

Conveying traditional Indigenous culture: From ethnographic film  
to community-based storytelling

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## ABSTRACT

## Conveying traditional Indigenous culture: From ethnographic film to community-based storytelling

In the following chapters, I discuss several works of film, video and photography made since the early twentieth century depicting Inuit and other Indigenous peoples of North America. Their creators have been motivated by a desire to produce a record, through various methods of reconstruction, of past ways of life of their Indigenous subjects. In the context of these efforts, the question of how to structure the material to attract and hold the attention of an audience has been a primary concern. The films discussed in chapters two and three exemplify ethnographic filmmaking as a visual and narrative practice of salvage ethnography. In contrast, the films and videos discussed in chapters four and five are examples of Indigenous media—that is to say, media produced by Indigenous people and communities—that make use of ethnographic, or simply cultural, reconstruction in a way that assumes the continuing vitality of Indigenous cultures and a healthy balance between past and present. Focusing on the example of Canada’s first Inuit-made feature-length fiction film, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, I argue that the film’s success and significance is grounded in a respect for traditional Inuit storytelling practices and an experiential approach to teaching that uses video as a proxy for directly “showing how,” an effort to make traditional Inuit cultural memory and stories relevant to Inuit and wider audiences in the present and future.

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This thesis is dedicated to my father, Gyde V. Shepherd, who taught me to value the artist's invitation to *look*; to my sister, Pippa Shepherd, who graciously helped me to reach the finish line when it was most unlikely; and to my daughter, Emily Shepherd, for her affection and wisdom all these years. Without each one of you, this thesis would not have found its way.

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## Preface: A Point of Departure

One evening in the spring of 2002, I walked into a movie theatre in Montreal to see *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, the first feature-length movie written, directed, acted, and produced by Inuit. It has been more than a decade since I first saw *The Fast Runner*, but I still remember the experience vividly.<sup>1</sup> It was to become both the point of departure, and after much exploration, the final destination of this thesis.

This is how the story begins:

*Scene 1.* A man stands at a distance in a monochrome landscape of snow, ice, and sky. He is surrounded by his dogs, some resting, some running over the snow; their howling communicates the breadth of the landscape more fully than anything I can see. I feel drawn into the space before me just as surely as if I were standing there with them.

*Scene 2.* A group of adults and children are sitting together in the dim interior of a *qarmaq*, a dwelling made of sod and stones. Standing in the centre of the group, two men are having a conversation, and I begin to read the subtitles. I get the impression that one of the men is a visitor, perhaps an unwelcome one, but the reason for his presence is unclear. The camera focuses momentarily on a young woman tending a seal oil lamp; as she looks at the men, her face suggests apprehension, but why? Struggling to get my bearings, I find it hard to follow the conversation, and sense that I should know more about the backstory.

*Scene 3.* We are outside again, now in the bright Arctic sun. The scene begins with a close-up of a man's hand passing a piece of fur along the runner of an overturned

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<sup>1</sup> I use the abbreviation *The Fast Runner* throughout the following chapters in order to clearly differentiate between references to the film and to its central character, Atanarjuat.

*qamutik*, a traditional Inuit sled made with antlers, driftwood, and bone. The runner is covered with a thick layer of ice. The camera pans up to show the man's other hand holding a bowl made of what looks like dried skin; he drinks from the bowl and carefully spits the water onto the piece of fur before putting it back on the runner. No one is speaking, so there are no subtitles to read, and there is time to understand the purpose of the action. I feel myself relax a little now that I have a moment to reflect on the events of the previous scene. At this point, I had already begun to view *The Fast Runner* in the particular way in which I have learned to watch documentary films of the kind often described as ethnographic.

*Scene 4.* We are back in the *qarmaq*. Two men are involved in some kind of contest. One wears a necklace made of what look like large animal teeth. They sit beside each other, their heads down, their legs extended in opposite directions, while two others bind them with seal hide rope. After a moment, one of the bound men falls on his side, unconscious or dead. One of the older men who had been conversing in the earlier scene takes the necklace off the fallen man and puts it on one of the young men watching the contest. Looking down at the necklace resting on his chest, he seems pleased and smiles broadly. Another man stands up and, addressing the young man, shouts: "You helped him to murder your own father!" Something important has happened, something of consequence, but I have no idea what it means.

Watching *The Fast Runner's* opening scenes, I had the distinct impression that I was seeing two films superimposed one on the other, or rather, interlaced through the sequence of shots. A spectator of one, I followed the progress of the story intently, identifying with some of the characters, wary of others, all the while feeling the constant

and powerful draw of the narrative. A spectator of the other, I observed the form and function of tools and clothing; the activities and social interactions of everyday life; the nature of ritual and artistic practices; and the appearance of landscapes, campsites and domestic interiors with their distinctive colours derived from land, sea and the bodies of animals. Yet while *The Fast Runner's* landscapes and cultural content were informative and enjoyable to perceive, not only visibly but audibly as well, they were forcefully contained within the imaginative framework of the narrative in which the characters lived. Unlike any other film I had seen depicting Inuit, the story was paramount.

As *The Fast Runner's* narrative unfolded, I gradually found my way. The movie continued to move back and forth between scenes, or shots within scenes, in which some object, task, activity or landscape was featured, and those in which the events of the story were played out. The observational sequences continued to provide a welcome pause in the advancing narrative; they also served to focus my attention on the movie's rich cultural content. At the same time, as I became more and more engrossed in the story and the fate of its central characters, the initial impression that I was watching two distinct films gradually faded. In their place I began to perceive an integrated whole, although *The Fast Runner's* cultural content remained compellingly present as the detailed and three-dimensional background to the legend.



## Chapter One: Introduction

*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* was made by an independent Inuit production company called Isuma Productions, which was founded in 1990 by members of the small Arctic community of Igloolik, Nunavut. When I first heard about *The Fast Runner* a few months before its Canada-wide release in April 2002, I was intrigued to learn that it was set in the distant past and that it was based on an ancient Igloolik Inuit legend. I had expected that the first Inuit-made feature film would be set in the present, or at least the recent past, and would explore current issues relevant to Inuit people and their communities.<sup>2</sup> My expectation was based on the example of feature-length fiction films by Indigenous directors made in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Films like *Once Were Warriors* (1994) by New Zealand director Lee Tamahori—one of the highest grossing New Zealand films to date—and *Smoke Signals* (1998) by the American filmmaker Chris Eyre—the first Native American feature film to see wide theatrical release—both told contemporary stories involving the present day struggles of Native American and Maori characters (Joyce 157; Hearne, *Smoke Signals* xv). Though fiction films, they carried on the activist tradition

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<sup>2</sup> 50,485 individuals identified as Inuit according to Statistics Canada's 2006 *Census of Population*, the most recent count of Aboriginal populations in Canada. The 2010 *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* estimated that approximately 90% of Canada's Inuit population live in Inuit homelands, which encompass fifty-three small communities in Nunavut; Nunatsiavut, Labrador; Nunavik, Quebec; and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories, while the remaining 10% live in Southern towns and cities, making Inuit "the least urbanized of Aboriginal groups in Canada" (24, 30). Statistics Canada projects that by 2031, "the vast majority" of Inuit in Canada will be living in the Inuit homelands ("Population projections").

<sup>3</sup> I use the capitalized word Indigenous here and in other instances where the scope of the reference warrants it. When referring to Indigenous individuals or communities in a national or local context, I use specific designations such as Inuit, First Nations, or Native American, which are used currently by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

that has defined the work of Indigenous documentary filmmakers in Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and other countries since the 1970s.

In a 2003 paper published in the journal *American Anthropologist*, Shari Huhndorf observed that southern critics and audiences in Canada and elsewhere naturally tended to relate *The Fast Runner* to what they remember from other films about Inuit people and culture, looking back to “the long history of representations of Native peoples in popular and ethnographic films” (822).<sup>4</sup> Both ethnographic and popular films (which is to say feature-length fiction films) have done a great deal to propagate stereotypes of Inuit and other Indigenous peoples. More fundamentally, Kerstin Knopf argues that Hollywood narrative films and ethnographic documentaries have served as, “The two major operational instruments of visual colonial discourse in North America” (5).<sup>5</sup>

One of the ways in which ethnographic films and feature-length fiction films have given expression to a colonial discourse is by depicting Indigenous peoples as living in the past. Taking aim at this longstanding habit in his 1992 book *Fantasies of the master race: literature, cinema and the colonization of American Indians*, Native American scholar and activist Ward Churchill was strongly critical of Kevin Costner’s 1990 blockbuster *Dances With Wolves*. “If Kevin Costner or anyone else in Hollywood held an

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<sup>4</sup> While some Canadian Inuit live in cities and smaller communities south of the Arctic and sub-Arctic Inuit homeland, I use the term southerner to refer to non-Inuit audiences in Canada and in other countries, the vast majority of whom live south of the sixtieth parallel.

<sup>5</sup> Given that both Canada and the United States achieved independence before cinema was invented, it might be argued that it is not accurate to refer to colonialism or a “colonial discourse” when speaking of Canadian and American cinematic representations of Indigenous peoples. Without entering into a debate about the definition of colonialism, or post-colonialism for that matter, it suffices to say that the unequal power relationships between the Indigenous peoples of North America and the settler states that were established on their ancestral territories is reflected in the evolution of Canadian and American visual media, with cinema leading the way.

honest inclination to make a movie which would alter public perceptions of Native America in some meaningful way,” Churchill wrote, “it would, first and foremost, be set in the present day, not in the mid-19th century. It would feature, front and center, the real struggles of living native people to liberate themselves from the oppression which has beset them in the contemporary era” (246).

Hollywood has made some progress in depicting Native Americans in more recent eras since *Dances With Wolves*, a prominent example being Adam Beach’s starring role as Corporal Ira Hayes in Clint Eastwood’s 2006 film *Flags of Our Fathers*. Yet in the years following Churchill’s call to action, the task of depicting contemporary Indigenous characters and stories has fallen largely on the shoulders of Indigenous filmmakers themselves, *Once Were Warriors* and *Smoke Signals* being two prominent examples. In contrast, *The Fast Runner* tells a story passed down for more than half a millennium through the oral tradition of the Igloolik Inuit, originating long before European explorers first appeared in the North American Arctic and sub-Arctic.<sup>6</sup>

*The Fast Runner* was praised unanimously by critics following its premiere at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, where it received the Caméra d’Or for Best first feature film (Kirkland). In a paper published in *American Anthropologist* (the same 2003 edition in which Huhndorf’s paper cited earlier appeared), Lucas Bessire argued that the fact that the film is “situated inextricably in the past,” helps to account for the overwhelmingly positive response of critics and audiences in Canada and around the world, an opportunity

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<sup>6</sup> Much of the action in the legend of *The Fast Runner* occurs on an island known as Qikiqtaarjuk, which is Inuktitut for “little island.” Bernard Saladin d’Anglure notes that Qikiqtaarjuk became a peninsula of Igloolik Island about five hundred years ago due to isostatic rebound. The fact that Qikiqtaarjuk is known as an island in the legend allows it to be dated as at least five hundred years old (113-115).

to experience the kind of “primitivist escapism” that appealed to non-Indigenous audiences of *Dances With Wolves* (834). Yet Bessire’s argument underestimates the significance of *The Fast Runner*’s depiction of a pre-colonial myth.

Writing on the occasion of *The Fast Runner*’s Cannes premiere, *Globe and Mail* film critic Liam Lacey described the movie as “an unclassifiable mixture of drama—murder, adultery and supernatural forces—and a fascinating cultural document.” In response to this “unclassifiable” combination of drama and document, critics have tended to focus on either one or the other, a point made by Huhndorf. She wrote:

Citing the narrative elements of love, jealousy, revenge, and struggles for power, many critics have described the mythic nature and appeal of *Atanarjuat* as universal, likening it to such fictional literary and film classics as *Macbeth*, the *Odyssey*, and *Laurence of Arabia*. Other commentators, by contrast, have focused on *Atanarjuat*’s careful attention to cultural details and practices, remarking on its documentary objectivity and frequently comparing it to Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*. (822)

While critics may have difficulty classifying *The Fast Runner*’s combination of drama and cultural documentation, Canada’s first Inuit-made feature-length fiction film represents a remarkably comprehensive response to the long history of documentary and fiction filmmaking depicting Inuit and other Indigenous peoples. Building on their experience making cultural reconstruction videos showing life in Igloolik in the 1930s

and 1940s, with *The Fast Runner*, Isuma draws both fiction film and ethnographic film into new territory, one defined by a respect for the traditions of Inuit storytelling and an experiential approach to teaching that uses video as a proxy for directly “showing how.” While video, first analog then digital, offered the technical means to accomplish this, Isuma’s Inuit-led community-based approach to filmmaking provided the social, cultural and political context for this accomplishment. Through these efforts, Isuma has worked to both preserve traditional Inuit culture in video and make it entertaining, memorable, accessible—all Isuma’s videos and feature films can be viewed in full for free online—and relevant to viewing audiences of all ages and cultural perspectives.

