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Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw on Film

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DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE ARE CENTRAL to Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw ceremonies and traditions. Since the early twentieth century, filmmakers have tried to capture this drama in their footage.[1] The films of Edward Curtis, Franz Boas, Robert Gardner, and the U'mista Cultural Society all feature the potlatch and its dramatic dances. Not surprisingly, all of these films reflect the viewpoints of their makers and the times. The films by Curtis and Boas (*In the Land of the Head-Hunters*, rereleased as *In the Land of the War Canoes*, 1914; *A Documentary on the Kwakiutl*, 1930) are firmly rooted in the salvage ethnography of the early twentieth century. Robert Gardner attempted to capture a more complete picture of Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw life in the 1950s (*Blunden Harbour and Dances of the Kwakiutl*, 1951) but still omitted any presentation of contemporary cultural struggles. By looking at these films and comparing them to two films produced by the U'mista Cultural Society, one may discover some of the devices used by the white filmmakers and how they have been reappropriated by Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw filmmakers to re-present or represent their culture through their own creative lens. This paper concludes that the modern U'mista films (*Potlatch ... A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, 1975, and *Box of Treasures*, 1983) reclaim and reinterpret ceremonial imagery from the earlier films as part of a larger Native-directed effort to document their own history.

These films are connected by more than just their general subject matter; many of them build on thematic and visual precedents set by the earlier films, which include the presentation of certain events as

central to the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw character, and most important, the use of song and dance.

In the Land of the Head-Hunters

In 1911, Edward Sheriff Curtis decided to make a film about the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw. His film—and his photographs—portrayed Native people in a pictorialist manner: not as they appeared at the time but as their parents and grandparents had appeared. He was familiar with the area and had produced hundreds of photographs of Northwest Coast peoples. Curtis carried with him a number of props and wigs in order to transform twentieth-century Native people into his romantic ideal of a glorious Native past. The film *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*, released in 1914 and lost shortly thereafter, featured Kwa-gulth people from Fort Rupert and 'Nak'waxdáxw people from Blunden Harbour in an exotic Hollywood melodrama. The film disappeared from circulation until 1947 when a print of the film was donated to the Chicago Field Museum.[2] When George Quimby left the Field Museum to come to the Burke Museum in Seattle, he brought copies of the footage with him. In 1973, Quimby and Holm restored and re-edited the film. They removed damaged footage and created a sound track of dialogue and songs recorded by three of the original actors in the film and eight others who were relatives of the original actors.[3]

Brian Winston notes three elements that are key to current interest in the film: the use of Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw actors, footage of Native ceremonials that give the film its ethnographic value, and Curtis's recognition of the desires of a non-Native audience for a melodramatic framework.[4] In considering Curtis's contribution to ethnographic filmmaking, Winston correctly leaves out consideration of the new soundtrack and footage added during Holm and Quimby's reconstruction of the film in 1973. However, rather than denouncing the "anthropologically accurate soundtrack" as Winston does, it should be considered as consistent with Curtis's published goals for the film: the prospectus of the Continental Film Company—a company established by Curtis and a few Seattle businessmen—explains in Curtis's own words his approach to filmmaking.

> The questions might be raised as to whether the documentary material would not lack the thrilling interest of the fake picture. It is the opinion of Mr. Curtis that the real life of the Indian contains the parallel emotions to furnish all necessary plots and give the pictures all the heart interest needed. In this respect it is as important that we take into consideration the Indian's mental processes as it is to picture his unique costume.... In making such pictures, the greatest care must be exercised that the thought conveyed be true to the subject, that the ceremony be correctly rendered, and above all, that the costumes be correct.[5]

In order to accomplish the correct rendering of costume, ceremony, and "the Indian's mental processes," Curtis needed a Native assistant. When Curtis arrived in Victoria in 1911 intending to make a film, George Hunt's reputation marked him as the man for Curtis to hire. *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* was the first of four films in which "Hunt would play a major facilitating role."[6] In the three years prior to the actual shooting of the film (which took place in the summer of 1914), Hunt was employed in various capacities: in 1911–12, he worked with Curtis's assistant William Myers, recording history and customs for volume 10 of the *North American Indian*, providing the ethnographic foundation for the film; in 1913–14 Hunt collected and commissioned props for the film and took photos of possible filming sites.[7] The collection included old ceremonial costumes and masks as well as pieces commissioned specifically for the film. Hunt commissioned twenty-one masks in addition to numerous blankets, capes, robes, and neck rings made of cedar bark.[8] He hired a number of women from Fort Rupert, including many from his own family.[9] Many of the actors and actresses (each of whom received fifty cents a day for non-principal roles) were related to Hunt, including his son Stanley, who plays the leading role in the film. This was suitable to Curtis because they were attractive, talented, and respectful of directions given by Hunt.[10] According to both Bill Holm and Gloria Cranmer Webster, the actors enjoyed participating in the project. Not only was it a lot of fun but there was most likely a pleasing irony that Curtis was paying them to do things for which they would otherwise go to jail under Canadian law.[11] The film's use of pieces similar to those that Hunt collected for other muse-

ums suggests Hunt was free to make decisions according to his own experience. In addition to pieces that Hunt commissioned or bought for the film, Hunt provided pieces owned by his family to use during the filming.

Aside from gathering all of the props for the film, Hunt acted as hiring chief, bookkeeper, and assistant director. Holm and Quimby assert that Hunt not only furnished Curtis with information that became the basis of the movie but also provided much of the text and served as interpreter for information received from other sources.[12] Still photos taken during the filming by photographer Edmund Schwinke illuminate Hunt's role on the set: two photos show Curtis behind the camera and Hunt equipped with a megaphone, directing the action (fig. 1).[13] According to Curtis, it was impossible to hire an actor to wear a mask that was not his hereditary prerogative. Hunt's knowledge of the actors and their hereditary rights was crucial to Curtis's record of the masks and dances.[14] Only a Native person with knowledge about traditional ceremonies and lifestyle could have captured the scenes that Curtis was determined to record. *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* certainly contains fanciful moments of artistic licence—the name of the film is a good example—but one can only imagine what the final outcome would have been had Curtis not benefited from Hunt's expertise.[15]

