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Revisiting Paul Kane's Wanderings of an Artist Among the Indians of North America

Abstract

Paul Kane's paintings and sketches which form the basis of Wanderings of an Artist, were made with the aim of presenting an "extensive series of illustrations of the characteristics, habits and scenery of the country and its inhabitants." However, a careful and detailed reading of his paintings and writings show that he actually violated the trust that the American Indians placed in him by depicting false images. Working in the background of Lasswell's theory of propaganda this study seeks to demonstrate how the images and writings that he created, fulfilled no purpose, other than that of propaganda. The essay takes as its base the short fiction of Sherman Alexie's Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians and attempts to show through the text how Kane, in reality, violated the trust that the American Indian tribes placed in him, by allowing him to photograph them in various poses and at various times of the day and year.

Key Words

Theory of Propaganda, Conventionalized Significance, Critical Inquiry, Skepticism, Distortion of Facts

Theoretical Framework

In The Theory of Political Propaganda, Harold D. Lasswell defines propaganda as "the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols." He goes on to explain that "The existence of an attitude is not a direct datum of experience, but an inference from signs which have a conventionalized significance." Taking Lasswell's theory of propaganda to demonstrate how the images and writings of the Canadian artist Paul Kane were created for purposes of propaganda. Paul Kane claimed to have provided a true and accurate representation of "the principal chiefs, and their original costumes, to illustrate their manners and customs, and to represent the scenery of an almost unknown country." This claim, Kane made in his Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America: from Canada to Vancouver's Island and Oregon through the Hudson's Bay Company's territory and back again, which has long been hailed as a seminal work in introducing the Red Man to the Europeans. However, later investigations into the work show a different pattern emerging from Kane's work. Kane's writings, sketches and paintings, when viewed through the lens of Lasswell's theory show American Indians the way the artist wanted them to be shown and not as they lived. This study, therefore, adapts Lasswell's theory to analyze the text of Paul Kane's paintings and sketches which form the basis of Wanderings of an Artist and evaluate it objectively. It also takes into consideration Sherman Alexie's short fiction, as representing literary texts, side by side with non-literary texts from history and art history. The writings of historians and critics like Heather Dawkins,

Arlene Gehmacher, Lorrie Blair, I.S. MacLaren and Benjamin Branham deserve special mention in any critical inquiry into the work of Paul Kane and they have been given special mention in this study. Of these MacLaren, Blair, Dawkins and Gehmacher offer a general critique of all of Kane's work – including his diary and the Wanderings – while Branham and Alexie focus on only one painting: Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians.

Paul Kane – stating his original object as being to present a dying race – or so he thought – in its true sense, claimed to present an "extensive series of illustrations of the characteristics, habits, and scenery of the country and its inhabitants." However, a careful and detailed reading of his paintings and writings show that he actually violated the trust that the American Indians placed in him by depicting false images. This willful move to spread negative propaganda about the American Indians has been viewed with a lot of skepticism and anger by critics, who viewed this distortion of facts as a carefully calculated move to discredit American Indians, in general, by showing them as Kane and his editors wanted them to be seen, rather than as they actually lived their lives.

Literature Review

Benjamin Branham mentions that in his Preface to Wanderings, Kane neglects to mention the identity of those to whom the territory remained 'unknown' thus giving credence to the Euro-American agenda of discovery, rather than contact. Branham quotes numerous examples of manipulation of and distortion of facts as when he explains the incident that Kane himself mentions of one

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of the women, whom he, derogatively and contemptuously, mentions as 'females' and who refused to pose for him "as she could not dress herself suitably for such an occasion, being in mourning for some friends she had lost, and therefore only wearing her oldest and dirtiest clothes." The language that Kane uses in *Wanderings* to describe the woman shows a distinct lack of good taste as well as the use of propaganda tactics like using words and phrases with negative connotations. In this instance, the use of the word female shows an imperceptible reference to animal traits, rather than human ones that the use of 'woman' would convey. In addition to this, it shows a distinct lack of consideration for the customs of the tribe, were wearing new clothes during the mourning period, might be a forbidden act. The fact that he later compromises by having another girl sitting for him in the costume of the tribe is a small example of how Kane manipulated facts through substitution of one sitter with another. His claim of accuracy, in such cases, is severely compromised, since his objective is not to sketch particular individuals, but any individuals willing to pose for him the way he wanted them to. Kane's actions in this instance are beyond comprehension, since Kane, hailing from Ireland would be no stranger to mourning rites.