## Ethnographic Film and Cultural Reenactment

In *Cinema: A Visual Anthropology* (2010), Gordon Gray writes that while cinema and anthropology “tend not to go together in most people’s minds,” one area in which they intersect is in “a particular form of documentary cinema known as ethnographic film” (xii). In *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and Turn-of-the-century Visual Culture* (2000), Alison Griffiths points out that while the term was not used widely until after the Second World War, the lineage of ethnographic film can be traced back to the earliest days of cinema (xxix). Griffiths focuses on this early period from the mid-1890s to the beginning of the First World War. She describes ethnographic film for the purpose of her book as, “films featuring native peoples that were produced by anthropologists, commercial, and amateur filmmakers alike” (xxix), and treats them as “a generalized and dispersed set of practices, a way of using the cinematic medium to

express ideas about racial and cultural difference, rather than as an autonomous and institutionalized film genre” (xxix).<sup>7</sup>

Informed by Griffiths’s understanding of ethnographic film, in the following chapters, I discuss a number of works of film, video and photography depicting Inuit and other Indigenous peoples of North America made since the early twentieth century. Their creators have been motivated in part by a desire to produce a record, through various methods of reconstruction, of past ways of life of their Indigenous subjects. Edward Curtis’s film *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1914), Robert Flaherty’s film *Nanook of the North* (1922), and Asen Balikci’s *Netsilik Series* films (1967-1970) which are discussed in chapters two and three, are examples of ethnographic filmmaking “in which individuals from the colonial group were making films about individuals from the colonized group” (Knopf 56), and represent what Griffiths calls an “encounter with the ethnographic Other” (xix). In contrast, the films and videos discussed in chapters four and five, as well as the work of the Inuit photographer Peter Pitseolak discussed at the end of chapter three, are examples of Indigenous media—that is to say, media produced by and for Indigenous people and communities.

In his 1994 book *Blurred boundaries: questions of meaning in contemporary culture*, Bill Nichols commented that, “Both anthropology and documentary filmmaking have caused themselves considerable vexation debating the issue of representation as a process of rendering likenesses effectively, according to criteria of realism, objectivity,

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<sup>7</sup> Griffiths provides the following caveat: “While I have concentrated almost exclusively on films featuring native peoples, this is not to suggest that the term ethnographic film excludes motion pictures made about Euro-American cultures and subcultures; to restrict ethnographic film to only those films made about indigenous peoples would be to perpetuate a fallacious and largely repudiated view of ethnographic filmmaking” (xxix).

accuracy, or ethnographicness” (64). A recurring theme in this debate has been the status of reenactments in the context of non-fiction film. Reenactment has played a particularly central role in ethnographic filmmaking, expanding on ethnographic reconstruction practices developed in the context of photography.

Nichols recalled that while relatively common in the 1920s and 1930s, “Reenactments came to be denounced as fabrications in the days of observational cinema: then, more recently, filmmakers resurrected them as a legitimate way to address what is not available for representation in the here and now” (4).<sup>8</sup> In the context of ethnographic photography and filmmaking depicting Indigenous peoples, a negative view of reenactment arises from a critique of the intent and methods of what is often referred to as salvage ethnography. With these salvage efforts, reconstruction practices taken up by Euro-American explorers, anthropologists and filmmakers have tended to frame out evidence of the actual social, political, economic, and cultural realities faced by Indigenous peoples in the context of colonialism. While ostensibly motivated by a desire to preserve Indigenous cultural patrimony, salvage ethnography has often served to perpetuate the belief that Indigenous cultures have no future outside the museums and galleries that house their artistic and cultural artifacts, or the films and textbooks that are

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<sup>8</sup> David McDougall makes this clear in his essay in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* which was originally published in 1975, entitled “Beyond Observational Cinema.” In the context of the early 1970s, McDougall noted that, “The past few years have seen a recommitment to the principle of observation in documentary filmmaking” (115). In another essay published in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* entitled “Observational Cinema,” Colin Young wrote that as fiction filmmakers began “raiding the territory of documentary” during the 1960s, in order to differentiate itself as non-fiction film, “documentary had to move further towards its subject and further away from fictional forms” (99).

often the only means by which non-Indigenous audiences around the world come to learn about Indigenous peoples.

As part of the historical shifts observed by Nichols with regard to reenactment, ethnographic films have been seen more recently as sources of valuable historical and cultural knowledge, for both anthropologists and participants and their communities. Not only have ethnographic film archives been “resurrected” (Nichols 4), but various methods of ethnographic reconstruction have been taken up by Indigenous artists, media producers and their communities as a means to revisit, remember, re-experience and teach aspects of their traditional cultures that are no longer part of daily life. While taking up some of the practices developed by Euro-American photographers and filmmakers, Indigenous artists and media producers have made use of ethnographic, or simply cultural, reconstruction in a manner that assumes the continuing vitality of Indigenous cultures and a healthy balance between past and present. These cultural reconstruction practices have contributed to the more general development of Indigenous media in the last several decades.

For the creators of the films and videos discussed in the following chapters, the question of how to structure the material to attract and hold the attention of an audience has been a primary concern. Whether intended primarily for theatre audiences, as discussed in chapter two, or for educational purposes, as discussed in chapter three, filmmakers engaged in cultural reconstructions have not always been successful in their attempt to balance an interest in ethnographic salvage with a desire to produce an engaging narrative for their audiences. In chapter four I discuss the emergence of Indigenous media in Canada and the arrival of television in Inuit communities, events



that led to the establishment of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation and later Isuma Productions in the 1980s and early 1990s. I also discuss cultural reconstruction videos produced by Isuma in the 1990s, a body of work that allowed the company to develop a community-based approach to filmmaking which eventually led to their feature-film making achievements, as discussed in chapter five.

Through a discussion of a number of examples, I trace the struggle to balance the two potentially conflicting aims of preserving culture in the information-rich mediums of photography, film and video, and making cultural reconstructions compelling and memorable to viewing audiences, often by way of storytelling. I argue that Isuma's success is based on the respect given to storytelling in a formerly oral culture, one that is now transposed into the technological medium of video through a process of community-based filmmaking that aims to make traditional Inuit cultural memory and stories relevant to Inuit and wider audiences in the present and future.

## Chapter Two: Ethnographic Salvage Cinema

The films discussed in this chapter are examples of ethnographic cinema from the early decades of the twentieth century. While realizing an apparently laudable project of cultural documentation and preservation, fulfilling a duty to “salvage” Indigenous cultures for posterity, these efforts have been critiqued in recent decades for perpetuating the view of Indigenous cultures as “vanishing.” Knopf argues that, “As Indigenous filmmaking is in constant dialogue with colonial film discourse that has objectified and stereotyped colonized cultures and established them as ‘inferior other’, an Arctic film must necessarily be in dialogue with Robert Flaherty’s film *Nanook of the North* of 1922” (320-321).<sup>9</sup> While Flaherty is the obvious comparison, I would like to begin with Edward S. Curtis. Curtis is known as a photographer, but he also made a film entitled *In the Land of the Head hunters* (1914). I continue with a discussion of *Nanook of the North* as well as two other films that combine drama and ethnography, examples of what the American visual anthropologist Karl Heider referred to in his 1976 book *Ethnographic Film* as “ethnographic fiction” (27).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony notes that *Nanook of the North* is regarded as “a point of origin,” touted as both the first documentary film and the first ethnographic film, although both these claims are debated extensively (99).

<sup>10</sup> In a 2006 reprint of *Ethnographic Film*, Karl Heider describes “the first Inuit-made film”—*The Fast Runner*—as a recent example of “ethnographic fiction” (*Ethnographic Film: Revised Edition*, 27).

*In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914)

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photographs depicting the Indigenous peoples of North America reached a growing audience in Europe and North America in a range of contexts, from illustrated magazines to public lantern slide shows. The American photographer Edward S. Curtis was one of the most prolific contributors to this industry. Published between 1907 and 1930, the twenty-one volumes of *The North American Indian*, Curtis's opus, contain more than two thousand photographs organized by nation and culture area.<sup>11</sup> During his lifetime, Curtis produced some forty thousand photographs; a body of work that includes some of the most widely recognized images of Native Americans.

In 1911, Curtis created a lantern slide show called *The Indian Picture Opera* to promote sales of *The North American Indian*. He took the show to several cities across the United States, giving lectures and showing his photographs projected on screen and accompanied by a small orchestra. While the venture did not generate the hoped-for sales, the appeal of the *Indian Picture Opera*'s cinematic elements—including the musical

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<sup>11</sup> *The North American Indian* includes volumes on the Great Plains, Great Basin, Plateau Region, Southwest, California, Pacific Northwest and Alaska culture areas. The culture area concept was developed by the nineteenth century German geographer Friedrich Ratzel, although Nina Brown explains that it was in the United States that the concept of culture areas “gained real social scientific cohesion.” According to Brown, an ethnologist and curator at the American Museum of Natural History named Clark Wissler “used the culture area concept to integrate what was known about Native American communities.” His books on the subject include *The American Indian* (1917) and the *North American Indians of the Plains* (1920) among others. Mick Gidley notes that Wissler knew Curtis, recommending him in a letter to his friend Alfred C. Haddon after Haddon wrote inquiring about Curtis in 1908 (158-159). According to Gidley, in his reply to Haddon, Wissler wrote that Curtis: “is an enthusiastic photographer who has a great deal of interest in the ethnological side of Indian life, but whose chief effort is to photograph as many of the living Indians as possible” (qtd. in Gidley 159).

accompaniment—encouraged Curtis to try his hand at filmmaking. Released in 1914, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (later renamed *In the Land of the War Canoes*) was the first feature-length film with an all-native cast, featuring members of the Kwagu'ł First Nation of northern Vancouver Island (U'Mitsa Cultural Society).<sup>12</sup>

As was his practice as a photographer, in making his film, Curtis “suppressed all visual evidence of the actual contemporary lives of the Kwakwaka’wakw, preferring instead to represent Kwakwaka’wakw culture in a remote nineteenth-century past that had to be extensively re-created by members of the tribe who participated in the film” (Griffiths 239). Curtis’s primary interest in making *In the Land of the Head Hunters* was to present his ethnographic material on Indigenous North American cultures in a context that was accessible to a wide audience. Hearne characterizes *In the Land of the Head Hunters* as “educational popular entertainment using melodrama” (319). Melodrama usually presented strongly contrasting characters of the hero-heroine-villain triangle, where the audience is meant to identify with the suffering of the noble and virtuous hero (the noble savage) and reject the Sorcerer (the evil savage). The film contrasted a “heroic warrior” with a negatively portrayed “sorcerer” or shaman who would have been seen by audiences at the time as “a relic of pre-Christian, pre-agrarian and pre-scientific thought.” (Hearne 312).

As Hearne explains, “In writing *In the Land of the War Canoes*, Curtis made up a story to justify the display of costumes, artifacts and dances and to show as many

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<sup>12</sup> The U’Mitsa Cultural Society website states that, “Ever since the white people first came to our lands, we have been known as the Kwakkewlths by Indian Affairs or as the Kwakiutl by anthropologists. In fact we are the Kwakwaka’wakw, people who speak Kwak’wala, but who live in different places and have different names for our separate groups.”

ceremonial activities as possible—a narrative ‘glue’ or ‘pastiche’” (307). In a 1915 interview for the *Strand* magazine in London, Curtis explained that “in order to add to the interest he felt compelled to mix it with a little romance,” although he saw his film as primarily of educational value (Hearne 311). “The story, of course, is a minor detail,” Curtis commented, “the real object of the film being to show the customs, amusements, fights, domestic life, and sports of the North American Indians” (314). As Catherine Russell explains:

Curtis’s inspiration was the huge success of the Indian film genre, which was most popular between 1908 and 1913. He intended his film to be commercially competitive with the Hollywood-produced Indian film because it would be more authentic, featuring actual Indian actors and real props, customs, dances, and activities. The vehicle of this authenticity, however, was a convoluted narrative of romance, intrigue, and adventure, which Curtis wrote and had the Kwakiutl act out. (100)

Curtis seems to have used melodrama in a kind of cinematic “bait and switch” in order to draw in his audience. Yet as Hearne asks: “Given his extremely careful control of images so as to eliminate evidence of European influence, why did Curtis not use Kwakwaka’wakw stories as the basis for his scenario for the film?” (311). She notes that it was not due to a lack of access to these stories. Only a few years earlier, Franz Boas

had published *Kwakiutl Texts* (1905) with George Hunt and *Kwakiutl Tales* (1910).<sup>13</sup> Curtis corresponded regularly with Boas and even more significantly, worked extensively with George Hunt, a native speaker of the Kwak'wala language, and had even collected Kwakwaka'wakw narratives from the communities involved in making the film (311). Hearne concludes that, "By treating the narrative scenario as 'a minor detail' and by ignoring the rich potential of the Kwakwaka'wakw verbal art that was all around him, Curtis missed the opportunity to give the silent images an Indigenous 'voice'" (312).

