

OBITUARY

Gil Cardinal: Canadian documentarian found his identity in film

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 18, 2015

A camera pans, circles and tilts along the expanse of a magnificent totem pole in a high-ceilinged room. The power of the image is enhanced by Gil Cardinal's soothing yet powerful voice, which intones: "This totem pole is the G'psgolox pole. For the Haisla people, it represents a vital link to their ancestral heritage, a link that was severed in 1929."

So begins *Totem: The Return of the G'psgolox Pole*, Mr. Cardinal's 2003 documentary, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. The film recounts the painstaking quest of a First Nations community in British Columbia to repatriate a mortuary pole that had been bought by collectors and transferred to a Stockholm Museum following a sale arranged by Canada's Department of Indian Affairs in 1929. Like much of Mr. Cardinal's work, *Totem* investigated a little-known chapter of Canadian aboriginal history in a respectful, sensitive manner, spoke to fundamental questions of human rights and commanded a broad domestic and international audience.

For more than 30 years, Gil Cardinal was a pre-eminent Canadian filmmaker, best known for documentaries, such as *Foster Child*, *The Spirit Within*, *David with F.A.S.* and *Totem*. Mr. Cardinal also worked on the TV miniseries *Big Bear* and *Indian Summer: The Oka Crisis*, as well as episodes of the series *North of 60*.

Gilbert Joseph Cardinal died in Edmonton on Nov. 21 of cirrhosis. He had been hospitalized for the final months of his life as he experienced a serious health decline complicated by diabetes.

Mr. Cardinal's death at the age of 65 was deeply shocking to his friends in the Canadian film industry. In Vancouver, filmmaker Loretta Todd said, "He challenged all of us to be very honest." She said watching his work made her ponder larger questions: "What legacy are we creating for our people? What meaning are we creating with our work?"

Alanis Obomsawin, who directed the films *Kanehsatake: 270 years of Resistance* and *Incident at Restigouche* said Mr. Cardinal is of "historical" importance to Canada. She said when she looked back at his work, "I am amazed by the access into extremely difficult issues and circumstances. I'm very grateful to him."

Gil Cardinal was a big man, standing 6 feet 4 inches and weighing more than 200 pounds. With cowboy boots and long hair, he cut a simultaneously imposing yet kindly figure. "He was a big, friendly bear of a man with a great sense of humour," recalled Edmonton sound recordist Garrell Clark. The activist and actor Tantoo Cardinal (no relation) said, "He was a gentle soul. I knew him as my heart brother."

Mr. Cardinal vaulted into prominence in 1987 with *Foster Child*, a film that documented the filmmaker's investigation into his own past. In a cinematic journey of self-discovery, he peeled back the layers his own life. Viewers discovered along with Mr. Cardinal that his birth mother, Catherine Lucielle Cardinal, left northern Alberta for Edmonton, where she gave birth to Gilbert Joseph Cardinal on July 19, 1950. He was about six months old when child protection officials apprehended him. The following summer, when he was a year old, Gil's mother officially surrendered him into the permanent care of Alberta's child-welfare system.

Gil had been ineligible for adoption because he was Métis, but he was eventually fostered on a long-term basis by an Edmonton couple. He studied at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology in Edmonton and began his filmmaking career as a cameraman with the Alberta provincial public broadcaster, the Metropolitan Edmonton Educational Television Association. As a young adult and filmmaker, he became determined to learn about his native ancestry.

"He was brutally honest in *Foster Child*," said Okiysikaw Tyrone Tootoosis, an actor and Cree Assiniboine story keeper. "For a person to do that takes a lot of courage. He had nothing to hide."

Foster Child is emotionally harrowing. A scene in which Mr. Cardinal sees photographs of his birth mother, who died in 1974 on Edmonton's skid row, was filmed and edited with raw authenticity. At one point, Mr. Cardinal, the stricken director/son confronted for the first time with an image of his middle-aged birth mother says, "She looks like a hard Indian. I'm not prepared for that."

The film won Mr. Cardinal multiple honours, including the Gemini award for best direction in 1988. "There are moments of pure cinema in that film," said his long-time colleague Graydon McCrea, former executive producer of the National Film Board's Edmonton-based North West Centre, "... sequences in which documentary transcends the possibilities of drama."

