Posed and Retouched: Photographs and films that staged the past

NBE3U, Unit 2: Behind the Image, Lesson 4. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

A photograph looks like proof. But a photographer chooses the costume, the pose, the caption and what gets erased. Edward Curtis removed a clock from a plate; the Department of Indian Affairs printed “before and after” portraits of a schoolboy; Robert Flaherty staged an Inuit hunt for Nanook of the North. Each made a story look like a fact.

What students do: Students learn three cases of staged or edited images (Curtis's retouching, the Department of Indian Affairs portraits of Thomas Moore at the Regina Indian Industrial School, and Flaherty's Nanook of the North), analyse the conventions each uses to convey meaning, and identify the perspective and purpose behind each.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
E1.5	identify the perspectives and/or biases evident in media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, and comment on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power
E2.2	identify conventions and/or techniques used in a variety of media forms and explain, with increasing insight, how they convey meaning and influence their audience in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures
A2.1	determine how the messages relating to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures conveyed in various contemporary and historical Indigenous text forms, and, as appropriate, in non-Indigenous texts, might change if they were presented from a range of different perspectives, and make appropriate inferences about how the viewpoint of the creator/author is shaped by factors related to historical period, gender, culture, sexual orientation, ability, and/or politics
E1.2	interpret media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, identifying and explaining the overt and implied messages they convey

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning how photographs and films use conventions to shape meaning. • We are learning to identify the perspective and purpose behind staged images.	• I can name the choices a photographer or filmmaker makes. • I can explain how staging changes the message of an image. • I can identify the purpose behind a staged image. • I can explain the implied message of an image.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Posed and Retouched deck.
- **Handouts:** Behind the Camera (page 1), Three Cases (page 2).
- **Optional:** Show the images from their holding institutions: Curtis's “In a Piegan Lodge” (Library of Congress and museum collections) and the Thomas Moore photographs (Library and Archives Canada; Legacy of Hope Foundation “Where Are the Children?” exhibition). Preview first. A clip from Nanook of the North (1922) is widely available.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Is a photo proof?	Discuss.	
8–20	**Choices**	The photographer's toolkit.	Note.	
20–50	**Three cases**	Curtis, Moore, Nanook.	Analyse in groups.	Purpose identified.
50–65	**Implied messages**	Compare.	Discuss.	
65–75	**Reflect**	Exit.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Case cards with guiding questions.
- **ELL:** Visual glossary: pose, caption, crop, retouch, cutaway.
- **Challenge:** Research one Indigenous photographer or filmmaker who answers these images.

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Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Three Cases	Bias and perspective (E1.5), conventions (E2.2), changing perspectives (A2.1) and implied messages (E1.2)

Posed and retouched: key points

- **Curtis's clock:** Removing a clock removed modern life, so the men look “timeless,” as if Indigenous people belonged only to the past.
- **Thomas Moore:** Short hair, a uniform and a staged pose in the “after” image were meant to prove the schools “worked”: propaganda for assimilation.
- **Nanook:** Allakariallak used a gun; the film shows a harpoon. The igloo was cut open for light. The film sells a “primitive” Arctic to southern audiences.
- **Conventions:** Costume, props, pose, lighting, cropping, retouching, captions and editing all carry meaning.
- **Common purpose:** Each image made an outsider's story look like a fact, and hid the people's own perspective.

Teacher notes

- Curtis: his 1910 photograph “In a Piegan Lodge” showed a small clock between two men; in the version he later published, the clock was removed from the plate (JSTOR Daily, “Edward S. Curtis: Romance vs. Reality”). He sometimes supplied costumes and props to fit an idealized past.
- Thomas Moore: the Department of Indian Affairs printed “before” and “after” photographs of Thomas Moore (also spelled Keesick or Kusick) in its annual report for the year ending June 30, 1896; he was admitted to the Regina Indian Industrial School on August 26, 1891 (Legacy of Hope Foundation, “Where Are the Children?”; Library and Archives Canada). The images promoted assimilation. He was a real child: treat the images with respect and do not mock them. This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Nanook of the North (1922), directed by Robert J. Flaherty, was filmed in northern Quebec (Nunavik). “Nanook” was Allakariallak, who normally hunted with a gun; Flaherty encouraged older methods, built a cut-away igloo for the camera, scripted the gramophone scene, and the two women shown as his wives were not his wives (Wikipedia summary of film histories). Use “Inuit,” not the film's terms.
- Show images from the holding institution's website rather than copying them into slides.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 5, Who Owns a Name?

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