Curtis's legacy has been criticized for perpetuating the "myth of the vanishing race" (Beck). In reference to *The North American Indian*, Mick Gidley notes that while Curtis "characteristically placed the emphasis on making a record...of Indian life," he "frequently presented his work as offering an apprehension of preexisting reality rather than what it was, the *construction* of a record" (103-4; emphasis in original). In his general introduction to *The North American Indian* included in the 1907 inaugural volume, Curtis anticipated his subject's recent or imminent disappearance and adopted a tone of urgency often invoked in the context of salvage ethnography. Curtis wrote:

The great changes in practically every phase of the Indian's life that have taken place, especially within recent years, have been such that had the time for collecting much of the material, both descriptive and illustrative, herein recorded, been delayed, it would have been lost forever. The

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<sup>13</sup> "Anthropologist Franz Boas used the name Kwakiutl to refer to an ethno-linguistic group of 28 tribes. It came from the name of the tribe that Boas did most of his work with, the Kwagu'ł or Kwagyelth, at Fort Rupert. The name was widely used into the 1970s and remains current in languages other than English. However, it is now considered a misnomer by most of the peoples it is applied to; they prefer to be called the Kwakwaka'wakw, which means Kwak'wala-speaking-peoples." ("Kwakiutl")

passing of every old man or woman means the passing of some tradition, some knowledge of sacred rites possessed by no other; consequently the information that is to be gathered, for the benefit of future generations, respecting the mode of life of one of the great races of mankind, must be collected at once or the opportunity will be lost for all time. It is this need that has inspired the present task. (xvi)

Curtis's use of the word "information" in the passage cited above implies an objective process of gathering what is simply there in front of the camera. Yet in planning and executing his photographs, Curtis engaged in a number of reconstruction practices to create images that would be compelling for his non-Indigenous audiences, including his benefactors.

Concluding the general introduction to *The North American Indian*, Curtis thanked his benefactors, which included the railroad magnate J.P. Morgan, assuring them that their investment will be worthwhile. "When the last opportunity for study of the living tribes shall have passed with the Indians themselves, and the day cannot be far off," he wrote, "my generous friends may then feel that they have aided in a work the results of which, let it be hoped, will grow more valuable as time goes on" (xvii). Curtis's emphasis on the anticipated disappearance of Native American cultures appeals to a collector's mindset; like an art collector who knows the death of the artist increases the value of the work of art, the threat of cultural disappearance increases the value of photographic and cinematic images depicting a culture in its imagined "pristine" state (Griffiths 236).

*Nanook of the North (1922)*

About the same time that Curtis was shooting his film on Vancouver Island, the American explorer and mining engineer Robert Flaherty embarked on his first journey to northern Canada to carry out mineralogical surveys of the Belcher Islands of Hudson's Bay on behalf of the Canadian railway baron William Mackenzie (Barsam 14). Flaherty did not find ore, but he spent a great deal of time improving existing maps of the region and taking photographs to document his experiences before returning home to Toronto in the spring of 1912. In 1913, Flaherty returned to the north with a Bell and Howell film camera, which he used extensively during a period of eighteen months exploring the area around Baffin Island; by the end of 1915 he had shot more than seventeen hours of film (Barsam 14-15).

Back home again in early 1916, Flaherty worked for several months with his wife Frances to assemble his footage into some sort of order. It proved to be a challenge. According to Paul Rotha, in this initial period, Flaherty "stressed all along that he merely took the movie camera with him to make visual notes of what he saw" (Rotha and Ruby 27). After showing a print to friends gathered at the couple's new home in Connecticut a year later, Flaherty concluded, "It was utterly inept, simply a scene of this and a scene of that, no relation, no thread of a story or continuity whatever, and it must have bored the audience to distraction" (qtd. in Rotha and Ruby 27). Flaherty realized he had to change his approach, and fire proved to be the agent of invention. When the highly flammable



celluloid negative burned all his film in a fire in the editing studio, he was released from any sense of responsibility to generate a better film from the material.

It was not until 1920 that Flaherty secured financial backing for a second attempt at filmmaking from the Paris-based fur and luxury goods company Revillon Frères (Barsam 16). The company had established a trading post at Port Harrison in 1909 and was eager to gain business and especially publicity from the film. Whereas on his first attempt Flaherty had simply used the camera to record and report on his journeys in the Canadian north, now his intent was to tell a story. He knew it would be a story of survival, a theme he would revisit a number of times as a filmmaker, and that it would be centered on an Inuit protagonist, a hunter named Allakariallak (Inuit traditionally went by only one name) who traded at Port Harrison. Like Curtis, Flaherty wanted to represent Inuit “as they were,” before the influence of contact with whalers, traders and missionaries in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century began to impact the Inuit hunting way of life in the region. Flaherty wrote: “I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples...What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well” (qtd. in Barnouw 45).

Ruby argues that Flaherty “thought like an ethnographer” (*Picturing Cultures* 87). He refers to a review of *Nanook of the North* by Bruce Bliven published in the *New York Globe* a few weeks after *Nanook*’s successful Broadway premiere in which Bliven asserted that *Nanook* was “in the first place, a piece of ethnographic research of solid scientific value” (qtd. in Ruby 86).

Ruby cites an additional comment by Flaherty quoted in Bliven's review:

It seems to me that it is possible to record the life of primitive people in such a way as to preserve the scientific accuracy and yet make a picture which has vivid dramatic interest for the average man or woman. Plenty of pictures have been made of the life of savages in various parts of the world, especially the tropics. The difficulty is that such pictures are usually episodic, showing unrelated scenes with little to hold the wandering attention of one who has not a scientific interest in the lives of primitive peoples. In *Nanook of the North*, by taking a central character and portraying his exciting adventures and those of his family, in the effort to wrest a livelihood from the frigid arctic, we secure a dramatic value which is both legitimate and absorbing. (qtd. in Ruby, *Picturing Cultures* 86-87)

In his 2005 book on the diaries kept by Flaherty during his years in the north, Robert Christopher suggests that when he made *Nanook of the North*, "Flaherty was thinking of a marriage of ethnography and drama, with the humanity of a family providing an anchor for the wandering attention of the average viewer" (385). Perhaps more co-habitation than marriage, the ethnography and the drama in *Nanook of the North* are sewn together in an alternating pattern marked out by intertitles. While the theme of survival in *Nanook of the North* is restated in almost every intertitle, it seems as though it were edited into the film. The overall impression is of a family living, building, eating

and hunting—the activities of daily life. The survival story is somewhat more abstract, signified through images of ice fields, snow and wind.

An example of how *Nanook of the North* moves back and forth between ethnography and drama comes early in the film. An intertitle informs us that Nanook is heading into the interior to hunt deer. It reads: “The desert interior, if deer hunting fails, is the country of death—for there is no food. Even moss, upon which deer depend and which the Eskimo use for fuel, grows only in patches here and there.” I would characterize the next two sequences as ethnographic due to their observational quality. First, we see Nanook placing a rectangular stone pot over a fire positioned between two skin tents. The intertitle reads: “This is the way Nanook uses moss for fuel.” In the next scene, two people are covering a kayak frame with sealskin for the journey up river to the interior. The intertitle tells us, “The kyak’s [sic] fragile frame must be covered with sealskins before the journey begins.” The dramatic story communicated in the intertitles and signified through images of ice fields, snow and wind depicts a way of life lived under the constant threat of starvation. In contrast, the observational sequences are quiet and un-dramatic, depicting Nanook and his family going about their daily tasks.

In another observational scene we see Nanook maneuvering between floating blocks of ice in an effort to find a good spot to fish. The ice has begun to break up further out into the bay and has been pushed to shore by the currents, opening a window of opportunity for fishing. Nanook finds a spot and lies on the edge of the ice to hide his shadow. The intertitle reads: “No bait. Instead, a lure of two pieces of ivory, jigging at the end of a seal-hide line.” There is a close up shot of a fish moving under the water near the jig. The scene lasts several minutes, and I find myself enjoying the relative simplicity of

the action. But then we are back to the survival drama, introduced by an intertitle: “The sea is once more free of ice and the salmon gone. For days there is no food. Then one of Nanook’s lookouts comes in with news of walrus on a far off island. Excitement reigns, for walrus in their eyes spells fortune.” A number of daily activities are shown, including an igloo-building sequence, after which we are again reminded of the precariousness of the food supply. We see Nanook dragging a small seal inside the family’s freshly built igloo, followed by an intertitle. “This little seal, until Nanook makes another kill,” it reads, “is all the food they have.” I get the impression that while he may have earned a reputation as a great hunter, Nanook isn’t very good at storing food.

Flaherty tells the story of how he came upon his filmmaking method at the beginning of *Nanook of the North*, which opens with a preface spanning several intertitles. One intertitle tells how Flaherty came to realize that, by building a story around “a single character and make him typify the Eskimos as I had known them so long and so well, I realized that the results would be well worth while.” Another introductory intertitle informs the audience that Nanook met a tragic end. It reads:

Less than two years later I received word that Nanook had ventured into the interior hoping for deer and had starved to death. But our “big aggie” become *Nanook of the North* has gone into most of the odd corners of the world, and more men than there are stones around the shore of Nanook’s home have looked upon Nanook, the kindly, brave, simple Eskimo.

Why not provide this information in an epilogue, thereby allowing the audience to engage in the drama of Nanook's struggle to feed his family, to hope for his success as the hero of the narrative? I suspect that in choosing to provide this information at the start, Flaherty's intent was to add dramatic weight to the central theme of the struggle for survival in a barren land. As the personification of a general type, Nanook's death serves to emphasize a kind of stoic, kindly heroism of primitive man as hunter, subject to the whims of chance in a harsh environment. By telling the audience at the start that Nanook perished, as Nanook and not Allakariallak, Flaherty preserves the illusion that Nanook is the real person. This is all the more convincing because the intertitle refers to an event outside the temporal frame of the film. An unwilling method actor, "Nanook" dies in character, a character in a story that was not his own.

While Flaherty puts so much emphasis on his film's main character, in the end we know very little about him beyond the stereotype. Christopher highlights the difference between the film and the diaries:

Intent on realizing a visualization of the North, which he believes his experience has granted him, Flaherty strives to observe its landscape with an intensity rarely seen before. But the experience of the diary is fully inclusive, encompassing as well the humanity of the landscape. And so we see a figure at odds with our received vision of the happy and energetic cinema Nanook. We meet instead Allakariallak—the man who played the part—a weary, tubercular figure, nodding at his tasks and embarrassed at his own disorientation about place and direction. (380)

Another introductory intertitle in *Nanook of the North* hints at a missed opportunity that reveals something of the power imbalance defining the relationship between Flaherty and Allakariallak. It reads: “At last, in 1920, I thought I had shot enough scenes to make the film and prepared to go home. Poor old Nanook hung around my cabin, talking about films we could make if I would only stay for another year.” I wonder what Allakariallak would have filmed had he been given the chance. What would have interested him? What stories would he have told; what oral traditions would they draw on; how would they have reflected his religious beliefs, his relations with his family, or his sense of belonging to the place that he called home? What kind of film would *Nanook of the North* have been if it were based, instead, on a story told by Allakariallak? Allakariallak no doubt had many to tell, but like Curtis, Flaherty missed this opportunity.

No doubt Flaherty felt a certain sadness, perhaps even a sense of injustice, in imagining the meager prospects for the future of his Eskimo friends. If, as Flaherty claimed, Nanook represents “Inuit”, his death signifies the demise of their way of life, a passing that is softened, at least from the point of view of southerners looking at a culture that is not their own, by the preservation in artifacts, photographs and film footage of its ethnographic contents. Rony argues in reference to *Nanook of the North* and other ethnographic documentary films that despite their sympathetic portrayal of Indigenous characters, they nevertheless “implicitly provide ideological justification for the very colonial and economic conquests that brought filmmakers like Flaherty to the Arctic” (196). Like Curtis, Flaherty was confident in his ability to represent Inuit with scientific accuracy while being a source of entertainment for his audience, although from a

commercial point of view, his film was successful, while Curtis's was not. Flaherty developed his story on the basis of observation of what he saw, what Grierson called in defining documentary as "the creative treatment of reality" (qtd. in Ellis 4). Brian Winston argues, "Flaherty understood the need to make a drama arise from the life being observed... This was very different from imposing a drama from without, as Curtis had done in *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*" (100). But it seems that despite their differences, the drama that did arise from Flaherty's method looked very much like one that he wanted to see. It might have been from his point of view, "the story of the place," but it did not seem to be informed by stories from the place, from the people who had lived there for centuries.

The full title of Flaherty's first film is *Nanook of the North: A Story Of Life and Love In the Actual Arctic*, although in fact, Port Harrison is located in the sub-Arctic on the east coast of Hudson's Bay. The distinction didn't matter because it was all Inuit territory, a place with minimal vegetation where animals were the principle source of food—the land of hunters. There is another inaccuracy in the subtitle, since it really isn't much of a love story—life yes, survival, most definitely, but love? I find it hard to see the love story, which I account for by the fact that it was not really of interest to Flaherty, despite the marketing pitch in the title. Flaherty admitted as much in a 1949 BBC Radio interview. "I don't think you can make a good film of the love affairs of the Eskimo because they never show much feeling in their faces," he asserted, "but you can make a good film of Eskimos spearing a walrus" (qtd. in Ruby, *Picturing Cultures* 86).

