

Visualising The Creator's Game: Visual Anthropology, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lacrosse Across Borders

In the Homeland of Lacrosse / V domovině lakrosu. Directed by Lívía Šavelková and Milan Durňák. Pardubice: University of Pardubice, 2024. 110 minutes.

Introduction: Visual Anthropology and Ethnographic Filmmaking

The growing importance of visual culture¹ over the last two centuries has led to what is commonly described as the *pictorial turn*,² accompanied by the emergence of interdisciplinary fields such as visual studies³ and visual anthropology.⁴ These approaches have become standard components of university curricula and provide essential methodological tools for analyzing the complex, multilayered visual environments of contemporary societies. Despite this development, visual anthropology continues to occupy an uneasy position within Czech academia, where visual outputs are still rarely evaluated as scholarly work on par with written texts.

Visual culture constitutes a specific field of evidence that requires distinct theoretical and methodological approaches. As Peter Burke has argued, visual sources gain particular analytical value when examined in series,⁵ as seriality enables comparison, contextualization, and the identification of structural patterns. It is precisely this strength that characterizes the long-term ethnographic project of the anthropologist Lívía Šavelková, developed in collaboration with anthropologist and filmmaker Milan Durňák. Their body of work – four feature-length ethnographic films produced between 2014 and 2024 – forms a coherent visual research corpus devoted to lacrosse as a cultural, political, and spiritual phenomenon, and to its unexpected yet historically grounded entanglement with Central Europe.

Šavelková's work stands out not only for its thematic focus on sport and indigeneity but also for its sustained engagement with the socialist and post-socialist contexts.⁶

This publication was supported by the Cooperatio Program provided by Charles University, research area History, implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. E-mail: Monika.Brenisinova@ff.cuni.cz.

- ¹ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- ² William J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *Artforum* 30, no. 5 (1992): 89–94; Gottfried Boehm, "Die Wiederkehr der Bilder," in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. Gottfried Boehm (München: Fink, 1994), 11–38.
- ³ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001).
- ⁴ David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Anna Grimshaw and Alison Ravetz, eds., *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
- ⁵ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 187–188.
- ⁶ Lívía Šavelková and Klára Perlíková, "Konceptualizace humoru ve vztahu k původním obyvatelům Severní Ameriky v česko-slovenském prostoru," in *Na křídlech aztéckého orla*, ed. Tomáš Boukal, Adam Horálek, and Tomáš Retka (Praha: Dauphin, 2022), 300–340.

Lacrosse entered Czechoslovakia through scouting, woodcraft, and subcultural movements that drew on imaginaries of Native American life, at a time when these practices functioned as subtle forms of resistance to the communist regime. By tracing these transatlantic and transhistorical connections, the films challenge both nationalist narratives of sport and reductive representations of Indigenous cultures.

The Lacrosse Film Cycle: Themes and Methodologies

Šavelková and Durňák's lacrosse films – *Lakros – To je způsob života* / *Lacrosse – It's a Way of Life* (2014) together with Tomáš Petrání, *Globální lakrosobá vesnice* / *Global Lacrosse Village* (2015), *Na břehu* / *On the Shore* (2022), and *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* (2024) – constitute a rare example of longitudinal visual research in Czech anthropology. Each film adopts a distinct analytical perspective, while together they document the authors' evolving understanding of lacrosse as a cultural practice shaped by colonial histories, globalization, amateurism, and Indigenous revitalization movements.

Methodologically, the films combine observational and participatory modes with a high degree of reflexivity. The filmmakers explicitly address the challenges of cross-cultural filming, including differing audience expectations and ethical responsibilities toward the communities involved. Humor, sensitivity, and self-irony function as deliberate narrative strategies, enabling the films to remain accessible without sacrificing analytical depth. Across the series, lacrosse emerges not merely as a sport, but as a medicine game, a medium of collective memory, and an arena in which questions of sovereignty, identity, gender, and material culture are negotiated.⁷

From Czech Republic to Six Nations: *In the Homeland of Lacrosse*

In the Homeland of Lacrosse was filmed in 2015 during the World Box Lacrosse Championship at Onondaga Nation and the unofficial U19 World Challenge held at Six Nations of the Grand River. Although chronologically conceived as the third major film in the series, it was completed only in 2024. The bilingual film has nevertheless circulated internationally, including screenings at the 45th *American Indian Workshop* (2024) and the 8th International Conference *Search for Indigenous America* (2025).

