



Alanis Obomsawin: A Portrait of a First Nations Filmmaker

By Adrian Harewood

UPON entering Alanis Obomsawin's three-story flat at the end of a nondescript cul-de-sac in downtown Montreal, I'm struck by the coziness of the abode. On this mild mid-December afternoon, the dolls that Obomsawin has hand-sewn to give to young orphans during the Christmas season—now annual ritual—are strewn on the floor of a large airy living room bathed in natural light. Posters, photographs and an eclectic collection of art adorn the home's multihued walls. Obomsawin has been living in this house now for half of her life. She isn't planning to leave any time soon.

One could excuse Alanis—pronounced “à la Nice,” as in the French city—Obomsawin for slowing down. After nearly four decades of documenting the lives and struggles of First Nations people across Canada, the 70-year-old writer, director and member of the Abenaki nation is considered one of the country's most distinguished filmmakers. A pioneering artist, singer, educator, community activist, member of the Order of Canada and recipient of numerous international awards, Obomsawin is to her



legion of admirers a legend in her own time. Yet she refuses to rest. Her latest documentary, the Genie-nominated, *Is the Crown at War with Us?*, like her earlier films *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), offers a trenchant critique of the policies and practices of the Canadian state and its protracted disregard for and abuse of First Nations people.

Over the course of her remarkable career, Obomsawin—one of only three remaining staff documentary filmmakers at the NFB—has moved from the margins to the centre of institutional power in Canada. While her work is now officially embraced by the repressive state that she lambastes, Obomsawin has retained the instincts, sensibility and posture of the eternally alienated outsider. To Jerry White, assistant professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Alberta and co-editor of *North of Everything: English Canadian Cinema Since 1980*, not only does Obomsawin “render the white invader settler gaze visible, [she] interrupts and inverts that gaze to observe the indigence self and white subject and reconstructs both from a

First Nations perspective.” Through her more than 20 documentaries, Obomsawin has altered the way in which we interpret the mythology of the Canadian state and its relationship with First Nations communities.



“Every time I tried to do something they would tell me, ‘Oh you can’t do this, you’re an Indian!’ The more they said that to me, the more I said, ‘Well I am going to do that anyway.’”

– Alanis Obomsawin

In person, Obomsawin is the epitome of dignity, grace and fine manners. She is humble and without affectation. When she speaks, and she is a dramatic storyteller, her voice seems modulated to correspond to the mood of the moment with an exacting precision. As an interlocutor she can be mischievous, playful and wildly funny. Belying her gentle, nurturing nature, she is a formidable force when challenged. Able to shift her mood at a whim, she possesses a wholly unique quality that allows her to disarm and charm at the same time. Her piercing dark brown eyes host a swirling sea of emotion, at times compassionate, inquisitive, earnest, defiant and wise. She understands the allure of the idle gesture, the raised eyebrow and the coquettish grin. She has what might have been called in an earlier era, “sass.” In passing, Obomsawin mentions that as a younger woman she worked as a model.

Alanis Obomsawin was born on Abenaki territory in Lebanon, New Hampshire on August 31, 1932. At six months she returned with her parents to Odanak, their home reserve, on Quebec’s lower south shore. It was in this close-knit community that she spent many a happy childhood moment singing songs and learning the stories of her people. Life, though, was far from easy for the Obomsawin family. Four of Obomsawin’s siblings died as infants and her father Herman, a hunting-and-fishing guide, contracted tuberculosis of the bone, which plagued him for seven years.

When Obomsawin was nine years old her family moved to Trois Rivières, 48 kilometres away from Odanak, where they became the town’s lone Native family. “That’s when I

realized I was poor,” Obomsawin notes. “I didn’t realize it before.” In Trois Rivières, the family endured many hardships. Obomsawin suffered daily racial abuse and hostility from schoolmates and teachers alike. “I never believed what I was told I was. I knew that there was a lot of wrong there. Every time I tried to do something they

would tell me, ‘Oh you can’t do this, you’re an Indian!’ The more they said that to me, the more I said, ‘Well I am going to do that anyway.’ I was just a fighter. I just wanted to make changes.”

An almost transcendent sense of mission, defiance in the face of immoral authority and a passionate commitment to justice and social change, have been themes that have defined Obomsawin’s life. In her 20s she became a popular singer and community educator, travelling across Canada to teach young people about the significance of Native history and culture. She eventually settled in Montreal, where, at the age of 24, she taught herself English by reading the Indian Act. She had always wanted to understand the workings of a law that had so afflicted her people.