Since its release in 1922, debates on *Nanook of the North* and its creator have been ongoing. Christopher notes that Flaherty's attempt at "a marriage of ethnography

and drama,” in *Nanook of the North*, “drew fire on both counts’ (385). But while it was definitely a box office success, Flaherty’s film was criticized early for its ethnographic inaccuracies. Vilhjálmur Stefánsson’s 1928 book *The Standardization of Error* is an early example of this body of work, which foreshadowed the tone of critiques of the film that emerged in the 1970s. According to Sherrill Grace, the book provides “a detailed exposure of the errors and deliberate misrepresentations in *Nanook of the North*” (269). As Christopher explains, “The drama of the film was challenged for the way in which the Nanook-Nyla family was a staged relationship and, on the accuracy front, for the way he arranged the ethnography of the film to give it an earlier, more primitive presence than was warranted by the gun and ammunition culture that he describes in his diaries” (385). Christopher’s principle critique of *Nanook of the North* is that as a documentary film claiming to be a dramatization of reality, it in fact made that reality more difficult to perceive. “The Nanook of the film made this figure of Allakariallak invisible,” writes Christopher, “but he was real nonetheless, and the diary allows us to reflect on what efforts he must have made to realize his vision of himself as the heroic figure whom Flaherty was so desirous of giving the world” (380).

In his 1936 essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the life of Nikolai Leskov,” Walter Benjamin distinguished between two modes of storytelling. On the one hand, there is “the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home” and on the other, “the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place” (85). Benjamin elaborates on what he argues are two distinct but related identities of the storyteller common throughout history: “When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about...and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come



from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions” (84). Both Curtis and Flaherty definitely qualify as “much-traveled” men, and both had much to show for it, but the telling proved rather more difficult. Neither were professional ethnographers, and in this they resembled many of the missionaries and explorers who had used photography and film to collect information about Indigenous peoples during the nineteenth century. Yet while it was an efficient tool for recording the visual appearance of things, places, people, events, the camera produced images in such great quantities that it overwhelmed attempts at storytelling. Benjamin suggests storytelling retains an inherent authority based on the storyteller’s role as a kind of messenger: “The intelligence that came from afar—whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition—possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification” (89).

In his 1932 essay “First Principles of Documentary,” Grierson emphasized that Flaherty’s storytelling achieves credibility by the fact that he spent a considerable amount of time in the place where the film and its narrative is set, a fact that was most accurate in the case of *Nanook of the North*. Grierson wrote: “Flaherty digs himself in for a year, or two maybe. He lives with his people till the story is told ‘out of himself” (qtd. in Barsam, *Nonfiction* 50). This is a compelling argument in favour of *Nanook of the North*’s status as a truthful representation of its subject, one that was the foundation of Grierson’s argument for the special status of documentary film. In taking on the role of the storyteller, a role that he discovered as a means to organize the still and moving images he ‘collected’, Flaherty not only attempted to adopt the figure of the storyteller as a

messenger “from afar,” but through his reconstruction efforts presents his story of Nanook as messages from the past. In a sense, he appropriated both dimensions of storytelling, one reaching across space and the other back in time, the territory of oral history. Extending the principle of storytelling to the second dimension mentioned by Benjamin—the lore of the past—Flaherty co-opted the role of the local storyteller, and purported to be able to show the local traditions.

*The Silent Enemy: An Epic of the American Indian (1930)*

*The Silent Enemy: An Epic of the American Indian (1930)* is a feature-length film that tells a story of an Ojibwa (Anishnabe) tribe threatened by famine. Set in the fifteenth century, the plot turns around a rivalry between the tribe’s best hunter and a medicine man, both of whom want to marry the daughter of the tribe’s leader, Chief Chetoga. Both men strive to gain influence over the elderly leader by finding a source of food that will bring an end to the famine (Carr). Jay Carr characterizes *The Silent Enemy* as “a mix of ethnographic authenticity and creaky melodrama, pervaded by genuflections to the harsh, elemental Canadian wilderness and carried by a force of conviction born of its determination to do justice to its subject.” This force of conviction was primarily that of an explorer and ethnologist named Douglas Burden, who conceived of the project, raised funds to pay for production, wrote the screenplay, and hired a director named H.P. Carver. A wealthy New Yorker and Vanderbilt family heir, Burden’s social circle included filmmakers Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, who a few years earlier had made the commercially successful films *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life*

(1925) and *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927), a documentary film about a poor Thai farmer and his daily struggle for survival in the jungle which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1929.

Inspired by *Chang's* success, in 1928 Burden began working on the story outline for a "natural history film" that would combine "drama and authenticity" (Mitman 41). With financial support from the Museum of Natural History in New York City, where he was a member of the board of trustees, and the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests, Burden and his co-producer William Chanler, a Harvard classmate, travelled to northeastern Ontario and northwestern Quebec in the summer of 1928 to hire a cast and crew and scout locations for shooting. Burden hoped to recruit Ojibwa "whose memories of traditional tribal ways had not been completely erased by modern life" (Mitman 43). With the help of a Catholic missionary, he and Chanler recruited local Ojibwa from villages along Lake Abitibi, Lake Temagami, Lake Temiskaming, and Lake Kippewa.

According to Peter Morris, Burden wanted to make a film that was "both authentic and entertaining," which involved recreating life in the natural environment using tools and equipment "long since relegated to museums" (201). While shooting "on location" at the mouth of the Kippewa River on the Quebec side of Lake Temiskaming, the crew made props and costumes for the film (Mitman 43). Burden brought some original Ojibwa clothing and artefacts from the collection of the Museum of Natural History, although most of the props were made on site, including wigwams, canoes, sleighs, snow shoes and fur clothing (Mitman 35). "To ensure the authenticity of objects," explains historian Gregg Mitman, "Burden relied upon the craft knowledge of elder Ojibwa in the reconstruction of their traditional material culture" (44). Morris notes

that the elders took pains to avoid using materials that would not have been available to their ancestors in pre-colonial times, such as the beads acquired from Hudson's Bay Company traders used at the time to decorate clothing (203).

In contrast to both Curtis, who made up the storyline for his film, and Flaherty, who "found" it on location, Burden based the script on Ojibwa stories recorded in the seventy-two volumes of the *Jesuit Relations* written by missionaries in New France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (41). Mitman sums up the endeavor:

In making *The Silent Enemy*, Burden hoped to produce a film in which dramatic interest remained faithful to scientific truth. The reconstruction of traditional Ojibwa artifacts and clothing, the hiring of native Americans for the cast, the shooting on location in northern Canada during sub-zero winter temperatures, and the scripting of scenes based on historical accounts of Jesuit missionaries and stories told by elder Ojibwa all contributed to what Burden believed to be an authentic and lasting record of the Native Americans' struggle for existence before the arrival of Columbus. (49-50)

*The Silent Enemy* is remarkable in that it does not involve any "encounter" between Europeans and natives, a result of the fact that it is set in the fifteenth century, before European explorers arrived in the region. Yet the intended audience is made clear at the beginning of the film, which is introduced by Chief Chetoga. It is the only part of

the film with sound. Facing the camera, Chief Chauncey Yellow Robe, who plays Chief Chetoga in the film, speaks directly to the audience:

In the beginning the Great Spirit gave us this land. The wild game was ours to hunt. We were happy when game was plentiful. In years of famine, we suffered. Soon we will be gone. Your civilization will have destroyed us. But by your magic, we will live forever. We thank the white men who helped us to make this picture. They came to our forest, they shared our hardships, they listened to our old men around the campfire, who told them the stories our grandmothers told us. This is why this story is real. Look not upon us as actors. We are living our own life today as we lived it yesterday. Everything you see is as it has always been. Our buckskin coats, our birch-bark canoes, our wigwams and our bows and arrows: all were made by our people just as they always have done.

Morris argues that despite the fact that *The Silent Enemy* involved a power struggle between the Baluk and Dagwan and a love story involving Baluk and Neewa, the chief's daughter, "the real drama lies in the people's unending fight for food and survival" (201). He cites Burden's description of the film as "a visual record for the America to come of the America that used to be" (201). A synopsis on the website Classic Fix expresses salvage ethnographic aspects of the film: "Filmed on location in northern Canada and cast with actual Ojibwa tribe members, this stirring motion picture offers a historical

glimpse into the daily trials and tribulations faced by the great Native American peoples at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, capturing their vanishing way of life on celluloid for all time.” The synopsis concludes: “Like *Nanook of the North*, *The Silent Enemy* is one of many films created during the early days of cinema in an effort to preserve an authentic record of a disappearing culture.”

*The Silent Enemy* premiered at the Broadway Criterion Theatre in May 1930.

While it was a critical success, it “disappeared rapidly from movie theatres” (Morris 203-204). According to Mitman, a promotional pamphlet sold on the occasion stated that, “after a few months of scratching his memory he just shed his outer layer of white man’s civilization and became himself again” (46). It is as if the perceived authenticity of the “reconstruction” was taken as proof that its Native American subjects did not have culture. Mitman writes:

Like the animals of the forest, their history was deemed by European Americans to be forever tied to the seasonal cycles and rhythms of nature, not to the changes wrought by civilization and culture. The attraction of this alleged tie to nature explains the popularity of ethnographic exhibits in the country’s leading museums of natural history. It also explains why ethnographic film and natural history film were so closely linked during the first part of the century in the imagination of the movie going public.

(46)

Morris describes *The Silent Enemy* as “a rich, warm, and impressive film, full of evocative imagery, and staged with great sensitivity” that was as good as “the best of Robert Flaherty’s work” (204). Recalling Flaherty’s assertion following the success of *Nanook of the North*, Burden was “steadfast in his belief that authenticity need not be sacrificed in generating audience appeal for nature subjects on the motion picture screen” (35-36).

In a letter to Cooper written during the making of *The Silent Enemy*, Burden wrote: “We are trying our level best to combine true drama with authenticity so that we will have when we are finished a record of lasting value” (Mitman 41). Elaborating further on this task, he continued: “It is this very combination which makes it so difficult. Either one alone would be a cinch by comparison” (Mitman 41). Although it received some good critical reviews, unlike *Nanook of the North*, *The Silent Enemy* was “a theatrical failure” (Morris 204). In contrast, *Ingagi* (1930) filmed that same year by American director William Campbell, supposedly showed an expedition into the Belgian Congo by Sir Hubert Winstead. In reality, the film had been shot at the Selig Zoo in Los Angeles using captive animals and actors wearing blackface (Mitman 51). When this was revealed by an investigation by the watchdog Hays Office soon after its release, RKO cut *Ingagi* from all its houses, ending a very short and profitable commercial run. While *Ingagi*’s commercial success would inspire Merian Cooper’s 1933 film *King Kong*, it did not really threaten Burden’s project because it was so sensational and quite obviously a fake.

More irksome for Burden was the commercial success of *Africa Speaks!* (1930), only a few months before the premiere of *The Silent Enemy*. Directed by Walter Futter,

the film followed the progress of the 1928 Colorado Africa Expedition in Uganda led by Paul Hoeffler, a Denver photographer and journalist. A scene involving a lion attacking a human being was also staged at the Selig Zoo (Doherty 239). According to Morris, for Burden and his colleagues on the board of the American Museum of Natural History, *Africa Speaks!* was “much more dangerous than *Ingagi* because the fake [was] so much better done” (Mitman 53). Burden wrote a letter to Arthur James of the *Exhibitors Daily Review* in which he claimed that the film was “a fundamental lie” that should not be tolerated by the scientific community. “I don’t believe the morals of the world are injured by the use of artifice to arrive at a correct impression,” James replied. “Certainly the public must have its drama or it remains at home. The scientist is in a different position. He wants to exact facts and finds his drama in the depiction of many things which would be boring as hell to the layman” (qtd. in Mitman 54).

While *The Silent Enemy* was not a box office success, a shortened version of the film was shown regularly in schools and museums for educational purposes for many years after its theatrical release, a history that also characterizes *Nanook of the North*’s trajectory (Morris 204). While Burden “searched for a niche for natural history film outside the commercial mass-production system of Hollywood,” the market for non-commercial films in the United States had to wait until the extensive use of film for public information and propaganda purposes laid the groundwork for post war development of the market for educational documentary films (Mitman 54- 55).



### *The Wedding of Palo* (1934)

In the early 1930s, the German director Friedrich Dalsheim began working on a feature-length silent film entitled *The Wedding of Palo* with the famous Danish-Greenlandic explorer and ethnographer Knud Rasmussen. Rasmussen wrote the screenplay and assisted during the location shooting in the Strait of Angmassalik in Greenland, although he died of pneumonia before the film's theatrical release in 1933. Having spent more than two decades exploring the Arctic on voyages spanning from Greenland to Alaska, Rasmussen's involvement gave the film an aura of scientific authenticity. "Better than any other document on film," wrote one reviewer at the time, *The Wedding of Palo*, "shows all aspects of the lives of the Inuit Greenlanders prior to the arrival of Christianity" (Kiefer 210).<sup>14</sup>

In 1974, the American anthropologist Thomas Kiefer penned a short review of *The Wedding of Palo* in the journal *American Anthropologist*. Kiefer provides the following synopsis of the plot:

Shot among the Angmagssalik Eskimo of Greenland, it is the story of the rivalry of Palo (with white parka) and Samo (with black parka) for the affections of an Eskimo girl. Palo eventually wins after an initial courtship, a fight with Samo during a fish-catch, a song duel, an abduction, and a chase sequence (in kayaks) in which Samo attempts to kill Palo but eventually comes to a bad end himself. (209)

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<sup>14</sup> Only a short clip is available for viewing online. The film is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York City.