⁷ For further critical assessment of these films, see Martin Heřmanský, "Through the Lens of Lacrosse: Seeing Beyond the Game in the Haudenosaunee/Iroquois Land," *Cargo* 23, no. 1 (2025): 81–88, <https://doi.org/10.46585/cargo.2025.1.152>; Zuzanna Kruk-Buchovska, review of *Lacrosse – It's a Way of Life*, dir. Lívía Šavelková, Tomáš Petrání and Milan Durňák, *Global Lacrosse Village / Lakrosobá vesnice*, dir. Lívía Šavelková and Milan Durňák, *On the Shore / Na břehu*, dir. Lívía Šavelková and Milan Durňák, *Review of International American Studies* 16, no. 1 (2023): 313–317, <https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.15319>; Lucie Kýrová, review of Lívía Šavelková: *Stvořitelova hra na cestě světem: Identita Irokézů v procesu revitalizace a globalizace*. DVD with ethnographic film *Global Lacrosse Village*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2015. 178 pages, *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Studia Territoria* 17, no. 1 (2017), 83–87.

In many respects, the film functions as a mirror image of *Lacrosse – It's a Way of Life*. Whereas the first film depicted the arrival of the Iroquois Nationals in Prague in 2011, *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* follows Czech players and fans travelling to Haudenosaunee territories. This reversal allows for a deeper exploration of what lacrosse means within its place of origin – as a practice embedded in cosmology, healing, land claims, treaty rights, and political sovereignty. Through visits to Haudenosaunee territories, the film presents Haudenosaunee homeland not as a set of fragmented reservations divided by the U.S.–Canadian border, but as a continuous cultural and territorial space, articulated through emic perspectives.

The film also addresses internal diversity and political tensions within Haudenosaunee communities, shaped by histories of colonization and assimilation. Interviews with key figures such as Oren Lyons and Rick Hill – co-founders of the Iroquois (now Haudenosaunee) Nationals – situate lacrosse within broader Indigenous revitalization movements since the late twentieth century. The inclusion of women's voices and references to the belated recognition of the Haudenosaunee women's national team further complicate the gendered dimensions of the game.

Gender, Authority, and Lacrosse Participation

As explained in the film, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy is composed of six nations – Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora – each internally organized into matrilineal clans, associated with animal figures. Clan membership, political identity, and inheritance are transmitted through the maternal line, and women, known as clan mothers, play a central role in political and social governance. Together with the council of fifty male chiefs, clan mothers participate in a complementary system of authority, including the nomination and removal of chiefs, thus occupying a structurally powerful position within Haudenosaunee society.

At the same time, the film reveals a pronounced gender differentiation within the contemporary lacrosse environment. While men occupy the visibly central role as players, women are primarily shown engaging in supportive activities such as organizing facilities, preparing food, and participating in ceremonial roles. During opening ceremonies, the camera captures male chiefs and medicine men alongside female clan mothers, faith-keepers, and representatives of Indigenous communities, reflecting a gendered division of roles rather than an egalitarian interchangeability. Although the film briefly acknowledges that girls and women also play lacrosse, their participation remains largely absent from the visual narrative.

Such gendered divisions should not be read straightforwardly as the outcome of a colonial patriarchy.⁸ While colonialism and missionary influence significantly altered

⁸ Julieta Elisa Paredes Carvajal, *1492 Entronque patriarcal: la situación de las mujeres de los pueblos originarios de Abya Yala después de la invasión colonial de 1492* (Buenos Aires: FLACSO and Sede Académica Argentina, 2018).

Indigenous governance structures – often undermining women’s authority and imposing Eurocentric gender norms – the Haudenosaunee gender system prior to European contact was already structured around differentiated but interdependent roles rather than gender symmetry. Scholars emphasize that women’s political authority, particularly through clan motherhood, coexisted with male leadership in warfare, diplomacy, and ceremonial life.⁹ The film thus reflects both the resilience of matrilineal principles and the ways in which colonial histories, Christianization, and modern sport institutions have reshaped gender visibility and participation. The relative invisibility of women’s lacrosse in the film can therefore be read not as evidence of an absence of female agency, but as a product of historically layered transformations affecting Indigenous gender relations, sport, and representation.

Lacrosse Wooden Stick: An Actor within Transnational Network

Material culture plays a central analytical role in Šavelková and Durňák’s films. The traditional wooden lacrosse stick is treated not merely as an object but, in line with Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory,¹⁰ as an actor within a transnational network connecting Haudenosaunee cosmology, Czech woodcraft traditions, and global sport governance. The films document traditional stick-making practices among Haudenosaunee artisans such as Cam Bomberry, Alfred Jacques, and Toby Williams, and juxtapose them with the work of Czech craftsman Richard Kliment, whose sticks circulate as symbolic gifts between communities. In this sense, the wooden lacrosse stick functions as a cultural agent, whose materiality and techniques of fabrication shape the experiences, practices, and social relations of lacrosse players.

