Micmac Storyteller: River of Fire—
The Co-Creation of an Ethnographic Video

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> *They'll see me talking right, they'll want to hear what I am saying, they'll want to see the atmosphere, see the environment, such as water, sun and all that stuff, goes along with the story. That's what they want: to prove what I am saying.*
> *– Michael William Francis, Big Cove, New Brunswick, 1991*

The ethnographic video *Micmac Storyteller: River of Fire* could not have been made without the cooperation of the weather. When the wind blew in from the southeast, east, or—worst of all—from the northeast, across the open reach of ocean, the waves striking the shore would drown out the voice of the storyteller. The family, sitting and listening, could always move closer. But the wind hissing in the microphone whipped up the sand. One small grain cost hours of despair before we finally found a repair shop, where a friendly and caring repairman gently took the camera, rotated the internal cylinder, and freed the tiny grain of sand that had immobilized the camera and us.

The stories of Michael William Francis, a Micmac of Big Cove, New Brunswick, are filled with images of the natural environment, and thus required that we take note of that environment. Surrounded by thousands of buzzing mosquitoes—that hummed in the microphone, that covered the lens, and made our lives miserable—we waited for the ideal sunset over the salt marsh. In the cool and quiet of first light, we waited for the perfect sunrise. We became attuned to sounds that we could first hear but not see (*meteta'q*): the loons out on the ocean, the small sandpiper flitting in the sand from one protective gully to the other, the osprey hovering high overhead searching for fish in the ocean, silhouetted against the brightness of the sky.

At this point, you, the reader, may be checking the title of this article to make sure you have not been mistaken. Such an exuberant opening as the above may seem more characteristic of "fiction" than of documentary ethnographic film-making. But, as the storyteller himself says, the presence of the natural environment is necessary to give his words authority. The atmosphere and the environment, water and sun, stand witness to the truth of his words. For this video to have "truth," we had to create equal space

for both the Micmac storyteller, Mike Francis, and the context in which his stories have meaning and authority.

Questions of Authority

In the process of cross-cultural co-creation, questions of representation and authority come sharply into focus. In the Australian film *Two Laws*, two white Australian film-makers, Alessandro Cavadini and Caroline Strachan (1981), collaborated with members of the Borroloola community in Australia. In this effort, authority was achieved primarily through the appropriate choice and consistent use of a particular camera lens. *Two Laws* presents Aboriginal perceptions of law and ways in which law regulates interaction with people, the land, and property. According to Cavadini and Strachan, these perceptions influenced the film-making process itself.

The Aboriginal community documented in *Two Laws* decided, as a group, that the entire film should be shot using a wide-angle lens, because such a lens is more inclusive. James Ray MacBean (1988: 211) quotes the film-makers as follows:

> It [the wide-angle lens] was the one that people responded to and liked. ... If someone wants to make a statement, others have to be present to make that statement possible—to confirm or to contradict it.

This approach is in direct contrast with Western documentary film conventions that favour the individual, authoritative speaker.[1] As MacBean writes further (loc. cit.), "That the results cinematically look so different from what we are accustomed to seeing in even the best ethnographic films up to now certainly causes us to sit up and take notice."

In the making of *Micmac Storyteller*, co-creation or "participatory cinema," as it was termed by British documentary film-maker David MacDougall (1975), seemed to be both the most interesting and the most appropriate cinematic mode. Let me digress, nonetheless, to discuss a few of the alternative modes.

Traditional narrative or expository documentary film claims direct authority on the basis of representing "non-fiction." The events the viewer sees and the explanations put forward by a narrator are presented as reality and truth. An authoritative narrator's voice (usually male) supplies the interpretation for filmed fragments of events that have been edited to support a smooth, single, causes-and-effects, chronological, pre-scripted explanation. In this process, the people being filmed are talked about, but they in turn have no voice, no way of speaking for themselves.

In reaction to some of the objectionable aspects of expository documentary style, some film-makers have switched to "observational" or "direct cinema" (MacDougall 1975). In its "purist" form, direct cinema features no narrator. No one directly addresses the audience, neither the film-maker nor the subjects filmed. Claims of truth for this mode are based

on the assertion that viewers are allowed to eavesdrop on unmediated, unrehearsed action. The camera as viewer acts as an unseen spy on the unknowing subjects. We are assured that what we see and hear are "naturally occurring" events. Meaning is to be discovered in the film "as text" and not in the intentions of either the film-maker or the subjects filmed.[2]

Observational cinema is the mode that Steven Feld suggested we use when he urged us to use film to do "better ethnomusicology" (1976). Feld based his argument concerning scholarly value on his analysis of film as "symbolic communication," as authored texts whose integrity depends on knowledgeable researchers taking more sophisticated samples. The structure of film, he suggested, should be based on "the experiential response and intuition of the informed observer in filming naturally occurring events" (ibid.:311). Then, by taking the next step and actually "publishing films and writing about them, we can share aspects of field experience— both its data and interpretation—and as a result attain a new level of communication" (ibid.: 314).