After providing this synopsis, Kiefer writes: “Forget the plot. Its only value is to provide some camp appeal which may help to hold undergraduate interest, and as a springboard for discussion of the problems of imposing our narrative structure on Eskimo culture” (209). For Kiefer, “The real value of the film for teaching (and research as well, for few scenes could possibly be shot today) lies in the way in which sequences taken singly convey the style and “feel” of Eskimo culture” (209). Kiefer argues that in their effort to make a commercially successful feature-length film, Dalsheim and Rasmussen resorted to “pandering to reach the widest possible audience” (209). The story is the culprit here, not the ethnography, which Kiefer deems on the whole to be accurate.

Appearing in the pages of *American Anthropologist*, a journal representing the American anthropological establishment, Kiefer’s review expresses an attitude to ethnographic films made by non-professionals, explorers and the like, one that has been in circulation in the anthropological profession since the earliest twentieth century attempts at narrative ethnographic cinema. If the attention of anthropology undergraduates, and by extension the vast majority of the public, must be held by a story, this must necessarily be an instance of pandering—a word with a decidedly negative connotation. Heider refers to *The Wedding of Palo* in the introductory chapter of *The Ethnographic Film*. He reports that, “Palo’s story seems at first suspiciously created by Hollywood but in fact appears to be based on a traditional Eskimo love story” (*Ethnographic Film*, 27). Heider’s comment anticipates Kiefer’s sentiment regarding the entertainment value of cinema, suggesting a general suspicion of storytelling in the context of ethnographic cinema.

If the pursuit of salvage ethnography as a prelude to the anticipated disappearance of Indigenous cultures appeals to a collector's mindset, this is not the case for the storyteller. Storytelling is designed with the future in mind; it is valuable because while it assumes change and movement, it also assumes continuation, survival, and growth. The ethnographic sensibility that assumes disappearance is not predisposed to see the value of storytelling. Even when it is an effective means of holding the attention of the audience, it is adopted half-heartedly, and largely without respecting the storytelling traditions of the cultures it claims to represent and preserve. The story is also undermined by the critical reception of the films, where the ethnography is emphasized as the source of value over the story, as demonstrated by Heider's and Kiefer's comments regarding the surprisingly entertaining (to them) authentic Inuit love story in *The Wedding of Palo*. Kiefer's comment cited earlier indicates the context in which the film would be seen in an undergraduate anthropology course. Indeed, educational settings were one of the primary means by which ethnographic films were shown in the post war period, in contrast to the theatre showings of films discussed in this chapter.

### Chapter 3 – Visual Anthropology and Cultural Memory

In the late 1960s, the Bulgarian born anthropologist Asen Balikci made a series of ethnographic films that reconstructed the traditional life of the Netsilik Inuit.

Anthropologist Karl Heider described the *Netsilik Series* as “The most ambitious film reconstruction project ever mounted.” Unlike the films discussed in the previous chapter, Balikci’s *Netsilik Eskimo*<sup>15</sup> film series was not intended for theatrical release, but was made specifically as part of a primary school social science curriculum (*Ethnographic Film*, 45). In making the *Netsilik Series*, Balikci was motivated to both create a record of a traditional Inuit culture in the medium of film and to educate audiences about the contribution of anthropology to understanding human societies. While there is a narrative structure underlying the series, roughly the seasonal movement of a family living on the land, the Netsilik participants in the film do not play defined characters in a story; rather, they reenact—and experience—aspects of the life their ancestors lived early in the twentieth century.

From the *Netsilik Series* I move into a discussion of photography and film as tools used by anthropologists engaged in salvage ethnography. I present an example from research by Elizabeth Edwards on the photographic survey movement of late nineteenth century Britain, which, in contrast to the approach to salvage that assumes cultural disappearance, sought to preserve cultural memory for future generations.

I conclude the chapter with the work of the Inuit photographer Peter Pitseolak, whose photographic output spanned several decades from the 1940s to the 1960s.

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<sup>15</sup> I will refer to the series from this point simply as the *Netsilik Series*.

While the *Netsilik Series* was specifically intended for non-Inuit school children, Pitseolak's photographic efforts were intended first and foremost to benefit members of his family and community, and Inuit people as a whole. As Amy Adams writes in an article on Pitseolak published in a 2000 edition of *Inuit Art Quarterly*, "Pitseolak assembled a body of work that chronicled the changes he had witnessed as his own children grew up. For Pitseolak, photography was a powerful means by which he could preserve the old ways" (13).

### *The Netsilik Series (1967-1970)*

In 1959, Balikci travelled to the community of Pelly Bay—renamed Kugaaruk in 1999—located just off the Gulf of Boothia in the Kitikmeot region of Nunavut, to carry out an ethnographic study of the Netsilik Inuit. Three years later, Balikci was awarded a grant to shoot a series of documentary films about the Netsilik Inuit, also known as the *Arviligjuarmiut*, of Pelly Bay. Shot on sixteen-millimeter colour film during the summers of 1963 and 1964 and in the late winter of 1965, the films were directed by Quentin Brown, with Balikci providing ethnographic direction with the assistance of the Canadian anthropologist Guy Mary-Rousselière. All the films can be viewed in full online on the National Film Board website. In "Reconstructing Cultures on Film," a paper published in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* in 1975, Balikci discussed the project and the ideas and methods that informed the creation of the Netsilik films. He notes that after 1940, the year a permanent mission and trading post were established in the area, the Netsilik "converted to Christianity, abandoned shamanism practices and ritual observances, and

gradually the families settled more or less permanently around the mission” (“Reconstructing” 186). He describes the situation at the moment when he arrived in Pelly Bay to do his fieldwork in the late 1950s:

At the time the band numbered about a hundred individuals and had gone through several acculturative stages. The introduction of the rifle in the area had produced profound changes in the settlement pattern, subsistence techniques and economic organization; it was the single most important acculturative factor. (“Reconstructing” 185)

Balikci emphasized that “despite strong acculturative pressures,” the Netsilik “remember vividly their traditional past” (“Reconstructing” 182). Later he clarifies this statement, noting that the middle aged and older Netsilik who participated in the project “remembered vividly the old ways and were very eager and proud to communicate their knowledge of local traditions to the anthropologist” (“Reconstructing” 186). Balikci hired a local hunter named Itimangnerk to be the “ethnographic consultant” for the project. Itimangnerk was responsible for recruiting the cast and for providing instruction to younger participants concerning the various traditional practices they would carry out in the film. The project provided an occasion for the older participants to share their knowledge about the traditional Netsilik way of life with younger Netsilik. This is achieved by way of the memory and enactment of the Inuit participants, what Margaret Mead referred to as Balikci’s “participatory reconstruction” approach (7). As Balikci explains, Itimangnerk’s role was “to reconstruct the traditional ways, select camp sites

and hunt the game he wished to hunt. The anthropologist's role was a subordinate one, namely to help with logistics and act as an intermediary between the Eskimo community and the cameraman" ("Reconstructing" 187).

Balikci recalls telling Itimangnerk that "All the new artifacts such as rifles, teapots, cigarettes, frying pans and canvas tents were to be kept in hiding when shooting or replaced" ("Reconstructing" 187). Balikci's insistence on keeping any signs of the present out of view is significant. He saw the process of cinematic reconstruction as a relatively simple effort that involved "cleaning up the camp" by removing objects that stood as witnesses to the colonial presence. Yet given that storytelling was not the purpose of the films, and that there was therefore no need to maintain the fictional space of the past within the frame, why insist on excluding signs of the present?

In the opening scene of *At the Winter Sea-Ice Camp* (1967-1968), a family is getting ready to set out on a *qamutik*, a traditional Inuit sled made of driftwood, antlers and bone. The colors of clothing, tools and other objects are striking against the white snow-covered background. The father is talking in Inuktitut and laughing as he works; he has an infectious laugh, which makes me especially curious to know what he is talking about. The mother and child are also talking. In the absence of subtitles, I pay close attention to body language, hand gestures and facial expressions, as though I were a spectator of a silent film. The family sets off toward the horizon, their dog team in the lead; in the next shot we see them at a distance, tiny spots of colour moving across a snow covered expanse of sea ice.

Several of the most memorable sequences in the series were shot by the American cinematographer Robert Young. Young was interviewed by Charles Laird for his 2004

documentary film about the making of the *Netsilik Series* entitled *Through These Eyes*.

Young explained,

I try to put the camera where I think the story is. I try to make it very experiential. I try to put ultimately the children in the place where they would see and experience what was going on around them. And they would be like little anthropologists. I was trying to take, by getting to understand what was going on inside the society, the ordinary day-to day things which I think contain so much meaning—and after all that’s what’s in front of me, that’s what I have to film. But how do you film the things that are happening that are so disparate and put them together in a film so that it really becomes alive?...You have to put them in some kind of a context, so that you yourself can make these kinds of discoveries. For example when Itimangnerk is hunting...the way he does everything is to help inform you. So that’s a very experiential way of understanding something.

The whole time Young is explaining his technique we see the scene of Itimangnerk setting up for the seal hunt through the snow. It is one of the most famous scenes in the *Netsilik Series*: the Inuit hunter, now no longer with the harpoon high overhead, but crouched and whispering to himself. Then Itimangnerk jabs the harpoon through the ice and pulls it up, dramatically leaving red blood across the snow. But it is not the drama that’s significant here, it’s the silent observational calm communicated by the pace of the



cinematography and Itimangnerk's methodical movements. Young's comments suggest that the observational sequences, while not adding specific plot-points to a story, nonetheless contribute to the audience's understanding of the narrative. It was a cinematography that allowed the audience to take time to observe and try to understand the purpose of an activity.

The *Netsilik Series* project was funded by several large organizations in the United States in association with the National Film Board of Canada, one of several planned for the "Man, a course of study" program, or MACOS as it was known. The MACOS program was the brainchild of American cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner. It was designed to provide elementary students in the United States with an audio-visual experience with the goal of developing "an anthropological vision of man, his main attributes and his place in nature and society" (Balicki, "Reconstructing" 190). While other series had been planned that were to represent classic nomadic cultures in Iraq, Mexico, New Guinea and Kenya, the *Netsilik Series* was the only one to be completed (Heider, *Ethnographic Film*, 45-46). In 1975, the MACOS program was discontinued after a campaign spearheaded by a Republican congressman from Phoenix, Arizona named John Conan. Despite its removal from school curricula in the United States, the series became one of the most widely distributed ethnographic films ever made. At its peak in 1972, four hundred thousand elementary school students had seen the *Netsilik Series*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In his 2004 review of the film, Jay Ruby argues that the MACOS films are "an important part of the history of visual anthropology and have not been subjected to the scholarly attention they deserve" ("Anthropology" 686). Ruby reported that he was only able to uncover one publication on the MACOS program, a 1991 book entitled *Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era*, by the curriculum developer Peter

Peter Dow, a curriculum developer and the administrator of the MACOS program, comments in Laird's documentary, which revisited the project and the controversy surrounding it, that the scientific credibility of the *Netsilik Series* rested on the fact that as the leader of the project, Balikci "represented probably one of the most knowledgeable people in the world about the nature of Inuit society." His role also involved consulting with historical archives, in particular Knud Rasmussen's expedition journals, which included a significant body of photographic material.

Balikci acknowledges his debt to Flaherty, noting specifically his decision to organize his film around the life of a principle actor and his family ("Reconstructing" 187). He differentiates his approach from Flaherty's with regard to decision-making authority, asserting that while Flaherty depended on his Inuit actors and especially Alakariallak, who played the role of Nanook, to be "interpreters" of their traditional culture for the film, "One should not forget however that it is Flaherty who defines the Eskimo character of Nanook" ("Reconstructing" 184). Yet despite Balikci's assertion that it was Itimangnerk who "directed the ethnographic content of the film," he acknowledges that the process of filming was "a highly selective and in a sense arbitrary process, the successful outcome of which depended mostly on the anthropologist's knowledge and understanding of Eskimo traditional ways" (187-188). Which is to say that while Itimangnerk and the other Inuit participant "actors" might have had input, they did not have the final word—that was the prerogative of the professional anthropologist with access to both academic knowledge and historical sources.

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Dow, who was the administrator of the program ("Anthropology" 686).

As Dow explains in Laird's documentary, the idea was to move beyond the dominant textbook-based learning of the time in order to "engage kids more directly in the process of knowledge generation." Dow noted that the films were innovative in that they did not provide voiceover narration to instruct viewers how to interpret what they were seeing, as was the case for most educational filmmaking during this period. He recalled:

There was nothing that I can think of in educational filmmaking that was at all like this that preceded it. ...The conventional educational film was sort of thirty minutes long with an authoritative commentary on it. So that you knew you were being told all the time what you were seeing and the significance of what you were seeing. The idea of taking that prop away and getting the viewer to figure it out for themselves was entirely new. (*Through These Eyes*)

Ann Fienup-Riordan recalls that some anthropologists criticized the *Netsilik Series* films for their very realist qualities, observing that, "The colour film had the appearance of reality, yet for all practical purpose they were no less a play than Flaherty's *Nanook*" (153). She argues that, "Although such a reconstruction certainly has precedent in films about Eskimos and is not reprehensible in itself, in ethnographic film it is essential that the audience be made aware of how this recreation is accomplished" (153).