The product of their collaboration caught the eye of the film critics of the time, who had high praise for *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. In *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) Vachel Lindsay wrote, "This work of a lifetime, a supreme art achievement, shows the native as a figure in bronze."[16] New York film critic W. Stephen Bush penned the most telling commentary on the film's brief success:

> Mr. Curtis conceived this wonderful study in ethnology as an epic. It fully deserves the name. Indeed, it seemed to me that there was a most striking resemblance all through the film between the musical epics of Richard Wagner and the theme and treatment of this Indian epic. The fire dance, the vigil journey with its command of silence and chastity, the whole character of the hero were most strangely reminiscent of Parsifal and the Ring of the Nibelungs.[17]

The comparison of the critics' reviews with Curtis's published aims illuminate the success that the film had on its release and its continued

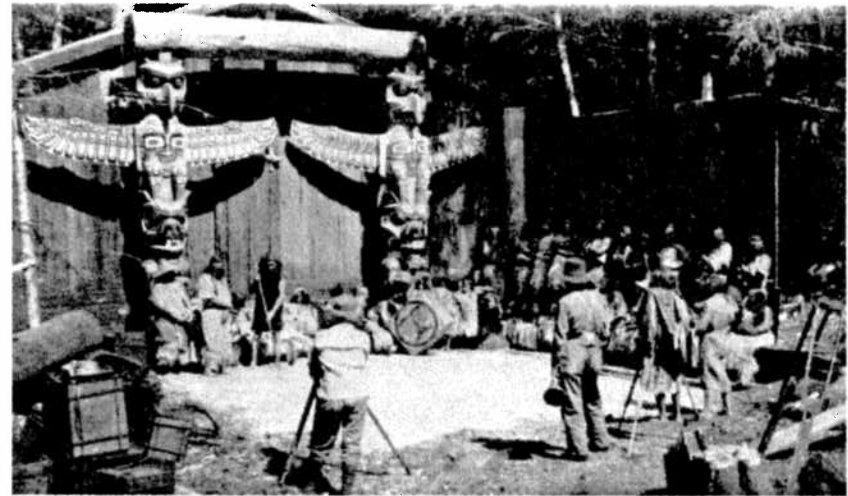

FIGURE 1: George Hunt with megaphone in hand and Edward Curtis standing behind the camera on the set of *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. (Photo by Edmund Schwinke. Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle, Washington.)

use (since its rerelease) in an educational context. The popular (albeit short-lived) success of the film in its Seattle and New York showings was due in large part to the romantic melodrama that Curtis invented. It had all the essential markers of a native "Other" that were expected at the time: head-hunting, warfare, and ceremony with elaborate ritual costume, combined with a familiar Western narrative of a villain, a hero, and his love. Conversely, today the dramatic storyline is largely ignored by audiences who excuse Curtis's romantic tendencies by praising the film's ethnographic value. Its current popularity is due to the accuracy (and drama) of the masks and costumes that appear in the film—a result of Curtis's desire for "documentary material" and George Hunt's ability to produce that material for the camera.

The Curtis film was the first film of Aboriginal people on the Northwest Coast. Primarily dramatic rather than anthropological, it contains all the issues that later ethnographic filmmakers would have to deal with: "problems of authenticity, of historical reconstruction, and of the means by which one is to present ethnographic information within a narrative frame."[18] Although the narrative of the film was popular with audiences in 1915, Curtis's contemporary renown is

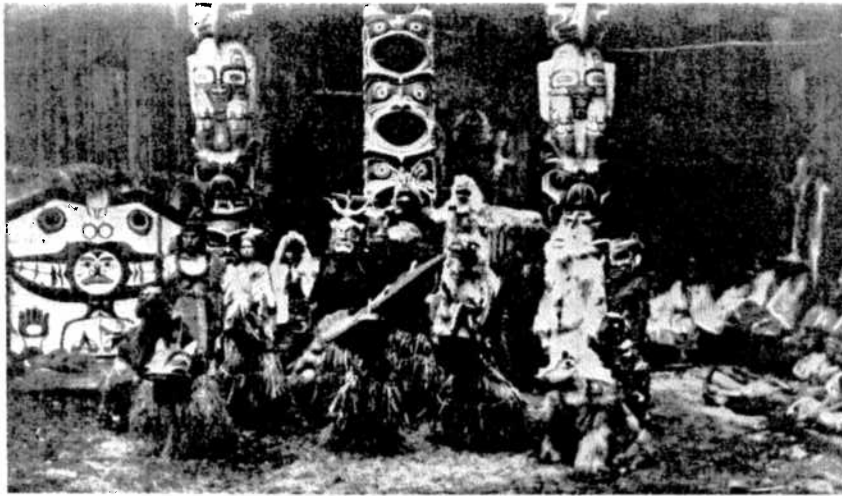

FIGURE 2: The appearance of all the masks in the house before the ceremony was called *gilsgumlihla* or *húkhsumlihla*. [Photo by Edmund Schwinke, taken during the filming of *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle, Washington.]

through those scenes that are constantly shown in museums and classrooms, particularly those depicting dancing and canoes (fig. 2). The inter-title before the dance scene is perhaps the most "ethnographic" moment in the film, and like all the inter-titles in the present version, was written by Bill Holm. It describes the power of the Winter Ceremonials: "The killing of enemies brings on the Winter Ceremonial power of the warriors. The ceremony of First-Appearance-of-Masks-in-the-House is following by the performance of the masked dances." The following portion of the film is frequently shown in anthropology and art history classes in order to present masks in use, although it is not offered in an ethnographically accurate ceremonial context. The scene of all the masks dancing in a circle was not a traditional activity and was apparently directed by Curtis so as to enhance the spectacle. Holm's informants called the appearance of all the masks simultaneously before the start of the ceremony *gilsgumlihla*, while both Boas and Curtis described the ritual as *húkhsumlihla* when it occurred at the start of the Winter Ceremonial (fig. 2).[19]

One canoe scene is an icon of Curtis's work on the Northwest Coast (fig. 3). The presentation of the Thunderbird in the prow of one

FIGURE 3: Canoe scene with Thunderbird, Grizzly Bear, and Wasp dancers taken during the filming of *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. [Photo by Edmund Schwinke. Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle, Washington.]

of three war canoes is used as the film's introductory image (in the Holm and Quimby restoration) and is later incorporated into what is certainly the most quoted scene of this film, and perhaps one of the most famous filmic moments of Northwest Coast culture, appearing in numerous museum exhibits in the past few decades (fig. 3).[20] Although Curtis was interested in including moments of Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw ceremonialism and wanted to be relatively truthful in the images of their material culture (although privileging his own conception of a dramatic moment over the Native one), his main objective was a successful combination of entertainment and ethnography.