Film provides us with a means for gathering better data. Film becomes a mode for doing better science. This is ultimately the legitimacy that Feld advocated in 1976. Doing better science requires that we acknowledge our signatures on the texts and that we authenticate the events filmed by labeling them "naturally occurring." Our role is that of observer, sampling but not influencing. We are reflexive about our presence only to assert more strongly our own objectivity and distance. *We* film *them*; *they* are the study object. The events we have discovered are "naturally occurring." But "What to do about people?" as Bill Nichols, the film theorist, asked (1981). What about their signatures on the event of filming? Or do we subsume their reactions as part of the "natural"?

In his article "Beyond Observational Cinema," MacDougall summarizes what he sees as the central shortcomings of the observational mode (1975: 219):

> What is finally disappointing in the ideal of filming "as if the camera were not there" is not that observation in itself is unimportant, but that as a governing approach it remains far less interesting than exploring the situation that actually exists. The camera is there, and it is held by a representative of one culture encountering another. Besides such an extraordinary event the search for isolation and invisibility seems a curious irrelevant ambition.

Had the Australian film, *Two Laws*, not been a collaborative effort, it is very unlikely that the film-makers would have chosen to use a wide angle lens throughout. As a result the film would most likely have looked more conventional to us. Collaboration and co-creation open up a potentially new space for cross-cultural dialogue, a new space for exploring different ideas about appropriateness and authority in representing people: their experiences and expressions.

The Co-Creation of *Micmac Storyteller: River of Fire*
Micmac Storyteller: River of Fire is a "low budget" video, shot with an Hi8
camera and edited to 3/4 inch video tape. It was created (1991-92) by
Michael William Francis, a Micmac elder from Big Cove, New Brunswick,
and myself. Mike is a well known storyteller, artist, and musician in his
community. I had worked with him since 1985, taping many hours of
stories, music, and discussion, and shooting fifteen hours of video footage.
Mike was aware of the power of visual communication, aware of the effect
that television was having on his children and grandchildren. He expressed
an interest in using film for storytelling. The idea to co-create came from
his remark that something was missing from my earlier footage. As a result,
his emphasis on storytelling came to guide our film's process.

Co-creation affected who and what got filmed, as well as where and
how. It also influenced the editing process, even though Mike was not
directly involved. After the first rough-edit, Mike and his family gathered
to give their comments and advice. To get a sense of what co-creation meant
in the production of *Micmac Storyteller*, I address specific aspects of the
filming process, touching on points of agreement as well as disagreement.

Mike did not wish to be involved in creating the initial framework, but
his first comment on seeing it was that he would prefer some changes.
Instead of starting with a sunrise, as I had originally proposed, he explained
why it should begin with a sunset and with a story of the *Sacred Fire*, a
story, by the way, that I had never heard him tell before.

Mike and I discussed where the filming of the storytelling should take
place. I was accustomed to hearing him tell stories at his kitchen table.
Neighbours would come in to listen and drink coffee. Usually the television
was on, but with the volume turned down at my request. I had taped Mike's
stories there, but he preferred that we film the storytelling at the beach,
among the "natural resources." In earlier years it had been at his summer
camp on the beach that people from the community would come to listen
to him. Placement of the camera and point-of-view were my decision. From
Mike's comments about the earlier footage, I concluded that a sustained
medium close-up shot would be most appropriate. Mike does not speak
directly to the listeners, but into a space at the centre of a metaphorical
circle. The camera provides the listener with a place within that circle. A
more direct approach would not be respectful, nor would it create an
appropriate "point of view."

Although the film was neither scripted nor staged, it was intentionally
created. Some footage was not preplanned, but represents a spontaneous
filming of ongoing events. However, these events occurred in a filming
context in which everybody had a heightened sense of self awareness.
Co-creating involved the whole family and meant young Lisha Francis
lying in her room listening to New Kids on the Block, Alog, a grandson,

coming to visit to be part of the film, children outside speaking Micmac, Mike drawing cartoons, his wife Ada telling the stories, Mike's 17-year-old grandson Cory and his young wife Polly bringing the week-old great granddaughter to be filmed. All these events were natural for the participants, but they were infused with new meaning in the context of co-creating.