Heather Dawkins in *Paul Kane and the Eye of Power* observes that "Kane's gaze, of observation and of knowledge, his sketches, paintings, and writings are deeply implicated in, and constitutive of, power." In the Preface to *Wanderings*, Paul Kane shows his future aims in the following statements: "the face of the Red Man is now no longer seen. All traces of his footsteps are fast being obliterated from his once favorite haunts." The use of the term 'Red Man' is as derogatory and racially charged, as 'nigger' is for the African Americans or 'chink' for those of Chinese descent. The choice of words in the Preface, as in the text of *Wanderings*, is politically charged and foreshadows the representation in the paintings and vice versa. Dawkins has made a detailed study and keen observation of the content and style of Kane's text – *Wanderings of an Artist* – and sketches and shows how he merges two or more sketches into one. She quotes Ramsay Cook's observations from Chapter XII of Kane's *Wanderings of an Artist* to prove that Kane went contrary to his claims of representing life as it was lived by the tribes. Dawkins states that Kane's written text is in contrast with his sketches, although he had claimed that *Wanderings* is an accurate account of life as it was being lived by the different tribes. In addition to the 'female' sitter being substituted, Heather Dawkins describes Sketch No. 110, which Paul Kane claimed to depict a Flathead Woman and Child. A closer look shows the subjects to be a combination of Cowlitz and Chinook customs. The Chinook had the custom of binding the heads of infants like the Cowlitz, and the completed sketch shows the merging of the sketch of a Cowlitz woman with that of a Chinook since the two tribes shared the custom of shaping infants' heads. Not only does he merge sketches but he does this without regard to tribal identities and customs. Sketch No 110 claims to depict a Flathead Woman and Child but the sketch itself "is a profile of a woman belonging to the Cowlitz tribe, who also shaped their heads." Lasswell's theory appears particularly appropriate in this instance since the impression conveyed throughout Kane's work is that one Indian is very much like another and that Kane's description of their customs is the only true representation of the savage customs of the tribes. For Kane, one Indian is very much like another and his description of their customs is interspersed throughout with words and expressions showing Kane's representations of what he terms as the filthy and savage customs of the tribes as when he talks of the children having 'vermin' in their hair and bodies or the "the horrible, harsh, spluttering sounds" that they call their language or that "Indians are invariably dirty...As to removing the filth, that is never done." Dawkins' critique of Kane's work also takes into account the excessive praise and admiration for Kane which she refers to as 'valorization' of the sketches and paintings which are frequently studied without the context of Kane's writings let alone those of other historians and explorers.

Discussion and Analysis

Paul Kane, "widely considered to be Canada's first artist of national significance" was deeply inspired by George Catlin, whose paintings of the American West had received appreciation in London. Following Catlin's example, he set off to explore the northwest, including "the vast tract of the country bordering on the great chain of American lakes, the Red River Settlement, the valley of Saskatchewan and its boundless prairies ... across the Rocky Mountains down the Columbia River to Oregon, Puget's Sound and Vancouver's Island." According to Lorrie Blair, Kane was convinced, like Catlin, of the inevitable disappearance of the American Indians, and this is what led him to undertake this project of painting and sketching. Having gained access to the Hudson's Bay Company officials, he set off to explore the northwest.

The journal that Kane maintained to what he ostensibly claimed was documenting his travels, combined with his sketches and paintings led art historians to give him adulation and praise for what Blair describes as "carefully executed oil paintings" and which suited "the classical and romanticized Victorian tastes," of London society. Witnessing what Europeans and Canadians were convinced, was the truthful and accurate depiction of a vanishing race, Kane's work received critical acclaim and appreciation from a society, whose notions of what American Indians must look like were fed by little else than Catlin and Kane's oil and watercolors.