According to Fienup-Riordan:

Mostly because of its realistic appearance, the Netsilik series tended to reinforce the general public's comprehension of Eskimos as prehistoric, preoccupied with adaptation to a harsh environment. In fact, during the 1960s the Netsilik were involved in a complex encounter with political and social forces beyond their control. Yet the films show isolated Eskimo families, still happy, still surviving in snow houses, still untouched by civilization. Ironically, the illusion of reality created by the detailed ethnographic reconstruction added weight to this vision of the pure primitive. (153)

To be fair, Balikci was aware of the pitfalls of ethnographic reconstruction. In fact, he stressed that the film reconstruction "acquires full significance only when compared with the acculturated setting," arguing that the contrast between the traditional past and acculturated present is the means by which social change is made visible in the film, "a revelation that is necessarily controlled in the context of a well organized social science curriculum" ("Reconstructing" 182). "In the 1950s," Balikci explained, "the Pelly Bay Inuit lived in igloos, drove dog teams, preferred caribou leather for clothing and relied exclusively on local food. Yet they regularly attended mass, drank tea and smoked pipes" ("Reconstructing" 186). Yet the *Nesilik Series* does not show gradual historical processes in the films, which would necessarily have been the case even with the relatively rapid degree of social change that occurred in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Concluding his essay in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, Balikci argued that, “Films dealing with cultural reconstruction have greatest value, in my opinion, when they are accompanied by secondary productions depicting the modern, acculturated ways of the same actors” (“Reconstructing” 189). In the early 1970s, a few years after filming the *Netsilik Series*, Balikci had an opportunity to be involved in such a project when he returned to help the NFB make *The Netsilik Inuit Today* (1972), a film about the new settled Christian community in which Itimangnerk and his family are featured living in a three-bedroom frame house. The film is remarkable for its use of sound indices—a ticking clock, a television humming in the background, church bells—to bring a sense of anxiety that emphasizes a very abrupt change from a nomadic existence to life in settled communities. Comparing the *Netsilik Series* films to the *Netsilik Inuit Today* (1972), one senses that Balikci wanted to emphasize the before and after to such a degree that it felt like a shock. For Balikci, “The contrast between old ways and new ways is dramatic,” such that, “no audience can remain indifferent” (“Reconstructing” 189). Yet as Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten point out in their recent book on Inuit shamanism:

The problem was not that [Inuit] were going to live in permanent settlements—they were already used to that—but that they had lost control over their rhythm of life, which ensured a healthy balance between life out on the land and life in a camp or settlement, and were being forced to adopt the Quallunaat ideology and way of life. (32-33)

Balikci made the distinction between the anthropological practice of reconstructing culture on film and the reconstructive work of the history film, which was initiated by D.W. Griffiths with films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916). For Balikci, “in feature presentations the reconstruction effort centers on a particular historical event along a given story line” (“Reconstructing” 181). In contrast, for cultural reconstruction in the context of visual anthropology, “The general aim is to partially reconstruct sequences of traditional behaviour as part of the routinized social process” (“Reconstructing” 181).

Describing the intent of cultural reconstruction in the context of visual anthropology, Balikci stressed that, “No attempt is made to portray the extraordinary or the unique. There are no explicit story lines, rigid scenarios, professional actors or stage rehearsals” (“Reconstructing” 181). “With this in mind we ask, why reconstruct at all and to what purpose?” (181). For Balikci, “The answer is cultural preservation of indigenous cultures that have been profoundly influenced by the advance of Western, culture, science and technology” (“Reconstructing” 181). Balikci noted that, “In recent years with rapid advances in Western science, industrial technology and communications the process of cultural leveling has speeded up tremendously, pointing in the direction of a world culture” (“Reconstructing” 181). In response, “The loss of original content among indigenous cultures has assumed dramatic proportions. The visual anthropologist who is reconstructing cultures tries in a sense to reverse the acculturative process and salvage elements of traditional behavior for posterity” (“Reconstructing” 181). The intent is pedagogical: “The old pattern is reconstructed and filmed for the specific purpose of providing instructional materials for classroom use” (“Reconstructing” 182). It is useful

to pause for a moment to consider Balikci's words. They imply that using a "rigid scenario," which in the context of film would be like an outline of a script, would distort or interrupt the work of reconstructing culture on film. Storytelling almost seems to be a liability in this context.

Fienup-Riordan notes that the *Netsilik Series* had "the twin goals of introducing students to anthropology and developing in them a concern for the human condition" (151). According to Fienup-Riordan, the films were designed to encourage viewers to observe an Inuit family through long interrupted sequences that "heightened the viewer's interest in specific activities," while "at the same time empathizing with them" (152). Fienup-Riordan writes that "like Flaherty, for whom a primary goal was to make Nanook and his kin comprehensible as humans, the pedagogical goal of the Netsilik series is to make strange and exotic Eskimos appear close and familiar and, thus, comprehensible" (151). Yet perhaps it would have made Inuit much more familiar and comprehensible if it were in the context of a story, where the audience can identify with specific characters as though they were part of the story themselves. In this way, through identification, the "Other" disappears.

In a postscript he wrote in 1994 included in the second edition of *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1995), Balikci said that the high Nielson rating the Netsilik films received, including an Emmy award for *Fight For Life*, the success of a two-hour BBC version, and the National Film Board of Canada series for children entitled *Tuktu* "led to over 150 television bookings worldwide" ("Reconstructing" 190). "It should be noted," Balikci added, "that the television success came entirely unexpectedly. Both in the field and in the editing room our aim had been the production of reliable educational materials

of the elementary classroom. Successful reconstruction aiming at the portrayal of traditional “classic” Eskimo culture partially explains the much wider diffusion” (“Reconstructing” 190). It is on one of these occasions during the 1970s, possibly in the classroom or on a school or family outing to the Museum of Man in my hometown of Ottawa, that I must have seen the *Netsilik Series*.<sup>17</sup> The fact that the films depict “sequences of traditional behaviour as part of the routinized social process,” means that they can be viewed out of order. This would not be the case if they recounted, as Balikci said, “a particular historical event along a given story line” (“Reconstructing” 181).

## Visual Anthropology

“The science of anthropology owes not little to the art of photography.” So wrote the prominent British anthropologist E.B. Taylor in 1876 (184). As Alison Griffiths explains, “photography was, at least for a while, the darling child of the fledgling discipline, hailed in both British and American anthropological circles as the *sin qua non* of advanced scientific practice” (87). Yet photography’s favoured status within anthropology was not to last. One of the reasons photography had been useful during the nineteenth century was the fact that for the most part, ethnological “data” was gathered by non-professionals, missionaries, explorers and other amateurs in the field whose presence “on location” for other reasons presented them with an opportunity to gather

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<sup>17</sup> Until 1989, the Museum of Man in Ottawa housed both natural history and anthropological exhibits, the latter featuring cultural artifacts from First Nations, Inuit and Métis cultures across Canada. Today the collections are divided between the Museum of Nature, which is housed in the same Ottawa building, and the Museum of Civilization, which is located across the river in Gatineau, Quebec, a move that signified the separation of anthropology from its historical ties to natural history.



ethnographic material, often using photography as a tool of collection. This material was then compiled and analyzed by professional anthropologists based in Paris, London, New York and other major cities where museums and universities were located (Clifford, *Predicament* 26). As James Clifford explains, by the 1920s anthropological theory and practice came to be dominated by the “fieldworker-theorist,” who “replaced the older partition between “the man on the spot” (in James Frazer’s words) and the sociologist or anthropologist in the metropole” (*Predicament* 26).

As the new methods of ethnographic fieldwork advanced by Bronislaw Malinowski and others took hold, Anna Grimshaw explains, “explicitly visual projects built around teamwork...were defined as archaic and largely dismissed as relics of an earlier nineteenth-century project” (4). According to Griffiths, “The elevated status of the anthropological monograph, which aimed to convey information not available through the mere examination of visual evidence, marginalized photography and film within ethnography, further discouraging anthropologists from adding mechanical recording to their arsenal of fieldwork techniques” (xxv). Griffiths argues further that, “Despite the eulogistic praise heaped upon photography from such notables as Edward B. Tylor, debate ensued about what kinds of photography were better suited to anthropological investigation and the attendant risks of photography’s too close an association with popular culture” (88). The arrival of cinema in the 1890s only served to emphasize this risk.

Reasserting the place of visual technologies sidelined in the early decades of the century, Grimshaw notes that what became known as visual anthropology emerged in the 1970s as part of a process that saw anthropology split into sub-disciplines in the period

after the Second World War (1). The success of the *Netsilik Series* was an important chapter in this process. This was marked by the publication in 1974 of a selection of papers presented two years earlier at the International Conference of Visual Anthropology, which was held in Chicago in 1973 in tandem with the Ninth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Science. According to Grimshaw, “The publication of *Principles of Visual Anthropology* was an important moment in the consolidation of visual anthropology as a distinctive field with its own intellectual concerns and techniques” (15). In her introduction to the collection, Margaret Mead lamented her profession’s insistence on seeing itself as a “discipline of words” (3). Using the terminology of salvage ethnography, Mead argued that there “have never been enough workers to collect the remnants of these worlds” (3). She argued that anthropology’s resistance to using photography and especially film continues, “while the behavior that film could have caught and preserved for centuries (preserved for the joy of the descendants of those who dance a ritual for the last time and for the illumination of future generations of humans scientists) disappears—disappears in front of everyone’s eyes” (4-5).

While using the problematic language of disappearing cultures, Mead’s use of the phrase “dance a ritual for the last time” is particularly notable here. Later in the chapter she seems to contradict this assumption of disappearance, imagining a future for film as a means for Indigenous people to recuperate and restore their cultural patrimony themselves. For Mead, film was ideally suited to this task. “We must, I believe, clearly and unequivocally recognize that because these are disappearing types of behaviour,” she argued, “we need to preserve them in forms that not only will permit the descendants to

repossess their cultural heritage (and indeed, will permit present generations to incorporate it into their emerging styles), but will also give our understanding of human history and human potentialities a reliable, reproducible, re-analyzable corpus” (8).

In a paper discussing her research on a number of photographic projects active in late nineteenth century Britain known collectively as the photographic survey movement, Elizabeth Edwards differentiates the anthropological concept and practice of salvage as a response to the perceived inevitability of cultural disappearance closely associated with anthropology’s historical interest in Indigenous peoples, from an understanding of salvage as a means to preserve elements of one’s own culture for the benefit of present and future generations (“Salvaging” 67). Edwards cites British anthropologist Christopher Pinney’s related distinction in connection to the disciplinary practices of late nineteenth century British anthropology. According to Edwards, Pinney argues that on the one hand, salvage is conceived in a way that “assumes a continuing social vitality, yet one that must, driven by a curatorial desire for preservation, be recorded for the future,” while on the other hand, salvage “assumes a fragility and ultimate disappearance and is associated with urgency and capture” (“Salvaging” 76).

Taking advantage of technological innovations that made photography increasingly accessible in the 1880s and 1890s, photographic surveys were carried out for the most part by amateur photographers, many of whom were members of local photographic societies and other groups with “broad anthropological and folkloric interests” (“Salvaging” 71). As Edwards explains, photographic surveys used “aimed to utilize the inscriptive and evidential qualities of photography as part of a “salvage ethnography” to record the antiquities, ancient buildings, and...the folk customs of

Britain before they disappeared” (“Salvaging” 67). Edwards argues that the photographic survey movement was “part of an endeavour to provide informational stability in a rapidly changing world” (“Salvaging” 68). To those involved, she explains, photography not only provided “evidential certainty” in relation to the past, but also, “a way in which the consciousness of an historical and cultural past could be revealed, reified, consolidated and projected into the future” (“Salvaging” 70). For Edwards, the photographic survey movement was significant for the fact that it “allowed amateurs to articulate their own vision of the historical environment and its significance” (“Salvaging” 84). Edwards argues that despite the rapid pace of change in late nineteenth century Britain, “The British...might not have been perceived as “dying out,” but memory of what connected them to their past certainly was” (“Salvaging” 70). As one might imagine, the prediction of disappearance is something rather more likely to be applied to a culture other than one’s own.

### Peter Pitseolak: Photographer of Inuit Cultural Memory

In his 1989 essay on the development of Arctic photography since its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, the American anthropologist Richard Condon commented that in the context of a museum exhibit, historical ethnographic photographs “can be very effective in communicating the functional uses of actual artifacts on display, enabling those artifacts to attain a greater degree of educational usefulness” (84). Extending this to a university context, he maintained that “anyone who has taught an introductory anthropology course can appreciate the value of still photographs and ethnographic film

to get certain points across which simply cannot be communicated by any other means” (84). Harkening back to an earlier era of anthropological research but in much different circumstances and conceptions of Indigenous peoples, Condon noted that it was in the 1970s and especially the 1980s that social scientists began to “realize the potential of photography as an actual research device to aid in the collection of genealogies and oral histories” (84). Ethnographic films also came to be seen in this way, part of a growing awareness among anthropologists working with Indigenous people around the world that their work must be relevant to the people they study.

