

21A.441

Discussion Questions: "Black Robe"

Many of the controversies surrounding "Black Robe" are concerned with the way in which it depicts indigenous peoples. Several native peoples appear in the film: Algonkians (Father Laforgue's guides and companions); Montagnais or Innu (who they meet on their journey); Mohawk (Iroquois), who attack the party and take it captive; and Huron, the people the Jesuits wish to missionize. To what extent and how does the film treat them as different or as all alike? Specifically, what do you think of the portrayal of the Iroquois?

In what way is language a problem in films about the Indians? How well does this one handle the problem?

What can you say about the depiction of violence and sexuality in the film and their meaning? What do you think about Churchill's criticisms (in our readings) on these matters? Do you think the filmmakers really think the sexuality of the Indians and Daniel is worse than Laforgue's? Do you think the film lets us understand the killing and the torture in their cultural context? (See the readings by Wallace and Richter.) What about Churchill's critique as a whole?

How do you think the film handles the clash between Christian and native religion? In what ways are the two sides presented and discussed? How does the film's presentation compare with Axtell's in the readings? What about preaching of heaven in particular?

What do you think of the scenes in which the Indians wonder at a clock and at Laforgue's ability to communicate at a distance through writing?

Do you think Laforgue is truly representative of the 17th century Jesuits? Why or why not? What about the dying priest he encounters at the end of the film and his attitudes towards the Indians and baptism?

The director (Bruce Beresford) and scriptwriter for the film (Bryan Moore) defended it by pointing out how much they had relied on the Jesuit Relations. What do you see in the film that might come from the parts of the Jesuit Relations we are reading? In what ways does the film seem to depart from the Relations?

What is the symbolic significance of the landscape and of the onset of winter in the film?

How would you have done the film differently?

How can a film be true to history? Is it possible? How do we reconcile the film with different positions on history taken by native peoples and others? Is Black Robe better or worse than Pocahontas? The Indian in the Cupboard? Last of the Mohicans? Geronimo? Smoke Signals? Dances with Wolves?