By 1965, Obomsawin had won such renown for her community and artistic endeavours that she was made the subject of a made-for-television profile, called *Alanis*, directed by Ron Kelly. The documentary so impressed officials at the NFB that in 1967 they asked her to serve as a consultant on Board projects focusing on Aboriginal subjects. Working with the NFB provided her with an entry into the world of cinema. It would be the beginning of an association that has lasted to this day.

In the early 1970s, Obomsawin met John Grierson, when the former paterfamilias of the NFB and doyen of the documentary was teaching at McGill University. She was immediately captivated by his views on the liberating role that film could play in the lives of ordinary people. She recalls that Grierson “felt that poor people, common



*Rocks at
Whiskey
Trench*

people, should be able to see themselves on the screen. That this would make a better life for them and for people at large in terms of understanding and feeling right about who they were.”

According to Jerry White, “[Obomsawin’s] formation is in a civic idealism rather than something that is more commercial.” She embodies much of the “Griersonian” ideal and as White puts it, “[she is] a validation of the role of the NFB.” What makes her unique is that she does not distinguish between her role as an activist, community leader or filmmaker. Obomsawin insists that her role as a filmmaker is, “to make sure that our people are heard! I want to expose the injustices. I look for social changes. [My role] is to make sure that these films, these documents, are used in the educational system.”

Obomsawin’s films have been criticized, in some quarters, for being excessively political and lacking in objectivity. White, however, suggests that the fact her films are so explicitly political and subjective means that “her political standpoint is impossible to miss. I think the clarity with which [she] makes her point known is one of the real strengths of her aesthetic.” He adds: “I would rather watch an aggressively subjective film by Alanis Obomsawin than I would some kind of overly detached, somewhat bland film by scads of other documentary filmmakers.”

To Bird Runningwater, Native American Initiatives programmer at the Sundance Film Institute in Beverly Hills, California, Obomsawin’s films represent a corrective to the historical exclusion of Native subjectivity in films. “If you look at the history of the Native image in film, the vast majority of it has been created without the consent and most often without the control of the Native person whose image is being taken and utilized in media. I really believe Alanis is using a medium to provide a voice and a story for a lot of people who historically have not had that opportunity.”

Is the Crown at War with Us?, Obomsawin’s latest documentary, focuses on the Mi’kmaq community of Esgenoopetitj (Burnt Church), New Brunswick, and its struggle to assert its treaty rights in the face of unconstitutional government regulations, federal fishery department harassment and vigilante attacks by white fishermen. Through interviews, archival documents, illustrations and still photographs, Obomsawin deftly blends the modern with the historical to portray the relationship between the Mi’kmaq and the Canadian nation fraught with duplicitous government policies, intimidation and state repression. The film’s thesis is that throughout its history the white Canadian state has sought to thwart, restrict and extinguish the inherent right of the Mi’kmaq to exploit the land and



Is the Crown at War with Us?

sea resources that are their birthright; the only way for the Mi'kmaq to survive as indigenous people in a modern context is to defend their rights "by any means necessary."

Obomsawin provides an account of the relationship between the Mi'kmaq and whites that provides a counterpoint to the distorted and often racist viewpoints to which students of Canadian history have been subjected. She notes that during the colonial era the Mi'kmaq often protected members of the Acadian community from attacks by English forces. Until the 1940s, lobster fishing was primarily an Aboriginal activity. Lobster had long been considered poor man's food.

Once a thriving market for it emerged, the Mi'kmaq were summarily squeezed out of the industry, replaced by white fisherman, and turned into second-class citizens in their ancestral territory.

In 1993, Donald Marshall, a Mi'kmaq activist who had first come to national attention after spending 11 years in jail for a crime he did not commit, was arrested, charged and convicted of catching eels with illegal nets and selling them out of season and without a licence. At issue was whether he possessed the treaty right to catch and sell fish. Marshall took his case to the Supreme Court of Canada, which, in September 1999, ruled in his favour, upholding a two-century-old treaty signed by the British Crown and the Mi'kmaq in 1752.

As soon as the Supreme Court ruling was rendered, Mi'kmaq fishermen began asserting their newly affirmed treaty rights by fishing for lobster in the waters of Miramichi Bay. White fishermen were outraged. They vandalized Mi'kmaq traps, burned their wharves and

assaulted members of the Mi'kmaq community. Rather than defend the rights of the Mi'kmaq and condemn the vigilantism of these whites, the federal Liberal government sought to appease the non-Native fishermen and their powerful lobbyists by restricting Mi'kmaq fishing rights under the guise of promoting conservation.