Franz Boas's Documentary

In 1886 Franz Boas arrived on the Northwest Coast, where he began his lifelong association with the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw. In 1888, Boas met George Hunt, who was working in Victoria as a court interpreter. When Boas returned to the coast as an assistant ethnologist for the Chicago Field Museum in 1891, he met up again with Hunt.[21] From Boas's first visit on the coast until his last in 1930, Boas and Hunt worked together to

produce an encyclopedic catalogue of Kwakwaka'wakw material culture. On Boas's last trip to the coast, he brought with him a 16mm camera and wax cylinders for sound recording. The sound and film footage were never intended to produce a synchronous sound production—both were merely records of the type of movement and music associated with the individual dances. Franziska Boas, Franz Boas's daughter, told Holm that her father's intention was to record the dance sequences for a study of dance.[22] The material collected was divided into three categories: technologies, games, and dance. The film footage consisted of short sequences—twenty seconds to several minutes—of various activities, such as "Woodworking," "Weaving Baskets," "Stick Game," "Hamatsa Dance," and "Feather Dance."

Boas never created a film from the 1930 footage. The editing and film production was completed in 1973 by Bill Holm.[23] The footage, such as it was, was given to Dr. Erna Gunther at the Burke Museum by Franziska Boas.[24] According to Holm, the sequences were already in place, and he contributed to the film through the extensive notes he compiled to go along with the film, explaining in detail what was happening in each scene, rather than substantial changes in the appearance of the footage.[25] Holm's production is consistent with Boas's approach to the compilation of information. The film echoes Boas's written notes, which provided detailed descriptions (recordings) of various kinds of technologies and activities. When the film was made, Boas knew almost nothing about the technical side of filming. It was not intended as a complete filmic ethnography and—if finished by Boas—would probably have served as an aid to field notes.[26] Holm writes, "Boas saw the advantages of film in recording specific actions that were difficult to describe verbally. His 1930 film must be seen from this point of view and not as film ethnography in any complete sense." Holm says that he had the clear idea that Boas never intended this footage to be a "film."[27]

Boas and Hunt were both in their seventies when the film was made in the winter of 1930–31. The film was shot at Fort Rupert, and the opening scenes show the village along the shores of Beaver Harbour. The first reel consists of technology and games. Here we see woodworking, spinning, and weaving, as well as children's games and the actions of official speakers. The second reel records a variety of dances.

Boas was aware of the limitations of lighting and film length, and instead of trying to obtain a complete record of the dances, he hoped to record segments that (together with his extensive notes) could constitute a study of Kwakiutl dance.[28] He wrote to Ruth Benedict that he wanted to compile "adequate material for a real study" of dance.[29] The film footage was intended to provide a visual accompaniment to the extensive notes that Boas had taken on earlier trips to the coast.

Rosalind Morris looks at Boas's film in *New Worlds from Fragments: Film, Ethnography, and the Representation of Northwest Coast Cultures*. She examines ethnographic film on the Northwest Coast, exploring how the techniques of individual filmmakers relate to broader questions of film and literary theory, history, and anthropology. Among the films that Morris examines are three of the films in my study: *A Documentary on the Kwakiutl, Blunden Harbour,* and *Box of Treasures*. Morris's highly theorized observations often provide a counterpoint to my observations on the use of certain types of visual imagery and as such will be included where they can provide a more theoretical interpretation of the films under consideration.

Morris seems greatly concerned with the lack of context or interpretation for the images in Boas's film.

> Without an expository narration or additional footage, it becomes impossible to interpret what might be the particular significance of any of these images. Decontextualization in this manner becomes a mode of objectification in the sense that the subjective and objective dimensions of practice are rent apart; the image becomes something akin to the (collectible) material artifact and need no longer be interpreted with reference to any Native meaning system. Instead, it is incorporated into the meaning system of its viewer and possessor.[30]

She suggests that this lack of context leaves the viewer to come up with his or her own interpretations; accordingly, Morris provides her own interpretation of the scenes and their significance.[31] She blames Holm and Boas for collaborating in the production of a film in which the "participants' perception is excluded from the interpretive frame provided for the viewer by Boas' own camera work and Holm's subsequent editing."[32] Her final condemnation of the film posits Holm and Boas as universalists, assigning "global significations":

Ingenuity and economy of technique, bounty of resources, diversity of ceremonial forms and rites, and, finally, the ultimate barbarism of cannibalism. These qualities or essences, which Boas and Holm manage to diffuse almost imperceptibly amid the mere cataloging of culture, are not neutral, of course, but form the conceptual latticework of a normative ethical system. Included within that system is a vision of the Native as Adamic, as originary. This is the image of the savage as custodian of the paradisical garden, where labor is neither onerous nor constant, and where leisure can be pursued energetically.[33]

All of Morris's commentary ignores a key aspect of the film: unlike many of the earlier films made on the coast, it was never intended for the general cinema. Rather, it was intended purely as research footage, compiled and presented in the way it is now presented, as a visual record accompanied by detailed written texts. The field-note nature of the footage is apparent at once: dogs and cats wonder in and out of the frame; the sound-recording device is placed next to the singer in the dance scenes; and Julia Averkieva, Boas's assistant, slips in to wind the recorder during the "Paddle Dance" scene. The text that Holm compiled to accompany the film was based on interviews with the participants and on Boas's notes.[34] The text is, in fact, informed by the very "participants' perception" that Morris feels is excluded. It seems that Morris deliberately ignores Holm's text, even though she poses the question of "what kind of meanings can be assigned *with* and without reference to extrafilmic sources" (my emphasis). The only information that Morris includes from "extrafilmic" sources is what appears in Browne's summary, rather than from information in Holm's notes.[35]

