and Arctic), punctuated by reproductions of Indigenous transportation and hunting technologies (a kayak, spears, an igloo; a birchbark canoe, a fish stage, snowshoes, traps, and bear snares), the panorama combined elements of the natural history diorama with settler ethnography. By displaying settler reproductions of Indigenous cultures and technologies alongside pelts and other animal remains, Indigenous bodies were transformed into scientific objects and spectacle, dehumanized as one more element of the natural environment alongside other North American flora and fauna. As many cultural historians have shown, exoticized and racialized depictions of Indigenous, colonized, and non-white peoples have a long, bitter history within Western visual film and culture, with advertising cultures of the early twentieth century being no exception (Ciarlo, 2011; Cowan, 2014; McClintock, 1995; Rony, 1996). Inuit and Sami peoples were even put on display in European ethnological exhibitions and “human zoos” in the exhibitions of the nineteenth century, including in German cities such as Hamburg and Berlin (Cowan, 2014). As a whole, the HBC’s exhibition—the panorama and film footage, in particular—which reflected these imperial ways of seeing Indigenous bodies and consuming history as a commodity, was typical of the period’s museums, trade shows, and world fairs (McClintock, 1995).

While Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930) has more aesthetic and narrative similarities to ethnographic cinema than to the genre of exhibition advertisement films more commonly associated with industrial exhibitions such as the IPA, it nevertheless reflects a similar ideological investment in using cinema to control “the movement of bodies and attention” (Cowan, 2014, p. 4) within industrial capitalism. In this case, it is the bodies of colonial subjects and fur-bearing animals that are alternatively circumscribed and transported by the fur trade and empire. In the exhibition panorama and throughout Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930), there is a consistent attention to the technologies and mechanisms of movement, from the canoes and kayaks carrying Inuit hunters in summer and sled dogs in winter to the various forms of what the film’s intertitles calls “modern transportation,” such as airplanes and ice-breaking steamers. As Liam Cole Young (2017) contends, infrastructures bring together human labour with non-human ecologies, the material, and the technical. Within the film, extractive capitalism is shown to necessitate the integration of animals into infrastructure itself, as energy as well as commodity. Alongside technophilic shots of combustion-powered transport by air and rail ensuring the smooth circulation of company supplies and employees are scenes of non-mechanical vehicles: sled dogs, fish caught to feed hunter and dog alike, kayaks propelled by human exertion. At the same time, these scenes of transportation within the film’s diegesis become a metaphor for cinema and the thousands of miles trav-
elled by the film reels themselves. Cinema, writes film historian Jeffrey Ruoff (2006), is “a machine for constructing relations of space and time” (pp. 1–2): through the composition and editing of images that move, and the industrialized modes of transportation that make the manufacture and transportation of this media possible. In Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930), the steamship, the train, and the automobile to which Ruoff points not only transported the unnamed camera operators through Labrador and southern Canada, they also formed part of the infrastructure for the trade being documented.

In The Fur Trade in Canada (published, it is worth noting, a decade after the Moving Picture Expedition’s tour across the country), Innis (1999) uses the term “energy” to describe the ways populations and infrastructures were directed toward the exploitation of raw materials in the Canada’s resource economy. This occurred in two ways: people were directly involved in the production of staples and “indirectly in the production of facilities promoting production” (p. 385). In Innis’ view, the productive labour and capabilities of Canadians were bound up in both explicit and implicit ways in staples economies. Workers exerted energy to physically extract raw materials, and they invested in the different transportation and communication infrastructures necessary for the transformation of resources into staples for European and American economies. Staple industries, therefore, guided the movement of materials (capital, labour, and natural resources) from far-flung geographies to manufacturing centres, necessitating a reciprocal trade in food and fuel to power these transportation networks and trading-post settlements. While Innis (1999) refers to human populations in this text, the fur trade was quite clearly predicated on animals’ reproductive energies and the harnessing of non-human energies (from sled dogs and horses to railways powered by steam and coal) to move staple commodities. Reading the films’ depictions of labour and animal capital together, staple economies can also be thought of in terms of the exertion and (re)production of energy.

Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson’s Bay Company, 1930) and the other fur films do not only trace the transformation of animals into luxury goods, they also demonstrate how fur is rendered into fuel, transforming animals into energy infrastructures. In her theorization of fuel and energy, Karen Pinkus (2016) contends that “any object—living or dead—that moves another object [can] be considered a fuel in the broadest sense” (p. 21). While dead, the financial and symbolic value of these furry remains motivated people to migrate across vast territories, build transportation routes and trading posts requiring other resources such as timber and iron, and enact forms of colonial legislation favourable to these economic practices. In effect, fur powered the engine of Canadian and European economies, not with an internal combustion engine but with the promise of wealth. During its height, the fur trade facilitated the reorganization of a settler economy to circulate and exert energy along certain axes, making and remaking environmental
and human relationships in the process. In this sense, the bodies of animals fuelled the expansion of economic frontiers, even as they became integrated into infrastructures of colonial mobility and extraction.