In the editing studio, this footage magically becomes film, transformed by the creative hand of the editor. Mike did not assist in the process. I based my decisions on what I understood to be our common goals and intentions. Stories were to stay intact. The general pacing of images should be in tune with the rhythm of storytelling. (Thus, in the biographical section, the tempo speeds up). Sounds and images should be linked to reflect a complex web of relationships. This was missing from my earlier unedited footage, and this, according to Mike, gives his words authority. After previewing the first rough-edit, he said:

> They'll see me talking right, they'll want to hear what I am saying, they'll want to see the atmosphere, see the environment, such as water, sun and all that stuff, goes along with the story. That's what they want, to prove what I am saying.

The previewing session, to which Mike invited members of his extended family, turned out to be a wonderful family event at which everyone was invited to comment on possible changes and additions. Mike and other members of his family thought that the film should introduce Mike more formally. I, on the other hand, had been reluctant to use any form of voice-over narration. Now the film was to have a formal biographical section. English subtitles for the "River of Fire" story, should be added, I was told, because not all Micmacs speak the language and because the language of storytelling is older and more difficult to understand. It would also allow non-Natives easier access.

At first, Mike was a bit hesitant about the section in which I counterpoint his stories with a scene of his thirteen-year-old daughter, surrounded by "New Kids on the Block" posters and lip-synching to their music. My concern was to show that the younger generation creates meanings from a broad range of social and cultural experiences. However, this was not part of the story that Mike was promoting. But Mike's nephew, a professional artist himself, convinced Mike that it should be left in, because the contrasting scenes depict the complexity of today's reality.

I, on the other hand, was hesitant to add the flute music (played by an Ojibwe on a traditional Lakota flute). I did so at Mike's request. He wanted to include it because one of the stories in the film is about the *Mikmwesu* ("Wizard of the Forest") who transforms the listener with his flute playing. Personally, I wanted to use only music played or sung by Mike himself, but Mike saw no need for such a narrow understanding of authenticity.[3]

Although Mike and I shared some basic concepts, there were some differences of intent. He expressed interest in preserving stories, passing on knowledge, and providing good entertainment for a broad audience. I, at the time, wanted to stay within what I considered to be appropriate boundaries for ethnographic film. The difference was not necessarily one of fiction versus truth, or art versus "science." These dichotomies tend to blur when, like Feyerabend (as reported by Nichols 1981: 248), we interpret science as a methodology that we use to discover the world that our assumptions fabricate. Instead, the difference becomes one of degree (loc. cit.). The following excerpt from my field journal entry, written after Mike saw the final version of the film, illuminates how Mike would really like to use film.

> The way Mike now says that he would like to use video is far removed from the realms of "ethnographic realism."[4] He wants to *use* technology. He wants to use trick photography to give the illusion of transformation—to evoke connections and relations between animals and people—to use mirrors to create illusion. He wants to have people walk on clouds, transform from person to animal or bird, etc. He wants to *use* technology to re-create symbolic relationships.

In 1991, to me, participatory cinema did not mean placing myself, as film-maker, completely at the disposal of Mike and his family and inventing the film with them, as MacDougall (1975: 122) proposes. Such a project still remains to be undertaken.

NOTES

1. Here I find the contrast with feminist film-maker Barbara Martineau's perspective (1984) interesting. She follows the principle that respect and point-of-view are most meaningfully achieved by means of the technique in which "talking heads" speak directly into the eye of the camera.

2. For a more in-depth discussion of film theory and practice, I refer the reader to Nichols (1981) and Titon (1992a); for a discussion of representation and authority in ethnographic film, see Titon (1992) and Dornfeld (1992).

3. Mike plays both fiddle and guitar. During the 1940s in Maine, he was a member of a country music band. Mike also knows, annd occasionally sings, some traditional Micmac songs, but he has never seemed very comfortable about recording these.

4. See Heider (1976) for a discussion of realism in ethnographic film.

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Résumé:

*Franziska von Rosen discute le processus qu'elle a utilisé pour faire un
vidéo ethnographique, «Conteur micmac: le fleuve de feu», avec le conteur,
peintre, danseur et musicien micmac Michael William Francis. Elle décrit
les mises en scène et la nature des contes de Francis, et sa façon de
travailler, qui était une sorte de «cinéma de participation», compris comme
un échange suivi entre l'artiste traditionnel mis en vedette et l'ethnologue-
directrice.*