Nevertheless, the textual component of the film is an integral part of the presentation. Think of it as an early multimedia production: to consider the film alone without the text is to examine something that is less than the whole. If Morris wants simply to approach Boas's footage, then she must acknowledge that Boas never created a "film," and begin her analysis from there. If Morris managed to view the film without the text—they are supposed to be kept together at the institutions that have the film—that is certainly not the fault of either the original filmmaker or the editor.[36]

However, not all of Morris's criticisms of the film seem so unwarranted. She justly notes that Boas's film—and his ethnologies—ignore many of the present realities of Fort Rupert in the early twentieth century.[37] Like those of Curtis, Boas's material collections and his visual images try to capture or reestablish an imaginary culture untouched by Euro-Canadian influences. This romanticized view is seen in the presentation of old technologies, old political forms ("Chiefs Boasting"), and shamanic healing practices. The conspicuous absence of new forms of technology, medicine, or political power serves to enhance this fictionalized viewpoint. However, Morris includes in her criticism the performance of "rites of a ceremony no longer in practice" on a staged set. Although she admits that using "extinction" to describe these ceremonies is extreme (since they "had been performed less than a decade before"), she is not aware that despite government persecution, many Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw—including the families of those individuals seen in the film—actively participated in these ceremonies.[38] As with all of the films in this study, Boas focused most of his attention on images of dances from these very ceremonies.

Robert Gardner's Films

Robert Gardner's *Dances of the Kwakiutl* (1951) is yet another film that stresses the importance of dance as the essential expression of Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw ceremony. The twelve-minute film is colour footage that Gardner shot in Blunden Harbour in 1950 while making a twenty-minute black-and-white film called *Blunden Harbour*. Both films are somewhat enigmatic. While Curtis's film was clearly made for commercial audiences and Boas's film was made as visual record to accompany his field notes, Gardner's objectives are not so obvious. The films were produced by Orbit Films for release through Dimensions, Inc., but no record of their commercial release seems to exist, and aside from the writings of Morris and Jacknis, they seem to have escaped the academic scrutiny that Gardner's other films have attracted. Even in Gardner's own writings, the films are ignored.[39] He mentions his time in Seattle but alludes only to the fact that he had "made a number of efforts and experiments in cinematography" before making *Dead Birds*, a film about two warring groups of Dani in what is now Irian Jaya.[40] Ira

Jacknis notes that when Gardner and Sidney Peterson founded Orbit Films, one of their goals was to "make an art of the anthropological film."[41] Gardner did speak about his Kwakwaka'wakw films in an unpublished interview with James Blue and describes the project as "a poetic lyric documentary of the Kwakiutl nation."[42] In his own writings, Gardner mentions the anthropological theories to which he was attracted. Interestingly, he notes that the only current concept that appealed to him at that time was called "culture and personality," focusing on the interaction and tension between "individual will and cultural constraint."[43] The "culture and personality" approach was used by Ruth Benedict, a student of Boas, in *Patterns of Culture*,[44] which examined several Native groups, including the Kwakiutl. However, Gardner does not seem to use this approach in *Blunden Harbour* as he does in *Dead Birds*. There are no individual characters and no explanation of community ceremonials, as in his later works. It is difficult to know how much of *Blunden Harbour* was Gardner's conception and how much belonged to his cinematographer, William Heick; both Gardner and Heick claim to have been the editors, but it seems clear that Heick was responsible for the filming.[45]

In contrast to later films, Gardner's voice-over in *Blunden Harbour* provides no omniscient narrative. It rarely comments on the visual image, and when it does, the connection is tentative rather than definitive. The film begins with a myth that explains the origin of the village: "I am Helestes and I go spouting around the world but I wish to become a real man in this place. So I built my house in Blunden Harbour." This origin story accompanies images of the village taken from a motorboat offshore. The camera then moves to shots of the boardwalk on which women are spreading seaweed to dry. Although we see the village and are told that this is Blunden Harbour, no names of the people, their tribal identity, or their geographic location are given. As the camera follows a group of people collecting clams and other seafood, the narrative continues:

> No struggle for survival.... No men against the sea. These ones have an ancient formula for success, ancient and simple. From the water, food. From the woods, a way of life. Each day a little different from the next, gathering, saving, cooking, eating, sleeping. There is time and place for everyone, the old, the young, the dead,

FIGURE 4: Willie Seaweed fishing for crabs from Robert Gardner's *Blunden Harbour*. As seen in *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, published courtesy of the U'mista Cultural Society, Alert Bay, British Columbia.

> the quick. There is as much to look back upon as there is ahead. Old methods with new tools. Old tools with new methods. This sliver of humanity has done well by the judgment of a whale.

Morris notes that where the voiceover does not specify the image, it "opens up the film and generalizes it, taking it onto a plane of universality."[46] The film combines shots of everyday life with modern amenities (cups, saucers, canned food, motorized fishing boats) and ancient technologies (crab spearing, dried seaweed cakes, traditional carving knives, log drums, and masks) (fig. 4). All of the imagery is accompanied by the sound of songs sung in Kwakwala. Shots of mortuary boxes in trees and the close-up of a carved eye on a mask are accompanied by "A way of life and death." The final scene in the film begins with Willie Seaweed speaking at a ceremony. The voiceover tells us, "A way of life, a way of death, and a way to remember." The scene continues with half a dozen different dancers all accompanied by a single song (fig. 5).

Morris's observations on the universality of the film are reinforced by the overall mood of serenity and stability. There is no conflict, no drama. "The film renders the life of Blunden Harbour utterly familiar,