**Conclusion**

By way of a conclusion, we return to Montréal. On an unusually hot, dusty evening in the spring of 2019, I exited the Grande Bibliothèque on Boulevard de Maisonneuve after a particularly long afternoon typing away on my computer. Waiting on the street corner for the light to change, my eyes drifted across the intersection. I caught sight of some graffiti adorning the side of the former Gare d’Autobus: “- capital + animal” (see Figure 7). *Moins de capital, plus d’animaux*. Less wealth, more life. While it is unlikely that the artist meant to reference the mass killing and removal of furry animal life from this continent to other shores, the juxtaposition—bus station, animal, culture—was serendipitous. Perhaps the writer intended this equation as an ecological balance sheet, a call for change in the time of disaster capitalism and mass extinction. Perhaps they intended something else. Facing the former bus station, however, this text can be read as one further reminder of the layered relationships between media and economy, infrastructure and the non-human world.

Figure 7: “Less wealth, more animals” at the Montréal Central Bus Station (Québec)

As cultural texts and historical objects, the HBC fur films defy easy categorization. The films are episodic, at times amateurish, emphasizing dramatic scenes, unique views, and different technologies over a coherent plot or dramatic narrative. Their image compositions borrow liberally from ethnographic film and the travelogue, incorporating tourist views of milling crowds and Arctic hunts alongside
wide-framed landscape shots. As a corpus, these fur films contribute to shaping an emerging settler film culture in Canada, upholding extractive economies and imaginaries even as they offer fertile grounds for counter-readings and resistant histories. By mapping settler infrastructures, labour, and trans-Atlantic networks of the fur trade between the two World Wars, these films assisted in the cultural legitimation of this imperial economy and materially facilitated the transfer of land to settler ownership. In this way, these moving images can be understood as another form of infrastructural mediation, structuring both human and non-human life in unequal and extractive ways. As vehicles of movement, they document the physical transportation of furs and celluloid film across vast distances while feeding the imaginaries of settler culture. As the substructure of so-called Canada, extractive practices shape both visual culture and more-than-human ecosystems, even as globalized commodity chains offer the illusion of distance from the negative consequences of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson characterizes as “extractivist behavior” (quoted in Klein, 2013, n.p.).

Although these moving images from the HBCA contribute to the sedimentation of settler stories of conquest and extraction, archival films such as these also offer fertile grounds for inquiring more deeply into infrastructures and the narrative architecture of colonialism. Whether watching the flickering intervals of light and shadow projected on screen, catching a glimpse of public artworks while walking to catch a train, or photographing graffiti, media scholars can use these interactions to make visible colonial pasts and presents, crafting new knowledge for a decolonial future.

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Notes
1. For other histories of film production in Labrador and the Eastern Arctic, see: Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic (MacKenzie & Westerståhl Stenport, 2016), The Iconic North: Cultural Constructions of Aboriginal Life in Postwar Canada (Sangster, 2016), and “Nunatsiavut’s Cinema”

2. There appear to be no extant prints of The Romance of the Far Fur Country (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920). In 2011, the Winnipeg-based production company Five Door Films undertook an extensive digital reconstruction of the lost film using production records and footage from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. While the 2015 reconstruction of The Romance of the Far Fur Country (Five Door Films, 2015) offers an important glimpse into what the original film might have resembled, according to archivists, The Heritage of Adventure (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) remains the closest to the lost 1920 film.

3. For more on the role of the National Film Board (NFB) in producing a settler colonial imaginary through publicly funded documentary and government policy, see Zoë Druick (2007). John Grierson founded the NFB in 1939 with the intent of cultivating a national cinema for Canada, in the vein of the British Film Institute and its colonial filmmaking practices. While a comparative study of the early NFB years and the HBC fur films is outside the scope of this article, these films contributed to shaping a shared visual language for the developing settler nation.

4. Bill Derr departed partway through the shooting, returning to New York City from Winnipeg in mid-September. In Vancouver, Harold Wyckoff was joined by HBC employee Captain Thomas P. O'Kelly, who continued with him until the conclusion of the journey (Geller, 2004).

5. The Romance of the Far Fur Country (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920) received a limited theatrical across the Western Canadian provinces through the Toronto-based Allen Theatre Enterprises during the spring of 1920. It premiered in Winnipeg at the Allen Theatre in May 1920, to an audience comprised of HBC clerks, members of the public who received free tickets at affiliated department stores, and Indigenous performers hired to promote the film and the HBC’s corporate image (Geller, 2004). The HBC also made an agreement with the Allan Theatre chain to offer free screenings to customers who picked up tickets at its retail stores (phone interview with James Gorton, August 7, 2015). Little archival evidence exists of any public screenings of The Heritage of Adventure (Wyckoff & Derr, 1920), despite the company's stated intention to release it in Great Britain (Geller, 2004).

6. Leipzig Exhibition footage (Hudson's Bay Company, 1930) is one of two versions of a film created for the IPA. While both pictures contain very similar footage, the length and order of the scenes and title cards differ somewhat (Manitoba, 2020).

7. For accounts of Germany's colonialism prior to World War I and its influences on German visual culture and public memory, see: “The Visual Archive of Colonialism: Germany and Namibia” (Steinmetz & Hell, 2006) and Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany (Ciarlo, 2011).

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Filmography


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