Richard Condon suggested that “northern photography has matured not only as a technique for preserving the present as a permanent documentary image but as a valuable tool for learning more about the unique history of northern peoples from the people themselves” (84). An example of this, Condon suggests, is the work of the Inuit photographer and artist Peter Pitseolak. After Pitseolak’s death in 1975, Canadian author Dorothy Eber published *People from Our Side: A Life Story with Photographs and Oral Biography*. The book includes a selection of photographs by Pitseolak and a text that reproduces his diary, originally written in Inuktitut syllabics that Pitseolak learned from missionaries as a boy. Pitseolak’s photographs and diary are supplemented with interviews Eber carried out with Pitseolak before his death in 1973.

In 1980, John Houston acquired a collection of over fifteen hundred of Pitseolak’s photographs and gave them to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the photographs in the collection are portraits and group shots of members of Pitseolak’s family and community, although there are several photographs of

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<sup>18</sup> The collection can be viewed in full online the by way of the museum’s digital archive.

Southerners. Sometimes the individuals in the photograph are dressed in traditional sealskin clothing, other times they wear Southern made clothes. Many of the photographs are taken indoors and include backgrounds filled with objects, including cans of tea, clocks, guitars and other Southern trade goods. Until the 1970s, Pitseolak's photographs were only occasionally seen by people outside his community, although since his death, there have been several exhibitions of his work. Eber's second book *Peter Pitseolak (1902-1973) Inuit Historian of Seekooseelak: Photographs and Drawings from Cape Dorset, Baffin Island*, was published in 1980 in tandem with an exhibition of Pitseolak's photography at the McCord Museum in Montreal and at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa. Another exhibition toured Arctic communities in a small plane. The increasing exposure of images reflects the increasing visibility of media produced by Inuit and other Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world since the 1970s and 1980s.

Pitseolak began taking photographs in the early 1940s with a Kodak box camera given to him by his nephews Pauta Saila and Solomonie Pootoogook, who acquired it from a Catholic missionary (Adams 12-13). At that time, Pitseolak was employed by the local Hudson's Bay traders at Cape Dorset (now called Kimmirut), but in 1946, Pitseolak moved with his family and several others to a camp near Keatuk, a trading post located in a region known as Seekooseelak a few miles from Cape Dorset. In this period, "the Inuit camp system (certainly modified by the activity of the traders since the days of his childhood) was still intact" (Eber, "Peter Pitseolak" 16) although it had gone through significant changes since the first trading posts were established at Lake Harbour (now called Kimmirut) and Cape Dorset (now called Kinngait) in 1913 and 1914 when Pitseolak was still a boy (Adams 12).

At Keatuk, Pitseolak “began to recreate for the camera the traditional ways as he remembered them” with the help of his wife Aggeok (Eber, “Peter Pitseolak” 19). Eber notes that “Pitseolak seems to have made a special point of photographing his models in traditional skin clothing, Eleeshusee, his older sister, remembered that because the skin clothing was disappearing many people borrowed hers to dress up for the camera” (“Peter Pitseolak” 19). Notably, Pitseolak’s photographs include backgrounds in which trade products are visible (Eber 19). For example, in a 1944 photograph entitled “Pulling a square flipper from the seal hole,” Pitseolak and members of his family are shown pulling a seal up through a hole in the ice. Adams writes:

The dichotomy between traditional and modern culture is subtly present in the image: the teamwork of the seal hunt and the traditional clothing worn by Pitseolak’s family is juxtaposed with the cigarettes on the lips of Pitseolak and his nephew Pingwaartok (far left), and a rifle, visible at the lower right, lying next to a harpoon or spear. Although they could easily have been removed from the scene, these distinctly southern elements have been allowed to remain. The image thus speaks of much more than “old ways”. (Adams 15)

This and other examples demonstrate that Pitseolak’s choice to photograph his subjects in traditional clothing was not motivated by a desire to create an illusion of the past, but as a tool of cultural memory. There was no need to “clean up the camp” as Balikci had done. Pitseolak’s documentary purpose meant that his photographs were “filled with visual

information” (Adams 13). “To him,” Adams writes, “amassing a detailed record of the Inuit way of life during his lifetime, a time capsule containing as much information as possible about his culture, was of vital importance. Armed with such information, his grandchildren, though destined to live through the difficult times to come, would be able to endure and even prosper, steadied by an awareness of their heritage” (16). Eber reported that “young Inuit who look at Pitseolak’s pictures usually single out the photographs set up “to show how for the future” as their favourites” (“Peter Pitseolak” 20).

At Keatuk Pitseolak contracted tuberculosis, and by 1954 he had to be evacuated to a sanatorium. He was able to return home in 1957 and took up photography again. Eber writes that in this period, “Pitseolak began to “set up” shots for his camera; the purpose...was to “show how for the future” (Eber, “Peter Pitseolak” 19). In this period Pitseolak sometimes used photographs as a template for prints, paintings and drawings (23). In this context, Pitseolak’s interest in cultural reconstruction was combined with a strong scene-making impulse. In a series of photographs he later used as a template for some watercolour paintings, Pitseolak’s family members act out the story of Taktillitak. According to Eber, the story was well known in the Cape Dorset area. Eber notes that Pitseolak’s sister Eleeshushee told her that Taktillitak was not a legendary figure but a real man whose elderly daughters were still alive when she was young (Eber, “Peter Pitseolak” 19).

Eber provides a brief outline of the Taktillitak story:



While hunting for seabirds, Taktillitak was carried away by the sea to a very small island where he ran out of food. He built his own grave and lay down to die, but after dreaming of seals he got up and killed a seal with a club. He made a sealskin float, paddled to shore and walked to camp where his friends were so happy to see him, they burst into tears.

Photographs, which include an old-style Inuit grave and the weeping friends, recount the whole story. (“Peter Pitseolak” 19-20)

Looking at the photograph of the gravesite with an ethnographic eye, I might also think about Inuit burial practices and how they reflect the traditional Inuit understandings of death and the afterlife. Yet I also see a key point in the story of Taktillitak: his decision to accept his death, and his eventual return home to safety. It is the imagined story around the gravesite that makes it so compelling. As I mentioned earlier, Eber reports that “reenactment” photographs were popular among young Inuit. I can see why: the story dramatizes the image, allowing the viewer to enter into the imaginary space of the story. In contrast to Balikci’s concern to avoid the anecdotal, the imaginative space created is thus specific and narrative, while also culturally informative. The Taktillitak story and Pitseolak’s effort to use photography to illustrate or tell it, expresses his interest in storytelling and local oral history, a strong element of Inuit oral tradition.

As its fur trading operations expanded across the north in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Hudson’s Bay Company was eager to project a positive image of

its northern activities. As part of this effort, the company began publishing a magazine in 1920 entitled *The Beaver: A Journal of Progress* in which photography from the north figured prominently.<sup>19</sup> In a study of the magazine's content from 1920 to the end of the Second World War, Geller finds, not surprisingly, an overall positive picture of the company's activities in the North as benefiting both northern Native inhabitants as well as southern investors and the country in general (168). Standing out from the mostly stereotypical depictions of Inuit he finds in the magazine, images produced for the most part by southerners, Geller discusses a two page spread showing a series of photographs by "Pitsulak...an Eskimo who trades at Cape Dorset" (184). The photographer was Peter Pitseolak. Geller writes: "These photographs, and the larger body of work that Peter Pitseolak generated over three decades as a chronicler of his own life and those of the families of *Seekooseelak*, question the meanings attached to photographs taken by those passing through an unfamiliar culture and landscape" (184).

While Flaherty is often credited for being the founder of the documentary genre, Adams suggests that Pitseolak's photographs are more truly described as "realistic and documentary" (Adams 19). Eber describes Pitseolak in similar terms: "A realist who knew he was providing a social history of a vanishing way of life, his story is a farewell to traditional camp life and to where the people of Cape Dorset once had their camps" (Pitseolak 166). Documentary films have long been used to inform and educate audiences about subjects—including people, cultures, places and events—that are not familiar to them. In contrast, working to preserve the memory of his own cultural environment,

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<sup>19</sup> The magazine was renamed *The Beaver: A Magazine of the North* in the 1930s.

Pitseolak's photographs were intended to remind Inuit of their own past: they are tools for personal and collective memory, images that "speak directly to Inuit" (Adams 12).

## Chapter 4: Indigenous Media

### The Development of Indigenous Media in Canada

In a 1995 essay focusing on film and video, Faye Ginsburg suggested that Indigenous media expressed “a desire on the part of Aboriginal people to “talk back on their own terms to those who might have presumed to speak for them” (“Parralax” 68). Ginsburg explained:

The media work of indigenous people has been provoked by an increasing awareness on their part of the politically charged nature of media representations about them; this recognition has been spurred on by a range of developments, such as the not always welcome introduction of communication satellites that bring television reception to indigenous people living in remote areas. The desire to be in control of imagery made about them has been facilitated by the increasing availability of relatively inexpensive media technologies, such as portable video cameras and VCRs. (“Parralax” 67)

Since the 1970s, Indigenous media producers have completed projects ranging from short video documentaries to major independent films such as *The Fast Runner*. Terence Turner notes that, “The peoples most involved in this development have been among the most culturally and technologically distant from the West: Australian Aborigines,

Canadian Inuit, and Amazonian Indians” (75).<sup>20</sup> The emergence of Indigenous media coincides with a period of critical re-evaluation of anthropological methods in the 1970s and 1980s. This period of self-reflection, Grimshaw explains, emerged in the context of “growing political pressure exerted by anthropology’s traditional subjects, and by the belated collapse of the paradigm of scientific ethnology” (6). Documentary filmmakers undertook a similar reflection. Discussing the *Navajo Film Themselves* project initiated in the mid-1960s, a somewhat awkward attempt at facilitating Indigenous self-representation carried out by filmmakers Sol Worth and John Adair, Knopf notes that while it was a “clearly patronizing project,” *Navajo Film Themselves* “must be understood as a step in the process toward decolonizing media-making” (57).<sup>21</sup>

In Canada, Indigenous film and video have developed with the support of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), which has provided training and financing for Indigenous media production since the late 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Launched in 1967, the NFB’s Challenge for Change program supported participatory film and video projects in disadvantaged and underrepresented communities in Canada. A key concern of the program was the transfer of control of the filmmaking process from professional filmmakers to community members so that ordinary Canadians in underrepresented communities could tell their own stories. The American social activist and documentary filmmaker George Stoney was appointed director of the program in 1968. That same year, Stoney established the Indian Film Crew in cooperation with the Company for

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<sup>20</sup> These include the Tanami Network in Australia; the *Centro de Trabalho Indigenista* and the Kayapo Video Project in Brazil; the Alaska Heritage Project; and the work of Hopi videographer Victor Masayesva.

<sup>21</sup> As the title indicated, a non-Indigenous audience is assumed.

<sup>22</sup> See Gil Cardinal’s overview for of the NFB’s involvement with First Nations, Metis and Inuit film and video on the NFB website.

Young Canadians, marking the beginning of the NFB's support for First Nations, Metis and Inuit video and film production. The first participants in the program received training in various aspects of filmmaking from NFB staff and then worked on community development projects and research for future films. The first films produced by participants in the program were *The Ballad of Crowfoot* (1968) by Willie Dunn, *These Are My People* (1969) by Roy Daniels, Willie Dunn, Michael Mitchell and Barbara Wilson, and *You Are on Indian Land* (all in 1969) by Mohawk filmmaker Mort Ransen. Ransen's film tells the story of a protest that same year in response to a bridge closure at the St. Regis Reserve on the bridge between Canada and the United States near Cornwall, Ontario (National Film Board of Canada, "Synopsis," *You are on Indian Land*).

In 1971, the Indian Film Crew evolved into the Indian Training Program led by Michael Mitchell, who had been trained in the program in 1968. Their works focused on contemporary issues and their origins in the past. The *Other Side of the Ledger: An Indian View of the Hudson's Bay Company* (1972) co-directed by Willie Dunn and Martin Defalco looked back over the company's history, making "a rather blunt indictment of a history of inequality in the trade relationship between the HBC and their Indian and Métis suppliers" (Cardinal).

One of the most prominent Indigenous filmmakers to emerge during the 1970s was Alanis Obomsawin, who is of Abenaki First Nation descent.<sup>23</sup> Obomsawin has chronicled native cultural and political activism and government and non-Indigenous responses to them, with works such as *Amisk* (1977), *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), a film that provided an inside view of the

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<sup>23</sup> Born in New Hampshire on Abenaki Territory, Obomsawin grew up on the Odanak reserve north east of Montreal and in Trois-Rivière, Quebec.