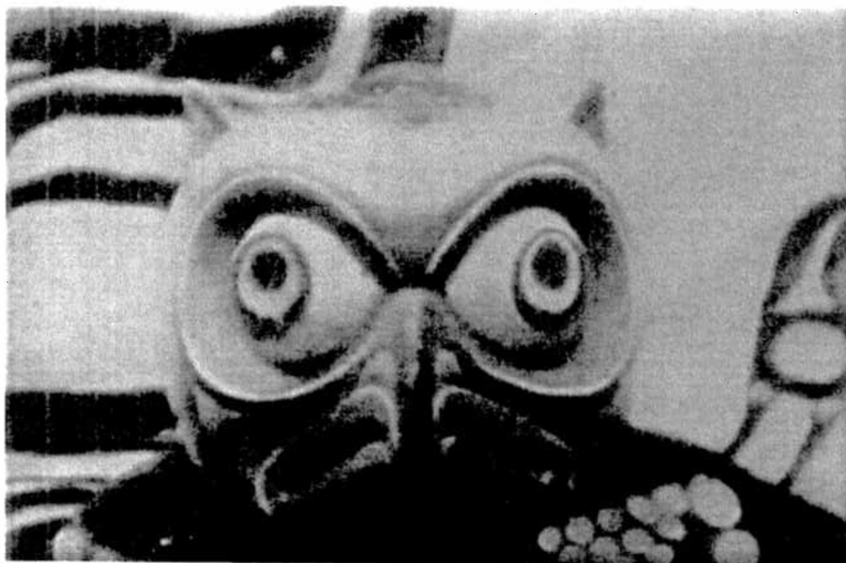

FIGURE 5: Owl dancer, Joe Seaweed from Robert Gardner's *Blunden Harbour*. As seen in *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, published courtesy of the U'mista Cultural Society, Alert Bay, British Columbia.

there is nothing chaotic about it, nothing unpredictable."[47] Even the dance scene, whose masks and costumes should seem exotic and alien, relinquishes its dramatic power to the tranquility and composure of the film as a whole. *Blunden Harbour* is purposefully ahistorical. It presents images from 'Nak'waxdáx̱w life as iconic moments of the essential Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw character. An eternal ethnographic present whose essence despite material changes is, at its core, immune to change.

For its part, *Dances of the Kwakiutl* consists of colour footage that was shot concurrently with the filming of *Blunden Harbour*. The same dancers, singers, and witnesses appear in each film. The film has only one short bit of narration, which is even more enigmatic than that presented in the longer film. After the appearance of the title, the film begins with close-up shots of the singers' hands and faces. As the image moves to take in the dancer, the narration begins:

> Fifty years ago the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia held their Winter Ceremonial in order to bring back the youth who were staying with the supernatural protector of their society. The songs and dances which belong to this ritual were vital to the success of the ceremony. Lately both the intention and performance of the Winter Ceremonial have been substantially altered. The dancers are no longer significant within the ceremonial complex and their performance depends now an individual and spontaneous will to recreate a very old syncopated dance form.

Here perhaps is a hint of the tension between individual personality and cultural constraint; however, there is no further explanation, no identification of the dancers or the ceremonial complex. Again, as in *Blunden Harbour*, despite the varied appearance of the dancers and their distinctive movements, the songs do not change with each new participant. These films do, in fact, seem to be experiments in visual poetics—an attempt, as Gardner wrote, to do "something that might lift up humanity and also belong to Art ... a longing to capture human reality in ways that might reveal its essence of significance."[48]

Films by the U'mista Cultural Society

The jump from Robert Gardner's 1951 productions to the films of the U'mista Cultural Society two and three decades later is a large one. The intervening years changed anthropology, ethnographic filmmaking, and Native rights. The 1960s and 1970s led the way for a re-evaluation of Native rights in both the United States and Canada. Interest in the art of British Columbia's Native people resulted in two shows by the Vancouver Art Gallery in the late 1950s, and in 1967 Doris Shadbolt organized the gallery's acclaimed *Arts of the Raven* exhibit. These shows marked the beginning of a trend. Between 1967 and 1983, the British Columbia Provincial Museum, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Vancouver Centennial Museum, and the University of British Columbia, put on over thirty temporary exhibitions.[49] The catalogue for *Arts of the Raven* reflects the role that Native art played in defining a new Canadian regional identity as well. The art was to be seen as an aesthetically valuable tradition, one that was alive and well and being practised by British Columbia's first residents. The images were becoming part of regional history: "But now these are arts in a different sense. Though truly enough of Indian descent, they are now Canadian art, modern art, fine art."[50]

This attitude led to government subsidies for Native projects, including a grant from the British Columbia provincial government to the U'mista Cultural Society to produce their own ethnographic film in 1975, entitled *Potlatch ... A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*. The film was originally conceived as a National Film Board production, budgeted at $90,000 for a half-hour documentary. When the Kwagiulth District Council learned that the film was not intended to make a profit that they could use to establish a cultural centre, they fired the NFB. The project was then taken over by the District Council. The U'mista Cultural Society was the executive producer of the film, Tom Shandell produced it, and Dennis Wheeler directed it. With a $45,000 budget, they produced a fifty-three-minute film.[51]

Focusing on the importance of the potlatch and the loss of ceremonial regalia, the film juxtaposes Kwakwaka'wakw elders remembering Dan Cranmer's 1921 Village Island potlatch, with shots of Doug Cranmer's 1974 memorial potlatch for his brother Danny, and recreations of the 1922 prosecution of forty-five people for dancing and giving or receiving gifts at the 1921 potlatch. Despite the theme of loss and unjust punishment, the film is not a memorial for the past, but a celebration of endurance *despite* loss. This is demonstrated by recollections of the infamous Village Island potlatch that are intercut with images of the contemporary potlatch.

Unlike the reconstructions used by Curtis, Boas, and Gardner, the dancing here is not staged solely for the camera, and modern-day adaptations are not banished from the view of the camera. Contemporary concerns and the history of the film's subjects are highlighted: Alfred Scow describes seeing his possessions illustrated in museum catalogues; Lucy Brown discusses her role in the Village Island potlatch; the recollections of Dan Cranmer about the ramifications of his potlatch are read by his daughter Gloria Cranmer Webster. Webster also explains the importance of wealth and power, and the role of coppers in Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw society. Although the film is obviously made with the non-Native viewer in mind—there is a lot of explanatory narration—the speeches given at the potlatch on the transfer of a copper, though translated into English from Kwakwala, are not totally understandable by the non-Native viewer because formal Kwakwala rhetoric is used (fig. 6).

FIGURE 6: Presentation of a copper. Billie Sandy Willie of Kingcome Inlet (holding the copper) with James Sewid. As seen in *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*, published courtesy of the U'mista Cultural Society, Alert Bay, British Columbia.