Arlene Gehmacher, critiquing Kane's work comments "The works he produced reflect the prevailing attitudes toward Aboriginal peoples held by white society in the mid-nineteenth century. The oil paintings were particularly compelling in the artist's day because they reinforced the trope of the "noble savage," a stereotype that was a product of the Western world's Romantic vision of indigenous people and their ancestral lands, which had been colonized by Europe." This trope gains authenticity when seen in the backdrop of Lasswell's theory of signs and symbols having a strong influence in forming the attitudes of the masses. Since Paul

Kane is one of the very few artists who undertook this assignment, his work was treated as Gospel by artists and historians alike, without taking into consideration various aspects of his biased and untruthful representation. Leading art historians like J. Russell Harper paid tribute to Kane's work in describing the journey that the artist undertook and which took him to different parts of the Hudson Bay Company's empire.

His journey over many thousands of miles of the difficult western frontier is unequalled by any other artist on the continent of his time, and he had a superb eye for recording the historically important. Certainly, he is the equal of and in many ways superior to any other 19th-century painter of the North American Indian.

Seen from another perspective Kane's work becomes part of the "imperialist discourse" that Dawkins and others consider as being responsible for establishing and later reinforcing stereotypes of the American Indian. Kane admirers, like Ramsay Cook, quoted Kane's notes as verification and authentication of his paintings; the idea not having occurred to them that one aspect of his work – paintings and sketches - could not be critiqued with the help of another aspect – diary entries and *Wanderings*. Application of Lasswell's theory gains ground in this perspective reinforcing the idea of power being exerted through the representation of attitude, especially when reading side by side with Lasswell's theory of signs enabling the formation of attitudes.

Benjamin Branham in On "Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians" comments on Kane "whose oeuvre consists largely of sketches and paintings depicting landscapes and scenes of Indian life in Canada and the Pacific Northwest." Branham refers to Kane's portrayal more in the archaeological sense since archaeologists have, for years tried to convince the world at large that the only good Indian is a dead one. This belief in the imminent extinction of the race has also proved to be one more aspect of the white man's justification of their own presence whereby they see "themselves as the preservers of a dead Indian culture," not realizing that the culture they want to see dead is a vibrant and living culture. Branham's reference to the short story, written by Sherman Alexie, is a valid example of Kane's propaganda tactics of pandering to the established stereotype of the 'noble savage.'

This study also calls attention to Sherman Alexie's exposure to Paul Kane's deliberate distortion of facts in order to further the agenda of keeping the rest of the US ignorant of their assimilation by promoting the stereotypical presentation of American Indian tribes and their people. The questions that this study seeks to address are: how much of Kane's work is a truthful depiction and how much is his viewpoint of Native American life? How far was Kane influenced by the prevalent customs and expectations of a largely European audience? How dependable is Kane's presentation of the various tribes, their chiefs and their life? How far is this representation colored by societal and cultural preferences of the time? Following in Catlin's footsteps, Kane published *Wanderings* to lend support to his thesis of the importance of documenting the disappearance of the American Indians. His thesis was given strength by the approval and appreciation that the book and his work received and which lead to historians like Nancy Wilson to note in the American Heritage, that "probably no other artist except George Catlin ever left such a complete and accurate record of the forms, the faces, and the way of life of this continent's aborigines." The veracity of this statement, however, becomes questionable when compared with the diary, which forms the basis of the *Wanderings*.

I.S. MacLaren, the Kane scholar makes a detailed comparison of the diary with the published book and proves, beyond a doubt that the notes that Kane had made in his pocket-sized diary – which had a total of 72 leaves – are at variance with *Wanderings*, almost as though *Wanderings* had been written at leisure and with a preconceived plan or agenda. Much the same embellishment is seen in the finished paintings when compared with the original sketches. This embellishment: changes to scenes, sitters and presentations, according to the mood and demand of the audience, is an example of Kane 'playing to the gallery' and therefore conforms with Lasswell's theory of propaganda showing premeditated planning on the part of Paul Kane. Kane's *Wanderings* was reviewed in The Athenaeum where the reviewer refers to 'armchair travelers' who appear to be the target audience of *Wanderings*. According to him, the armchair travelers had certain requirements that could only be met if they were fed information that they could process and this information had to conform to their expectations, which in turn were formed by works such as those of Catlin and Kane. MacLaren is also of the opinion that *Wanderings* was not the work of Kane alone and that no less than three editors worked on converting the 72-page diary into the journal that supports and is in turn supported by *Wanderings*.

