

Peter Geller. *Northern Exposures: Photographing and Filming the Canadian North, 1920-1945*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004. Pp. 280.

The cover of Peter Geller's *Northern Exposures: Photographing and Filming the Canadian North, 1920-1945*, presents a photographic image from 1919 of a cinematographer seated in a kayak that is drawn up close to shore. His paddle is balanced across the kayak's deck beam, and resting on the cockpit combing in front of him is a large hand-cranked film camera that he appears to be operating. The manner in which the cinematographer assumes a position that would normally be occupied by an Inuit paddler provides a visual introduction for Geller's study of southern expansion in the North and mirrors the role that photographs and films played in imparting southern values to the North's inhabitants.

The cinematographer pictured in this image was filming for the Hudson's Bay Company. While *Northern Exposures* provides an account of the respective interests of the government, the Anglican Church, and the Hudson's Bay Company, it is "the interlocking nature of these three varieties of the northern vision" (p. 168) that most interests Geller. A photograph published in a 1935 issue of the Company's magazine *The Beaver* highlights this overlapping vision. Chesley Russell's photograph shows three men clad in arctic gear on board the Company's steamer *Nascopie*: representatives of the government's Eastern Arctic Patrol, the Anglican Church, and the Hudson's Bay Company. The manner in which the government, the Church, and the Company each played a part in directing the portrayal of the North forms the basis for Geller's study.

With respect to government-sponsored programs, Geller gives most consideration to Major Lachlin Taylor Burwash's photographs and Richard Finnie's films from the 1920s and 1930s. Geller relates such projects as those of the North West Territories and Yukon Branch (NWTYB) to earlier expeditions' "attempt[s] to make the unknown knowable" (p. 28). In a manner now familiar through post-colonial study Geller characterizes the government's programs as situating the North as "something to be domesticated and civilized, brought into the frame of reference of southern Canadian understanding" (p. 49). Geller's analysis of a number of albums compiled by Burwash reveals the manner in which Burwash's photographs extend earlier practices of photographing and grouping Inuit subjects in a typology in which the subjects' individual identities are lost. Even where the Inuit subjects are named their individuality remains tenuous. As an instance of this, Geller highlights *Back to Baffin*, a 1928 film of the NWTYB edited by

Finnie. *Back to Baffin* shows Nuqallaq, a native of Baffin Island, departing the government steamer Arctic to be reunited after a long absence with his wife Ataguttiaq. Geller observes that what is not revealed in Finnie's scenes of a happy homecoming is that Nuqallaq "was not back from a pleasure trip but from a confinement in Manitoba's Stony Mountain Penitentiary" (p. 141). This story recalls Geller's earlier analogy between "the all-seeing eye of the motion picture camera, floating through Arctic waters as it captures images of people and place," and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, that nineteenth-century prison that serves as a central image and metaphor in post-colonial study (p. 49).

Peter Geller's book is, however, not locked into any obscure theorizing of such issues. Rather, in its clear presentation and focus upon the subject of Northern imagery during a particular time period, *Northern Exposures* could serve well as an introduction to theoretical perspectives for many readers. In its mixing of interests across such fields as anthropology, film and photography, history, and sociology, Geller's study should be wide-reaching in its audience. In addition, Geller has worked in a number of sub-themes throughout his study of Northern photographs and films, including the role of amateur photographers and film makers, how the creation of these northern images is situated within a southern culture of collecting and museum display, and the manner in which these films and photographs of the North existed alongside such popular cultural forms as *Life Magazine* or Robert O'Flaherty's 1922 film *Nanook of the North*. Primary among such sub-themes is a consideration of how any aesthetic or other meanings of the photographs and films must be considered in the context of their production and dissemination through forms that rely upon both image and text.

In considering photographic and film work done for the Anglican Church by Bishop Archibald Lang Fleming, Geller takes up the question of how Fleming could "portray the goals and successes of the missionary program...yet retain the power and resonance of the photographic image" (p. 75). An answer resides, in part, in his "building a visual language of the transition from darkness to light" (p. 75). Such a strong "guiding light" is evident on the faces of Inuit men in three individual photographic portraits reprinted from Fleming's 1928 book *Dwellers in Arctic Night* that are respectively captioned "An Unevangelized Eskimo," "Sow-ne-ah-lo," and "A Native Christian Leader." This is a "language," Geller writes, that is dependent upon a "juxtaposition of image and text" (p. 75), with the function of the portraits' accompanying captions (especially the first and third) being clear in this instance. In considering these and such other "improvement" photographs as those associated with missionary schools, Geller highlights ways in which meaning is constructed through such varied intertextual forms as published books and pamphlets, lantern-slide lectures, and films with inter-titling.

Furthermore, such intertextuality exists also in the idea that some of the films were “combination” films, made up by bringing together footage by such cinematographers as Bishop Fleming with pre-existent films from government sources.

With respect to work undertaken for the Hudson’s Bay Company, Geller traces the development of *The Beaver* from a primarily text-based magazine founded in the early 1920s, through its development in the 1930s as a highly visual, almost collage-like, forum for promoting Northern imagery and the Company’s interests. During this transition there was extensive use of photographs and other contributions from Company employees and, as Geller observes, advances in photographic technology made it possible for “the camera [to become] an unofficial part of the fur traders’ outfit by the early decades of the twentieth century” (p. 129). It is an interesting aspect of Geller’s study that a consideration of the contributions of individual amateur photographers and filmmakers is set alongside larger questions surrounding Inuit identity (both individual and cultural) during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

To get a sense of such publications as *The Beaver*, it is useful to have entire page layouts reproduced. This step could be taken further with photographs providing a sense of the entire physical nature of the publications and unpublished albums that Geller discusses. Certainly the inclusion of such images as that of the cinematographer in the kayak and one showing a group of aboriginals outside Winnipeg’s Allen Theatre dressed in traditional native costume for a showing of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s film *Romance of the Fur Country* fulfil an important function in highlighting the performative aspect of these Northern images with respect to both production and reception.

With eighty-six images, Peter Geller’s *Northern Exposures* is a well-illustrated and thoughtfully assembled book. Alongside other recent publications such as Thomas Ross Miller and Barbara Mathé’s *Drawing Shadows to Stone: The Photographs of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897-1902*, and J.C.H. King and Henrietta Lidchi’s *Imaging the Arctic*, Geller’s study provides a valuable contribution to an expanding area of study into what he characterizes as “past representational practices in the construction of the North,” and the ‘currency’ of such images “in the present” (p. xvi).

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