The writing of the film was a collaboration by Gloria Cranmer Webster—the film's narrator (along with Robert Joseph)—Dennis Wheeler, Brian Shein, and Tom Shandell. According to Webster, the fact that the filmmakers were not Native was not a problem because they supplied the technical knowledge while the band controlled content.[52] Dennis Wheeler wrote,

> We knew that we were making a film with the Kwakiutl, not about them. That was an important distinction from the beginning. It was very concrete inasmuch they were the owners of the film. But the film had to do several things at once. It had to give an intense feeling of the potlatch without mystifying it or romanticizing it, as well as a sense of what the history of it was in political and mythological terms.[53]

The importance of the potlatch as an ongoing institution is emphasized through the use of texts and images created by people outside of the culture. Boas's record of a speech made to him in 1896 is read to

accompany footage from Associated Screen News films.[54] The speech challenges Boas's right to witness the ceremony and insists on his respect for Kwakwaka'wakw laws governing land ownership and dancing.

> Is this the white man's land? We are told that it is the Queen's land; but no! It is mine!... Where was the Queen when our God gave the land to my grandfather and told him, 'This will be thine'?... Do we ask the white man, 'Do as the Indian does'? No, we do not. Why then do you ask us, 'Do as the white man does'? It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbours. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law, we shall observe ours. And now, if you are come to forbid us to dance, be gone; if not, you will be welcome to us.

The footage of the contemporary potlatch is directly followed by a series of images from the Curtis and Gardner films.[55] A still photograph of the Thunderbird dancing in the prow of the canoe, from the Curtis film, affirms the long tradition of dancing that *Potlatch* emphasizes (fig. 3). The ownership that the Kwakwaka'wakw people feel for these traditions—and for their participation in the Curtis film—is exemplified in an anecdote from the making of *Potlatch*. Dennis Wheeler originally wanted to include footage from *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* rather than stills taken during the filming. Apparently, the royalties requested for use of film footage made it too expensive for the project. Webster simply said, "Dennis, let's just use it, we don't have to pay for it, it's ours."[56]

There was no such problem with the footage from *Blunden Harbour* or *Dances of the Kwakiutl*; Gardner provided the film footage at no charge.[57] The images taken from his films are especially telling. Of all the dance footage in those films, the chosen moments include only those points in the film where the dancers look directly into the camera (fig. 5). These scenes engender confrontation that pulls the viewer into the action, effectively questioning the role of the film's observers and bringing them into the potlatch setting where they are made witnesses to the events. This was by all appearances a purposeful choice on the part of the filmmakers. Just as the speech to Boas challenged his

respect for traditions over one hundred years ago, the U'mista film challenges our role as observers.

The film concludes with an explanation of the concept of U'mista, the return to the family of someone who had been taken by another group, or the return of an item of importance. Webster explains that they are fighting for the return of the confiscated potlatch goods that have languished like prisoners in the storerooms of Canadian museums.

Box of Treasures (1983) is the sequel to *Potlatch*. The U'mista Cultural Society succeeded in its struggle for the repatriation of the masks and regalia confiscated from the 1921 Cranmer potlatch. The film documents the celebration of their return, with the opening of the cultural centre, and a concurrent potlatch given by the Cranmer family on November 1, 1980.

Prior to these celebrations, Gloria Cranmer Webster was approached by Chuck Olin, who was making a film for a Maritime Peoples exhibit at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, and wanted to film in Alert Bay. When this was proposed to the band council, they agreed that Olin could work in Alert Bay if he would film the opening of the Cultural Centre for them. Not knowing what to film and what to omit at the opening, Olin filmed it all. He later asked Webster to come to Chicago to see the footage and suggested that U'mista make a film with it, feeling that there was a message there for other Native groups.[58] The film took three years to produce and included six trips by Olin to Alert Bay. Olin was inspired by the people he met—their successes in cultural survival, and their struggles with the larger political, social, and economic issues of the day. He felt that it was "a jewel of a culture with everything conspiring against it." He understood that there was a continuity of tradition within the culture but that it had been stretched thin.[59] It is interesting that Olin's original draft of the film was unsatisfactory to the band because it had a happily-ever-after ending suggesting that the return of the masks addressed many of the band's concerns. They wanted a stronger message about both the repatriation of property and the strengthening of cultural traditions. According to Webster, they wanted the filmmakers to go back to the interviews because "the real stuff is already in there, in the interviews that we did with various people that this is a battle we'd won, but the war is still

FIGURE 7: *Nimpkish Producer* coming into the harbour with dancers on top of the wheelhouse during the opening ceremonies of the U'mista Cultural Centre, November 1980. Tony Westman, the cameraman for *Box of Treasures*, can be seen in the foreground filming the dancers on the beach in front of the Cultural Centre. [Photo by Robin Wright.]

going on and this is just part of the story. So that change happened and we were happy with that."[60]

One of the most powerful shots in *Box of Treasures* is not reappropriated old footage, as was used in *Potlatch*, but new footage that quotes the most famous moment of the Curtis film, in which the Bear and Thunderbird each dance in the prow of a war canoe. During the opening ceremonies for the new cultural centre, a fishing boat arrives with similarly costumed dancers performing on top of the wheelhouse (fig. 7). The event was certainly not planned for its cinematic impact, but the sequence of shots as the boat enters the harbour deliberately plays on familiarity with the Curtis scene.[61] Had *Box of Treasures* been shot fifteen years later in the late 1990s, these dancers once again would have arrived by canoe.

Morris quotes John Berger's inquiry into the role of film and photography: "All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present. Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message

concerning the event photographed and another concerning the shock of discontinuity."[62] Films like *Potlatch* and *Box of Treasures* that quote old images, either by using them directly, or by framing new images in the likeness of the old, can confront this "shock of discontinuity." Although she is not speaking specifically about these instances of visual quotation, Morris asks pertinent questions about Native use of information—visual or textual—compiled by non-Native anthropologists and filmmakers:

> We can and must ask of recent films whether and to what extent they make use of old concepts and symbols to tell different stories, and to what extent such filmic intertextuality supports or undermines an attempt to undo the narrative of an earlier era. These are urgent questions, for those earlier narratives were both determined by and complicit with the institutional policies aimed at the elimination of aboriginal cultures.[63]

Morris argues that the use of old concepts and symbols risks re-inscribing the ideologies of salvage ethnography and assimilationist policy. While she doesn't insist that these old ideologies are reproduced in the U'mista films, neither does she recognize the important, perhaps essential, function of incorporating the Curtis, Boas, and Gardner images. I believe that the use of earlier devices does not necessarily subject the filmmaker to the policies or politics of their non-Native predecessors. Denying Native people the ability to adopt and adapt non-traditional technologies or information confines them within the very limits they are working to destroy. It may be that using the same tropes is the best way to undermine or invert earlier narratives—converting and subverting them. Any other approach might simply create a whole new path that would not intercept and confront old paradigms of paternalism and assimilation.