"He had the courage to bare his soul in that film and the courage to take on an issue that was so important to so many aboriginal people but so little understood by political leaders," Mr. McCrea added.

The film had a profound impact on aboriginal audiences, recalled Bonnie Thompson, an NFB producer who worked with Mr. Cardinal. "When people came out of the screening there was an emotional charge. People saw themselves represented with kindness and respect."

It also had a powerful effect on non-native audiences, she noted. "When Gil started, there was little understanding of the generational trauma," experienced in residential schools, prisons and child-welfare systems, which he documented in his films.

Dorothy Schreiber, who was Mr. Cardinal's business partner and one-time romantic partner in the 1990s, said, "If Canadians take the time to watch Gil's films, that will be an act of reconciliation," made especially meaningful at a time of national inquiries into residential schools and heightened awareness about disappeared aboriginal women.

Following the success of *Foster Child*, Mr. Cardinal moved with determination onto the national cinematic scene. "He was meticulous in his preparation," Ms. Thompson said. "He created close, trusting relationships with his subjects and with his crews."

The award-winning filmmaker Peter Raymont, who worked with Mr. Cardinal on *Tikinagan*, recalled his colleague's professionalism and strong leadership. "He had gravitas. When he spoke, you listened."

In the 1990s, Mr. Cardinal delved into drama, determined to bring an adaptation of Rudy Wiebe's novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* to the screen. His diligence paid off. The CBC mini-series *Big Bear* (1998), which he directed and produced, set high standards for aboriginal film in Canada.

Ms. Schreiber, the Alberta producer of the film, recalled that Mr. Cardinal "felt the enormity" of being entrusted with an \$8.5-million production budget while assiduously striving to honour Big Bear's story with historical and cultural accuracy.

The travails of making Big Bear took a toll on Mr. Cardinal. "He gave 300 per cent all the time," Ms. Schreiber said. "We had him in hospital three times with exhaustion." Video editor Marke Slipp recalled his colleague collapsing in the editing room. "He drove himself too hard, as filmmakers are wont to do, and he experienced depression and post-partum blues after productions. That was particularly evident after Big Bear."

In the 2000s, Mr. Cardinal directed episodic dramatic television and the mini-series Indian Summer: The Oka Crisis as well as documentaries, such as Totem, and Chiefs, a biographical series. He worked as a producer and mentor to emerging filmmakers at NFB Edmonton. He also wrote the screenplay for a feature film to be called Blackstone. A series of creative and financial reverses led to Mr. Cardinal relinquishing control of the Blackstone concept, which became the eponymous television series. Although Mr. Cardinal eventually wrote a few episodes, Graydon McCrea sees the affair as a significant setback for Mr. Cardinal: "He had great hopes for Blackstone as a piece of cinema. I think he had some regrets about not staying on that train."

In the past five years, Mr. Cardinal withdrew. His friends became concerned that his increasing consumption of beer, coupled with his diabetes, was harming his health. Mr. Cardinal also steadfastly refused to quit smoking cigarettes.

"His films examined the fragility of individuals. He was not exempt," Mr. McCrea said. His friend Dorothy Schreiber concluded, "He was haunted by a really hard beginning in life. It led him to make decisions that weren't in the best interests of his well-being."

Those things that haunted him, however, drove him to become a diligent chronicler of human experience, leaving behind a formidable body of work. "I don't consider him a hyphenated filmmaker. Foster Child and Totem are not great aboriginal films, they are great films," Mr. McCrea concluded. Ms. Obomsawin said, "He could have done any subject. It was a gift to our people that he chose to do films about the community."

Mr. Cardinal leaves his former wife, Donna (Cardinal) Gannon, and half-brother, Terence Decoine. He is buried next to his mother, Lucy.

Earlier this month, the Edmonton film community celebrated the life of Mr. Cardinal, an adept pool player, at Metro Billiards, one of his favourite haunts. With Mr. Cardinal's approval, the Gil Cardinal Legacy Fund has been created to help emerging indigenous filmmakers produce a demo for their first film, drama or documentary. As Mr. Cardinal was a mentor to so many, this fund will continue that legacy.

"We have lost a great storyteller, not only for Canada, but for the world," Mr. McCrea said. "A central span that connects First Nations people with the rest of the country has fallen."