Sherman Alexie, Spokane-Coeur d'Alene poet, dramatist, novelist, short fiction writer, screenplay writer, literary spokesperson, and stand-up comedian, is very vocal in his criticism of the Euro-American distortion of American Indian reality. Alexie's *Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians* focuses on only one example of how the American Indian tribes have been misrepresented through the use of images. Being the foremost political scientist to recognize the usefulness of various psychological theories and to demonstrate how they could be applied to understanding politics, Lasswell's perspective is appropriate for the study of Alexie's text as also for the study of Kane's writings and paintings.

Paul Kane set out to make sketches and paintings of the American Indian tribes of the Pacific North West, claiming to depict, through these paintings, the way of life of what he believed was a race becoming rapidly extinct. Amongst these paintings are several that have been highlighted and questions have been raised regarding the accuracy with which they depict the various tribes. During his journey, Paul Kane made sketches of what he claimed to be Aboriginal people in their habitat, but research shows that Kane used his paintings for propaganda purposes. Artistic creation is, of course, a composition, a coming together of different elements and being presented as a cohesive whole. However, Kane's depiction of the different tribal chiefs, and their way of life, is reminiscent of

European colonizers and their treatment of natives. He has treated them merely as subjects for his own art and in doing so distorted the truth since the falsehood serves his ulterior motive of spreading propaganda.

Kane basks in his glory as an artist by portraying American Indians as perpetually troubled and gloomy. There are accounts which relate how he always required the subjects to be somber and “insisted they remain stoic”, so as not to let the world see that the natives too belonged to content and thriving community. Alexie, representing American Indians to a non-American Indian audience, referring to the painting titled *Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians* uses the subject of the painting as a speaker and states:

“You must also understand that we treated Paul Kane well even as he conspired to steal. Some sat still for his portraits and didn't smile because Kane insisted they remain stoic. That was his greatest mistake. Our smiles were everything; our laughter created portraits in the air, more colorful and exact than any in Kane's work.

I have seen all his paintings and Kane never let us smile.”

The speaker, according to Alexie, is the Spokane woman, whose identity Kane establishes as that of a Spokane woman whose husband had been murdered by a Blackfoot man. The woman is shown dancing in the foreground and kicking a Blackfoot scalp, as revenge, while eight other women dance in the background. A careful look at the painting shows that it panders to the established stereotype of the stoic and therefore unsmiling dancing Indian woman. These lines serve to underscore the fact that not only did Kane maneuver his subjects, into positions and expressions, that he wanted to show to the world, and not as they were in reality, but also availed of this opportunity to spread negative propaganda regarding those who trusted him enough to show willingness and support for his project. Alexie's statement that their smiles were everything depicts the Spokane as people who enjoyed life to its fullest, like all other tribes and peoples and did not shirk from expressing their feelings and emotions. The woman refers to Kane's propagandist technique when she mentions that Kane “insisted they remain stoic” since the stoicism and unsmiling faces of his subjects would serve to reinforce his agenda. This is also referenced to the stereotypical representation of American Indians as being stoics and either lacking emotional expressions totally or as tribal warriors, screaming and shrieking, forever on the warpath.

Kane's painting *Scalp Dance by Spokane Indians*, shows a Spokane woman desecrating the skull of a Blackfoot man who had supposedly killed her husband and states that through this desecration she is avenging the death of her husband. The woman in Alexie's story also mentions the fact that she is never married – “I never shared tipi with any man” – and that Kane is therefore guilty of misrepresentation of the Spokane while claiming to present them as they really are. According to art historian Heather Dawkins, the painting presents the speaker of the prose-poem “like an encased artifact or a “preserved” culture... In the painting, Kane usurps her identity to suit the configuration of his own vision,... “an instance of imperialist discourse.” It is also highly debatable whether the Spokane ever had scalp dances, since there is no information available apart from Kane's painting, and the veracity of the painting is highly questionable, in view of critics' and historians' observations.