This concept is exemplified in the U'mista Cultural Centre itself. Within the museum, objects are arranged in a manner reflecting the temporal sequence of the rituals for which they were made. As a viewer travels through the galleries, he or she re-enacts the process of witnessing each object and validating its presence in the sequence. This is a new hybrid concept of "museum," one that has been adapted and "transculturated" to become "a cultural center and a site of storytelling, of indigenous history and of ongoing tribal politics."[64] The

FIGURE 8: Dan Cranmer dances as Hamatsa with Gloria Cranmer Webster at the opening ceremonies for the U'mista Cultural Centre, November 1980. [Photo by Robin Wright.]

museum and the films are simply tools by which the Kwakwaka'wakw may now exercise their inherent rights to reclaim and recontextualize these objects, texts, and images.[65] The strength of these claims is emphasized in the closing scene of *Box of Treasures*, which, like all of the films discussed here, features ceremonial dancing: Dan Cranmer and Gloria Cranmer Webster participating in the Hamatsa dance. This image is accompanied by Gloria Webster's moving text: "But most of all we celebrate the fact that we're still alive, we're still here. We've survived and we'll continue to survive and we're always going to be here" (fig. 8).

All six of these films focus on ceremonial dancing as the essential institution of the Kwakwaka'wakw people. Certainly, this was not a coincidence. The Native subjects of the films were high-ranking families whose role within the potlatch complex was key to their experience within their culture.[66] The Curtis and Boas films, despite the participation of Native actors, insist on a historical reconstruction that denied contemporary realities of Kwa-gulth life. Gardner acknowledges the intrusion of modern-day commodities and subsumes them into a poetic snapshot of Kwakwaka'wakw life. Only the U'mista films insist

on a combination of cultural history—emphasizing continuity of tradition—with the specificity of individual experience and contemporary realities. In their productions, images created by earlier non-Natives filmmakers are reappropriated to serve their own narrative. Images of family members wearing long-lost regalia—taken by others and used for outside purposes—have been returned to the culture. Thus, like the physical objects in the cultural centre, they too are U'mista.

Notes

1. In the 1983 film *Box of Treasures*, Gloria Cranmer Webster states that the Kwakwaka'wakw are "probably the most highly anthropologized group of Native people in the world." See *Box of Treasures*, directed by Chuck Olin (U'mista Cultural Society, 1983). Film.
2. For an extensive history of the making of the film and the relationship of Curtis and Hunt, see Bill Holm and George Irving Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes: A Pioneer Cinematographer in the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980).
3. Bill Holm spoke with over fifty people who had been involved with the film or present at the filming (Ibid., 16–17).
4. Brian Winston, "Before Grierson, Before Flaherty ... Was Edward S. Curtis," *Sight and Sound* 57, 4 (1988): 278.
5. Holm and Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis*, 113–14. It is interesting to note that Curtis is using the word *documentary* to validate his pursuits more than a decade before Grierson defines the documentary as a category of anthropological filmmaking in his 1926 review of Flaherty's *Moana*. See Eliot Wienberger, "The Camera People," in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 139.
6. A film made by Pliny Goddard in 1922 no longer survives. *Totemland* was produced by the Associated Screen News of Montreal in 1930. Also in 1930, Franz Boas filmed the research footage considered here. See Ira Jacknis, "George Hunt, Collector of Indian Specimens," in *Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1991), 205n12.
7. Jacknis, "George Hunt," 206.
8. A number of artifacts and props from the film are now in the collection of the Burke Museum. These include the Duntsik boards (seen growing and receding during the dance scene), more than a dozen cedar bark head and neck rings, two basketry hats, three whalebone clubs, and Naida's headdress.
9. Holm and Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis*, 55.
10. Ibid., 57.

11 Bill Holm, personal communication, October 10, 2000; Lois Speck, "Interview with Gloria Cranmer Webster," *U'mista Cultural Society Newsletter* (Summer 2000): 18.
12 Holm and Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis*, 57.
13 Ibid., 58, 60.
14 Ibid., 121–25.
15 Although George Hunt was half-white, half-Tlingit by birth, he was raised within the Fort Rupert community and his native tongue was Kwakwala. Hunt's mother, a foreigner to the community, established her position through traditional methods; thus from an early age Hunt was aware of the Kwa-gulth system of social validation. At the age of nine, Hunt was initiated in a Kwa-gulth ritual, and throughout his life he participated fully in the ceremonial and social life of the Fort Rupert Kwa-gulth. See Jeanne Cannizzo, "George Hunt and the Invention of Kwakiutl Culture," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 20, 1 (1983): 44–58.
16 Quoted in Holm and Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis*, 13.
17 Ibid., 14.
18 Rosalind C. Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments: Film, Ethnography, and the Representation of Northwest Coast Cultures* (Boulder: Westview, 1994), 40.
19 Holm and Quimby, *Edward S. Curtis*, 96, 102.
20 These included the Sea Monster House at the Pacific Science Center, the Burke Museum, the Portland Art Museum, the Royal Columbia Provincial Museum, the American Museum of Natural History's *Chiefly Feasts* exhibit, and most surprisingly, in the Vancouver Art Gallery's *Down from the Shimmering Sky*—an exhibition that prided itself on showing art in a *gallery* setting without the usual anthropological context.
21 Jacknis, "George Hunt," 181.
22 Holm, personal communication, October 10, 2000.
23 The film, as edited by Holm, is available at the University of Washington. A copy of some 1930 Boas footage is still available unedited by Holm at the National Anthropological Archives in Washington, DC. This copy has fifteen minutes of the dance scenes (but not the Games and Technologies reel) in an order different from the one in which they appear in the Holm version. One short reel shows Boas himself dancing as well as some non-Native children playing. This copy was given to the archives by Columbia University and may have been in the possession of Boas's student, Dr. David Effron. Thanks to Aaron Glass for bringing this copy to my attention.
24 Holm, personal communication, October 10, 2000. In Helen Codere's edited volume of Boas's *Kwakiutl Ethnography*, she reported that the film was lost. See Franz Boas, *Kwakiutl Ethnography*, ed. Helen Codere (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 171. Morris repeats this information and adds that Boas thought the footage had been stolen. See Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 56. In 1953, Gunther recorded songs, sung by Mungo Martin, to go with the film, but that project was never completed (Holm, personal communication, November 11, 2000).