During the summer of 2000, the Mi'kmaq defied the federal government pronouncements on the sanctity of conservation by continuing to fish and were subjected to intense surveillance and physical attack by officials of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). *Is the Crown at War with Us?* provides, surely, one of the more vicious images ever witnessed in a Canadian documentary, when it shows a DFO cruiser deliberately running over a small dory containing Mi'kmaq fisherman, twice, nearly decapitating the terrified men who must leap into the cold water to save their lives. The image of fishery officials, attempting to sink a rickety boat containing four living Aboriginal men seems so outrageously brazen, so fantastic, that one can scarcely believe one's eyes—it's like watching a 21st-century Maritime-style lynching in real time. In an Orwellian twist we learn that the Mi'kmaq men, who narrowly managed to escape the attacks on their boat,

"It's not the image, it's the word that is most important. It's what people are saying. It's the people themselves who tell me what they are and what the story is."

- Alanis Obomsawin

have themselves been charged with obstructing "justice." The white DFO officials responsible for the brutal attacks were not charged.

Bird Runningwater considers Obomsawin's major contributions in films like *Kanehsatake, Rocks at Whisky Trench* (2001) and *Is the Crown at War with Us?* to be her exposure of the brutality of state violence in the modern era. As Runningwater suggests: "The Native person as a victim of attack is often described. [Obomsawin] shows the images of these attacks happening in modern times." For Obomsawin, "it's not the image, it's the word that is most important. It is what people are saying... It's the people themselves who tell me what they are and what the story is. And I can listen and if it means listening for 15 hours with one person, I'll do it." Obomsawin honours her subjects,

displaying a patience and a respect for their stories that results in the creation of a powerful rapport between filmmaker and subject. For all of her concern about the primacy of the word, what has often made her films so compelling has been the arresting images of state-sanctioned and non-Native violence; with the visual, it would seem, the oral cannot be denied.

Obomsawin's sympathies clearly lie with those in the Esgenoopetitj community advocating a more aggressive approach to asserting their treaty rights. She focuses much attention on the impressive pan-Native support that exists for the Mi'kmaq of Esgenoopetitj across Canada. Obomsawin means to indicate that there is strength and power in numbers. The film suggests that Native people must unite if they wish to advance their collective struggle.

While Obomsawin makes reference to divisions that exist in the community, we rarely hear from or see those advocating a more conciliatory approach in dealing with the federal government. Why do they seek conciliation? What is their argument? These are questions that the film lamentably leaves unanswered. Obomsawin has an aversion to highlighting discord in First Nations communities, believing this to be the preferred and pernicious strategy of choice of a self-described "neutral and objective" Canadian government and mainstream media. While she may be correct in her assessment of these "venerable institutions," she fails to articulate the real differences of opinion that exists within the Esgenoopetitj community that could shed light on the nature of the crisis. It is not the "red herring" of objectivity that is at issue here; rather, it is, more fundamentally, the very story that Obomsawin is attempting to tell.

In her film, white fishermen are also seldom seen and barely heard. Obomsawin is unwilling to include their arguments in an explicit manner because she contends that they get ample hearing in the mainstream media. And the white fishermen do indeed seem to enjoy the full support of the Canadian state in the form of politicians, DFO officials and the RCMP. However, in the context of the documentary, the elaboration of the white fishermen's point of view could have, paradoxically, advanced Obomsawin's argument that their actions are motivated by greed and racism.

Obomsawin interviews the young and old of Esgenoopetitj to provide a vivid portrayal of a troubled yet resilient community. She seeks to reveal the varied emotions that often exist in the community: anger, frustration, disappointment,



Kanichsarake: 170 Year of Resistance

fear, pride and triumph. In a poignant scene, one of the Mi'kmaq fisherman run over by the DFO cruiser, himself a supporter of the Mi'kmaq asserting their treaty rights, reveals that he will not be going back on the water in the fall because he believes things have become too violent. He doesn't want to be a martyr. He just isn't ready to leave his kids yet. An elderly woman reveals that she has placed her faith in God to ensure the safety of her boy on the dangerous waters of the Miramichi. She is certain that everyone will be safe.

For Liz Czach, programmer for Perspective Canada at the Toronto International Film Festival, *Is the Crown at War with Us?* "is a gritty film [which is] not as aesthetically complex as some of her other films. It speaks of a certain urgency." *Is the Crown at War with Us?* is a vital and valuable document that forces the viewer to recognize that history lives in the present and that the rights of First Nations people can only be protected through struggle. Obomsawin has an enormous faith in the capacity of ordinary people to make history. For her, the solutions to the problems that the First Nations community faces ultimately lie with the people.

Adrian Harewood is a freelance writer and broadcaster based in Toronto. He is one of the hosts of The Directors on Bravo!