Over time, the materials and forms of stick-making have changed, marking a distinction between the traditional game, played with wooden sticks and imbued with historical, spiritual, and medicinal significance, and the modern, contemporary form of field or box lacrosse, which relies on synthetic sticks standardized for international competition. For the Haudenosaunee, the traditional lacrosse stick carries cosmological and ritual meaning and accompanies players throughout life, serving as a tribute to the Creator, whereas contemporary synthetic sticks primarily facilitate performance within formalized rules.

⁹ Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Elisabeth Tooker, “Women in Iroquois Society,” in *Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies*, ed. Michael K. Foster, Jack Campisi, and Marianne Mithun (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984), 109–123; Sally Roesch Wagner, *Sisters in Spirit: Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Influence on Early American Feminists* (Summertown, TN: Native Voices, 2001); Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

This visual ethnography thus highlights ongoing tensions between Indigenous claims to cultural tradition and the regulations of international sport, which prioritize synthetic materials under the guise of safety. The films show how the stick as a material object mediates transnational relations, linking Indigenous communities, European practitioners, and global sporting institutions, and how it embodies both the continuity of Haudenosaunee cultural practices and the pressures of modernization and globalization.

Contribution to Visual Anthropology and the Anthropology of Sport

Although filmed a decade ago, *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* remains strikingly timely. The film addresses enduring issues of colonization, residential and boarding schools, Indigenous identity documents, and international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), while simultaneously engaging with contemporary debates on Indigenous participation in global sport mega-events, including the Olympic Games. By incorporating more recent developments – most notably lacrosse’s return to the Olympic program and explicit political support from North American leaders – the film extends its analytical reach beyond ethnography in the narrow sense and contributes meaningfully to the anthropology of sport and global sports politics.

Šavelková has long been engaged in ethnographic research among the Indigenous peoples of North America and is widely recognized as a leading Czech expert on the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois).¹¹ She is also a pioneer of visual anthropology¹² and the anthropology of sport within the Czech academic environment.¹³ Her scholarly and visual work on lacrosse – referred to by the Haudenosaunee themselves as the Creator’s Game – offers unexpected and analytically rich insights into the sport as a cultural, spiritual, and political practice. By following lacrosse back to its place of origin, the film reveals the colonial histories of Haudenosaunee communities at Six Nations, the transformations of their cultural practices, and the challenges they continue to face, including the traumatic

¹¹ Lívía Šavelková, *Současní Irokézové: Severoameričtí Indiáni a utváření jejich identit* (Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2010).

¹² Lívía Šavelková, “Cross-Cultural Filmmaking as a Process of Self-Reflection: Filming Native Americans within Central European Space’s Prevailing Imagery of the ‘Noble Savage,’” *Ethnologia Actualis* 17, no. 1 (2017): 133–154; Michal Pavlásek and Lívía Šavelková, “Vizuální antropologie v České republice a na Slovensku: Mezi marginalitou a marginalizací?” *Biograf* 73/74, no. 1–2 (2026): 3–14.

¹³ Lívía Šavelková, *Stvořitelova hra na cestě světem: identita Irokézů v procesu revitalizace a globalizace* (Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2015); Lívía Šavelková, “When the Creators Game Spreads to the World,” in *Identity, Tradition and Revitalization of American Indian Cultures*, ed. Barbora Půtová (Praha: Karolinum Press, 2017), 74–107; Lívía Šavelková, “Lacrosse and Its Spread and Transformation in Various Countries with Emphasis on Continental Europe,” in *Cultural Transfers in Sport in Europe / Les transferts culturels en sport: Origins and Diffusions of Sport in Europe / Origines et Diffusion du sport en Europe*, ed. Denis Jallat (Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 2021), 129–177.

legacy of residential schools, the disruption of family and community ties, and ongoing efforts to revitalize Indigenous culture, traditions and languages such as Cayuag, Ganondagan, Seneca, Mohawk and Onondaga, all of which are addressed within the film.

When read in dialogue with Šavelková and Durňák's earlier film documenting the 2011 World Indoor Lacrosse Championship in Prague, Czech Republic, *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* also foregrounds a persistent condition confronting Indigenous peoples globally: systematic marginalization and exclusion from official state, legal, and international sport structures, inseparable from ongoing processes of territorial dispossession. This is exemplified by the participation of the Iroquois Nationals – travelling on Haudenosaunee passports that remain unrecognized by both U.S. and Canadian authorities – as well as by the historically precarious position of lacrosse within international sport governance. At the same time, the film situates these struggles within a broader colonial continuum in which Indigenous nations continue to be deprived of their ancestral lands and resources, and in which land claims, treaty rights, and sovereignty remain actively contested. Although recent developments – including lacrosse's planned inclusion in the 2028 Olympic Games – suggest a degree of institutional recognition, the film makes clear that access to global sport remains deeply entangled with state power, international law, and the enduring colonial struggle over land, territory, and resources. In this respect, ethnographic films focused on Indigenous peoples and sport offer critical insights into transnational power relations and the persistence of colonial structures within ostensibly apolitical domains such as international sport.