25 Holm, personal communication, October 10, 2000. Holm's explanations of the activities were informed by his interviews with the surviving actors in the film who were asked to explain the scenes. Holm spoke with Mungo Martin, Mary Johnson, Mr. and Mrs. James Knox, and Bob Wilson, who all participated in the film. Other actors included Mr. and Mrs. George Hunt, Sam Hunt, Frank Walker, Sarah Hunt Ohmid, and Charles Wilson, many of whom had been key informants for Boas. See Bill Holm, *Notes on "The Kwakiutl of British Columbia": A Documentary Film by Franz Boas*, prod. Franz Boas, ed. Bill Holm (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 1.
26 Ira Jacknis agrees that the film was never intended to be presented to a general audience. See Ira Kacknis, "Visualizing Kwakwaka'wakw Tradition: The Films of William Heick, 1951–63," *BC Studies* 125 and 126 (2000): 103.
27 Holm, *Notes on the Kwakiutl*, 1; Holm, personal communication, October 10, 2000.
28 The dances had to be staged outside to provide enough light for the cameras. Because the windup camera held a limited amount of film, the dance sequences were by necessity abbreviated (Holm, *Notes on "The Kwakiutl,"* 2).
29 Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 56.
30 Ibid., 61.
31 Ibid., 56–62.
32 Ibid., 62.
33 Ibid., 63.
34 Morris asserts that "not even Holm could interpret the image-track that Boas left behind." However, this is exactly what he did in compiling the text (ibid., *New Worlds from Fragments*, 59).
35 Ibid.
36 It seems clear that Morris did not read Holm's text, because there are discrepancies between her descriptions and the information provided in Holm's notes. She does cite Colin Browne's annotation of the film, which states that the film is "available with copious excellent notes by Bill Holm." See Colin Browne, *Motion Picture Production in British Columbia 1848–1940: A Brief Historical Background and Catalogue* (Victoria: British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1979), 190. Morris seems to feel strongly that the film should be analyzed on its own merits without considering any texts (Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 59).
37 Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 63. The film, similar to Boas's field notes, records information from his informants about activities that Boas considered to be "traditional." However, the milled-lumber houses of Fort

Rupert appear in the background and the actors are wearing early-twentieth-century Western clothing—characteristics that certainly would not have appeared in a Curtis production. The undisguised trappings of twentieth-century life support the notion that the film sequences were intended as field notes rather than as part of a film production.

38 Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 64.

39 Gardner made an additional film in Fort Rupert, located directly across Queen Charlotte Straights from Blunden Harbour, in June 1950. Gardner, in response to an inquiry from Bill Holm, denied having made the film (Bill Holm, personal interview, November 11, 1999). However, Ira Jacknis discusses the circumstances of the filming in Fort Rupert. The footage was apparently made into a finished film, although the present whereabouts of the film is unknown (Jacknis, "Visualizing Kwakwaka'wakw Tradition," 108–109).

40 Robert Gardner, "The Impulse to Preserve," in *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 174.

41 Jacknis quotes avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage (Jacknis, "Visualizing Kwakwaka'wakw Tradition," 107).

42 Ibid., 108.

43 Gardner, "The Impulse to Preserve," 173.

44 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

45 Jacknis, "Visualizing Kwakwaka'wakw Tradition," 110n31.

46 Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 104.

47 Ibid., 105.

48 Gardner, "The Impulse to Preserve," 172.

49 Karen Duffek, *The Contemporary Northwest Coast Indian Art Market* (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983), 33.

50 Wilson Duff, Bill Reid, and Bill Holm, *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indian* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1967), 8.

51 Speck, "Interview with Gloria Cranmer Webster," 18.

52 Ibid.

53 Dennis Wheeler, "Director's Statement," *Potlatch . . . A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*. (U'mista Cultural Society, 1975).

54 These scenes are from *Fish and Medicine Men*, 1928, and *Totemland*, 1930. Thanks to Dan Savard for identifying these clips.

55 One provocative angle for viewing these films may be to consider the ramifications of performances enacted specifically for the camera and those filmed while in progress for a traditional audience. For an informative discussion of dances performed for non-Natives and what aspects must be included, regardless of audience, see Judith Ostrowitz, *Privileging the Past: Reconstructing History in Northwest Coast Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 84–104.

56 Speck, "Interview with Gloria Cranmer Webster," 18.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 One benefit of this collaborative project was the "Salmonista Video Project," which grew out of Olin's time at Alert Bay. One of his crew, Judy Hoffman, came and taught a video workshop, instructing students in handling of video equipment, lighting, sound dubbing, history of video, maintenance of equipment, and interviewing techniques. See Speck, "Interview with Gloria Cranmer Webster," 18. One of the students in this workshop was Barbara Cranmer, who went on to direct *Mungo Martin: A Slender Thread*, I'Tusto: *To Rise Again*, and Tlina: *The Rendering of Wealth*.

61 The arrival of a big canoe for a potlatch was one of the scenes recorded in the now-lost footage that Gardner shot at Fort Rupert in 1950 (Jacknis, *Visualizing Kwakwaka'wakw Tradition*, 109n28).

62 Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments*, 39.

63 Ibid., 116–17.

64 James Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections," in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 212.

65 For a discussion of the reclamation and reorganization of objects and texts in the U'mista Cultural Center see Clifford, "Four Northwest Coast Museums, 107–45. A number of his observations can be applied to the recontextualized images that appear in the U'mista films.

66 See Barbara Saunders, "Contested *Ethnie* in Two Kwakwaka'wakw Museums," in *Contesting Art: Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy, 85–130 (New York: Oxford, 1997), for a discussion of the self-conscious construction of a Kwakwaka'wakw *ethnie* by the U'mista Centre and the Hunt-Cranmer family, based on the Boas texts and the repatriated Potlatch collection.

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