European influence manipulated many of Paul Kane's paintings. Not only did he play around with the background – stormy skies, dramatic lighting, etc – but he was not above copying the style of the Masters. Having spent time copying the paintings of Da Vinci, Raphael and Rembrandt, which was the source of his income in Europe, it was easy for Kane to adopt and adapt the subjects of his paintings. Thus “*The Man That Always Rides*,” which is housed in the Royal Ontario Museum, is reminiscent of Théodore Géricault's, “*An Officer of the Chasseurs Commanding a Charge*,” 1812, housed in the Musée du Louvre, in the heroic tableau-like composition, with its theatrical and crepuscular sky. Kane thus digresses from his position as an artist to enter the field of archaeology. This aspect is also underscored in Alexie's piece which states: “They call themselves artists but they are really archeologists. Really, that's all any kind of art is.” This comparison may be viewed in the light of the fact that Kane's creation does exactly that whereas in reality the American Indian culture is still thriving and their past lives on in their stories and songs. The National Gallery of Canada states: “In *Assiniboine Hunting Buffalo* (c. 1851-1856), Kane composed the painting from his spot sketch and enhanced it based on Italian and French prototypes. He further heightened the moment by including a stormy sky and dramatic lighting.” Kane thus was not only recording but he embellished and distorted as and when it pleased him. Thus the stormy sky in the buffalo hunting painting, in his view, heightens the inevitability of the extinction of the buffalo and by extension, of the American Indians. This is in addition to his joining the last buffalo hunt, where he is reported to have killed two of the last five hundred buffalo shot.

The Canadian Encyclopedia in the section titled Paul Kane: Artist and Adventurer show Kane's interest changing with the passage of time and especially after the first display of his collection of paintings. No longer did he even attempt to paint the landscape and its inhabitants as he saw them.

He was not interested in showing the clear light of the western skies, nor the bright colors of the Aboriginal people's ceremonial garments, nor the rugged landscape that he had so intensely traversed. He wanted instead to fulfill his Catlin-inspired assignment of documenting the “wild west” by polishing his works according to the stylistic discourse of his day: idealized Aboriginal people, Europeanized landscapes, muted colors.

Being convinced of the imminent disappearance of the ‘noble savage’ he mixed and matched the colors and subjects of his paintings, much as he would take a palette and mix paints to get the desired shade of color. The encyclopedia also emphasizes Kane's “racially patronizing” and “exotic and idyllic” paintings. Although the notes in the diary were supposedly the record, with the

paintings being representative of the artistic endeavor, "What he produced back in his Toronto studio, later on, is an art rather than historical record." In the true spirit of Lasswell's theory, Kane saw an opportunity to present history, from his own perspective, and he did so without thinking of the ultimate consequences.

The woman from Alexie's poem voices her protest at the misrepresentation of Spokane culture by Kane's narrow interpretation of it. He is unaware of the customs and ethnography which he claims to depict truthfully in his explicitly staged portraits and sketches of the American Indians. In *Wanderings* he refers to one occasion on which he wanted to paint a girl in the tribal regalia: "After some difficulty, I succeeded in getting a young girl to sit in the costume of the tribe, although her mother was very much afraid it might shorten her life. But on my assuring her that it was more likely to prolong it, she seemed quite satisfied." This statement presents the dominant Euro-American narrative which supports the distorted representation in Kane's *Wanderings*, where all the men are portrayed in their traditional regalia, and not in their natural surroundings. The question that arises in the mind of the observer is why would the subjects of Kane's portraits be wearing their regalia, rather than ordinary buckskin or linen dresses that they were used to wearing in their everyday lives? The poses also are formal and European in nature, and not indigenous to the sitters, for it was unusual for the chiefs to be dressed in their regalia unless the occasion demanded it. However, Kane just went ahead and painted them the way he wanted them to be perceived, not considering how his visual representation was at variance with his written account of the American Indians as savages, uncouth, unclean and not worthy of close encounters. Not only did he present them in *Wanderings* as unclean, uncouth and savage, he also portrayed them as such. Having made the preliminary sketches during his travels, he could make whatever alterations he wanted to, sitting in his studio. He did not even have to wait for the paintings to be completed and *Wanderings* was published before all of the paintings were completed.

Conclusion

Although Kane's work has come under fire on many accounts, there is no denying the fact that the work, in its entirety, is phenomenal. While not representing the true face of the lives of American Indians, it does show us the European perspective of tribal life, heritage, and customs. Traveling the "length of a huge continent" he managed to create works of art that help us to understand the life of the Aboriginal peoples, as imagined by an Irishman and required by the armchair travelers in Europe and the Americas. It is important to keep in mind the fact that writers, like Alexie, are doing a service to mankind by exposing ground reality and lifting the veil from the biased and one-sided European presentation of American Indian peoples.

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