In the Homeland of Lacrosse can be productively situated within the broader historiography of ethnographic film¹⁴ that emerged in critical response to the colonial epistemologies of early visual anthropology. As scholars have long noted, classical ethnographic films relied on authoritative voice-overs, asymmetrical power relations, and the assumption that the filmmaker could transparently represent cultures deemed unable to speak for themselves. From the late 1960s onward, however, this paradigm was increasingly challenged by reflexive, dialogical, and participatory approaches that sought to dismantle the hierarchical distinction between observer and observed. As articulated, for example, by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, this shift entailed a growing “modesty” on the part of filmmakers, marked by an awareness of positionality, the contingency of knowledge, and the ethical limits of speaking *for* the Other.¹⁵

Šavelková and Durňák's film clearly aligns with this later tradition. Rather than offering a didactic account of Haudenosaunee culture, *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* foregrounds interaction, encounter, and shared space. The filmmakers do not claim epistemic authority over Indigenous knowledge; instead, they allow Haudenosaunee actors – players, chiefs, clan mothers, intellectuals, and activists – to articulate the meanings of lacrosse, land, and sovereignty in their own terms. This approach resonates with earlier

¹⁴ For further information and literature, see Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 345–346.

¹⁵ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 2014), 31–37.

experiments in dialogical anthropology associated with Jean Rouch and his ethnographic pieces,¹⁶ as well as with Latin American and Indigenous filmmaking practices that replaced representational certainty with negotiated meaning, reflexivity, and the possibility of being challenged by one's interlocutors.

At the same time, the film engages – indirectly but critically – with debates surrounding indigenous media. While *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* is not itself produced by Indigenous filmmakers, it is attentive to the politics of mediation, circulation, and audience. Lacrosse emerges not only as a cultural practice but as a medium through which Haudenosaunee actors negotiate sovereignty, land claims, treaty rights, and international visibility. In this sense, the film reflects what scholars of Indigenous media have described as the use of audiovisual practices to mediate ruptures of time, history, and territory, and to assert identity across colonial borders. Importantly, the film avoids romantic narratives of redemption or ecological idealization; instead, it presents Indigenous political struggle as ongoing, pragmatic, and embedded in unequal global power relations.

By combining reflexive ethnographic filmmaking with a sustained focus on sport, sovereignty, and transnational mobility, *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* contributes to the expansion of visual anthropology beyond its traditional thematic boundaries. It demonstrates how ethnographic film can function not merely as documentation, but as a form of historical and political analysis – one that renders visible the persistence of colonial structures while also foregrounding Indigenous agency, humor, and strategic engagement with global institutions. In doing so, the film exemplifies the shift from representing the Other toward collaborating with interlocutors in a shared, contested field of meaning, a shift that has been central to the reconfiguration of ethnographic cinema since the late twentieth century.

To Conclude

Taken as a whole, Šavelková and Durňak's lacrosse film cycle constitutes a substantial and methodologically complex contribution to both visual anthropology and the anthropology of sport. The films demonstrate how ethnographic cinema can generate forms of knowledge that are difficult to capture through text alone: embodied practices, spatial relations, affective intensities, and the material and symbolic dimensions of transnational encounters. In doing so, they challenge persistent stereotypes of Indigenous cultures as static or peripheral and instead foreground Indigenous actors as politically engaged, historically grounded, and strategically positioned within global structures.

Rather than reproducing a simplified postcolonial opposition between Native and European/Western worlds, the series reveals shared – though asymmetrical – experiences of marginalization, amateurism, political constraint, and institutional exclusion. Lacrosse emerges not merely as a sport but as a medium through which histories of colonization, claims to sovereignty, and struggles over land, resources, and recognition are

¹⁶ E.g. *Bougo, les funérailles du vieil Anai*, dir. Jean Rouch (1979); or *Jaguar*, dir. Jean Rouch (1967).

articulated and contested across borders. The films thus situate sport within broader colonial continuities, showing how global sporting institutions remain deeply entangled with state power, international law, and territorial dispossession.

At the same time, *In the Homeland of Lacrosse* exemplifies a reflexive and dialogical mode of ethnographic filmmaking that resists authoritative representation and instead privileges encounter, collaboration, and emic perspectives. By allowing Haudenosaunee players, leaders, and intellectuals to articulate the meanings of the Creator's Game in their own terms, the film aligns with critical traditions in ethnographic cinema that seek not to speak for the Other but to create a shared, contested space of meaning. In this sense, Šavelková and Durňák's work offers a compelling argument for the scholarly value of visual anthropology itself. It demonstrates that ethnographic film can function not only as documentation or illustration, but as a form of analytical inquiry capable of engaging with historical depth, political complexity, and theoretical reflection.

Monika Brenišínová

doi: 10.14712/23363231.2026.5