1990 standoff in Oka, Quebec between police and Mohawk protesting plans to turn one of their burial grounds into a golf course.<sup>24</sup> Even when looking back at the history, as Obomsawin does in the Oka film and others, it always comes back to a contemporary struggle, which is seen as the latest in a long history of colonial relations of power.

Launched in 1991 and headquartered in Edmonton, Studio One provided funding exclusively to Aboriginal filmmakers. According to Cardinal, “The events which shook Canada through the summer of 1990 highlight the need for better communication between the non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities of this country, and among the First Nations themselves.” In 1996, the Aboriginal Filmmaking Program was established with a mandate to provide designated funds for Native filmmakers (Cardinal).

### The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation

In 1964, residents of Pond Inlet on the north shore of Baffin Island established a community radio station that broadcast all of its programming in the local Inuktitut dialect. From this point, writes communications scholar Lorna Roth, “The idea of native-language community radio quickly spread across the North” (68). In her 2005 book, *Something New In the Air: The Story of First Peoples Television Broadcasting in Canada*, Roth explains that community radio had an important consequence, since “it set the attitudinal context for the coming of television. What this meant was that when television finally arrived in the North, people who were accustomed to listening to radio

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<sup>24</sup> Singer points out that while the Canadian government has been providing financial support for Indigenous broadcasting and filmmaking since the late 1960s, “no similar policy was ever established in the United States specifically for American Indians” (56).

messages that conform to their information needs fully expected a television service that would do the same” (69).

This is not what happened. While the CBC’s Northern Service provided some programming in Inuktitut during the 1960s, by the early 1970s the CBC’s short-wave service was still primarily aimed at the non-Inuit population, only broadcasting a small portion of its programs in Inuktitut (Roth 68). As Roth notes, “the federal government did not even consult local native populations about the decision to expand television service in the North,” and apparently felt little pressure to do so given the fact that First Nations and Inuit had little lobbying power at this time (73).<sup>25</sup> She argues while the Canadian government claimed to be motivated by a desire to connect Inuit to the rest of Canada, strategic and especially commercial interests were behind its development of a northern communications infrastructure (70).<sup>26</sup>

Television arrived in the North in 1972 when Canada’s first satellite, the *Anik-A*, allowed the CBC’s Northern Service to begin broadcasting television into seventeen northern communities (Fleming 28). By 1980, after almost a decade of broadcasting, television still remained largely oriented to non-Inuit residents in the North. “By 1975,” Fleming writes, “unilingual English television was being broadcast into most settlements in the North, but Igloolik refused TV broadcast for 10 years on linguistic and cultural

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<sup>25</sup> Sigurjon Baldur Hafsteinsson and Marian Bredin point out that in Canada, research on Indigenous media was initiated by communication and media scholars investigating the impact of radio and television broadcasting on First Nations and Inuit communities beginning in the 1960s (7).

<sup>26</sup> According to Roth, “The strongest pressure on the CBC to provide television for Northern communities came from the mining companies and the Minister of Northern Affairs.” Faced with a high turnover rate, mining companies saw television as an incentive to Southern workers to remain in the North for a longer period of time (Roth 70).



grounds” (Fleming 28). Television eventually arrived in Igloolik, but only after the creation of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), an achievement that was due in part to persistent lobbying by Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national Inuit organization established in 1971 (Fleming 28).

Building on the experience of community radio, in the late 1970s video provided one of the means by which television broadcasting came to Igloolik. “Igloolik’s first official video project,” Fleming explains, “was the Inuksuk project of 1978-1981, an interactive, inter-village communications project facilitated by the new Anik-B satellite, which allowed six remote communities to talk to each other on TV by means of a satellite link-up in Iqaluit” (28). Igloolik was one of the communities, along with Iqaluit, Pond Inlet, Baker Lake, Arviat, and Cambridge Bay. After two years of preparation, the project broadcast for sixteen and a half hours a week for a period of eight months. According to Fleming, “The coverage in Inuktitut of local events, issues, consultations and stories that Inuksuk served to disseminate was enthusiastically greeted by communities that had not yet received TV in their own language, and this ultimately led to the creation of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC)” (28).

In 1981, the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) granted a network television license for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) to Inuit Tapirisat of Canada.<sup>27</sup> According to the IBC, the Inukshuk Project had “demonstrated that Inuit could successfully manage complex broadcasting projects and adapt sophisticated communications technology to meet their needs.” IBC aired its first program, a ninety-minute special introducing the network, in January 1982. Citing Marc Raboy, Evans

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<sup>27</sup> The story of the IBC is told in the documentary film *Starting Fire with Gunpowder* (1991).

notes that the corporation, “was central to the effort to make Native broadcasting an integral part of the public system, not just an appendage of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBC) northern service” (*Isuma* 5).

## Isuma Productions and Cultural Reconstruction Video

Ginsburg argues that, “The creation of the IBC—a production centre for Inuit programming of all sorts—became an important development in the lives of contemporary Canadian Arctic people, as well as a model for the repurposing of communications technologies for indigenous people worldwide” (“Screen Memories” 41). In her 2005 book, Roth focuses on Inuit public broadcasting in Canada, and although she does not discuss the development of independent Indigenous media production, she mentions that the growth of this activity “can be attributed to an increase in television and other digital venues on which to exhibit their productions” (13). IBC established production centres in Iqaluit, Baker Lake and Igloolik. In 1982, Zacharias Kunuk joined Paul Apak Angilirq as an IBC trainee, and began training in video production (Fleming 28). While at IBC, Kunuk developed his own approach to video making, and produced his first independent video in 1986 entitled *From Inuk Point of View* (Berger 6). It was during this period that Kunuk met the American videographer Norman Cohn at a training workshop Cohn gave in Iqaluit (McCall 184).

By 1988 Kunuk and Apak were ready to establish an independent production company. Founded in Igloolik in 1990 by Igloolik residents Kunuk, Apak and Pauloosie Qulitalik, and by thr American videographer Norman Cohn, Igloolik Isuma developed

through two distinct phases over a period of two decades. Like Pitseolak, Kunuk and his Isuma colleagues were concerned with documenting aspects of traditional Inuit culture, although the company also produced several videos concerned specifically with current issues.

Katarina Soukup explains that when Apak and Kunuk left IBC to form Isuma, “Their chief complaints with IBC were that the management was based in Ottawa and that they never had the budgets to make drama that could visually illustrate oral history and storytelling by the elders.” As Sally Berger wrote in a 1996 article in *Inuit Art Quarterly*: “The process of remembering by doing, using the technology to dramatically and artistically re-envision rather than journalistically document and record, has been the pivotal centre of Kunuk’s independent work” (Berger 7). Kunuk recalls how he began to think about video as a way to “show how” and to tell stories at the same time:

In the 1970s Igloolik voted twice against TV from the south since there was nothing in Inuktitut, nothing in it for us. But I noticed when my father and his friends came back from hunting they would always sit down with tea and tell the story of their hunt. And I thought it would be great to film hunting trips so you wouldn’t have to tell it, just show it. In 1981 I sold some carvings and bought a video camera. When I watched my videos I noticed kids outside were glued to my window looking to see the TV. That was how special it was at the beginning. (15)

Isuma's first two series *Unikaatuatiit* [Storytellers] (1989-1993) and *Nunavut* [Our Land] (1994-1995) were commissioned by IBC, exemplifying the manner in which broadcasting opportunities would give support to Inuit media development. Intended for half hour or one hour programming, *Unikaatuatiit* and *Nunavut* are documentary recollections and dramatic re-constructions set in the Igloolik area in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>28</sup> This was the period after whalers, traders and priests had arrived in the Igloolik region, but before families had settled in permanent yearlong communities in the 1950s and 1960s. Isuma completed the *Unikaatuatiit* series in 1993. The series received a Bell Canada Award in Video Art, and the success of the series led to Telefilm Canada and other funders, including the Government of the Northwest Territories, supporting their next project, the thirteen-part series of videos entitled *Nunavut* (Berger 7).<sup>29</sup> Berger describes the intent of the *Storytellers* series:

These stories do not reflect contemporary life in Igloolik, where people live in clapboard houses, have telephones and fax machines and wear manufactured clothing... It is not their primary purpose to dispel the misconceptions of outsiders about Inuit living in a romanticized past or an unmodern present. Rather, they are about change from within, through the historical, psychological and philosophical process the Inuit are engaged in as each story evolves towards the next. (Berger 9)

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<sup>28</sup> They can be viewed in full on Isuma.tv.

<sup>29</sup> Igloolik was part of the territory until 1999 when it became part of Nunavut.

The *Nunavut* series was intended not only for audiences in the Northwest Territories, but also southern Canada, and was broadcast in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Ontario (Berger 7). The first episode of the *Nunavut* series is entitled *Qimuksik* [Dog Team]. After the opening credits, an intertitle indicates the place and date: “Igloolik Region 1945.” While this might be a source of confusion for a Southern audience, the intended audience is primarily Inuit, suggesting that this fictionalizing intertitle is used as a means to encourage viewers to enter into the imaginative space of the film. The actors wear clothing of mixed materials that includes both wool and seal skin, as would have been worn at the time. The dialogue is minimal, centered on descriptions of activities being carried out by the actors. Many of scenes involve a father teaching his son various activities, including how to hunt seal. The video shows a number of activities that would be familiar to southern audiences, although in contrast to Balikci’s *Netsilik Series*, they show trade goods that were used in this period, including a wooden handled steel saw used to cut blocks of snow to make the walls of an igloo. There is no narration, which recalls the *Netsilik Series*, and this ensures that observation is an important part of the viewing experience. However, in contrast to Balikci’s films, Isuma’s videos include English subtitles that allow people who are not fluent in Inuktitut to better understand what is going on in the videos

In *Qimuksik*, the same combination of traditional and Southern materials is used in a depiction of the seal hunt. The seal-hunting scene is instructive in that it takes a new turn on the harpoon wielding Inuk. We see instead the successful seal hunt in which both a rifle and a harpoon are used. In the scene, the father uses the rifle to shoot the seal as it comes to the surface of an open patch of water some twenty metres away. This would be

too far for a harpoon. But once the seal has been hit, the father calls to his son to run beside him as they hurry to the water's edge. On the way, calling his son to run with him, the father runs a few metres before putting down the rifle and picking up a harpoon that seems to have been placed conveniently near the edge of the ice. He runs a short distance along the water's edge before throwing the harpoon—which is tied to several feet of rope—to where the body of the injured seal has floated to the surface of the water. With the help of his son, he drags the seal onto the ice. This scene, one among many others like it throughout the series, is a clear and compelling demonstration of the manner in which Inuit have combined Western and traditional Inuit technology.

While instructive in the manner in which they show that Inuit life was subject to a gradual and historically located process of change, watching the videos, I encountered several occasions in which I knew something was being depicted about Inuit culture, values, beliefs and daily activities that I did not understand. For example, after the seal-hunting scene, father and son bring the seal back to the camp and other family members gather round to eat parts of the seal while it has not yet frozen. In this scene, a young woman approaches the group gathered around the seal and seems to be asking for some food. The family eating the seal appears to ignore her and continue eating. I presume there is a pecking order, as the father had said earlier that the men and boys eat first; but in truth, I am not sure why. Is she a cousin, why does she not join them? There is no narrative other than a family catching and eating a seal to hold my attention.

So it is that even when making a documentary style film, the imaginative and artistic element of video is foregrounded (Berger 10). Yet clearly at this point, Kunuk and Isuma have not fully developed their craft, for there is not yet the character development

we see in the later feature films. The *Nunavut* series videos were completed in 1995 just as the idea for *The Fast Runner* was getting off the ground. Commenting on the progress evident in this second series, Berger writes:

They reflect a more defined and experienced approach to the deceptively simple historical recreations of the earlier tapes, including *Saputi*. The new works use the same half-hour format and process of dramatic re-enactment as before. However, the Nunavut tapes are made with higher production value and with more directed and focused scenarios. (7)

In 1998, several Isuma videos were exhibited at the Le Fresnoy National Studio of Contemporary Arts in Tourcoing, France.<sup>30</sup> In a review of the exhibition published in *Canadian Art*, Peggy Gale described the videos as “hovering between contemporary drama and historic documentary” (59). Gale situates *Quaggiq* and *Nunaqpa* [Going Inland] (1991) and the other videos in the exhibit: “These stories were set in the nineteen-thirties and nineteen-forties, that is, after the white whalers and priests had arrived, bringing rifles and metal tools, tea and tobacco—but *before* families had given up their life on the land for settlement in permanent villages” (Gale 62; emphasis in original). Gale noted that, “The seamlessness of the work and easy comfort of the actors lead the viewer to forget this is a construction, prepared for the camera and for an eventual audience” (62). For the audience, the pleasure is in the experience of the story—even for those who know very little about Inuit traditional culture. The pleasure for the Isuma

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<sup>30</sup> Entitled *Une Lumière Blanche*, the exhibition also included videos produced by Arnait Video Productions.

team and the cast is also the pleasure of telling and reenacting remembered past ways of life. Seen as pleasure, cinema has often been described as a means to pigeonhole audience members into gender stereotypes, but the pleasure here is one of a community's experience of memory through reenactment. Gale interviewed Madeline Ivalu for her review. An Igloolik resident who appears in several of the videos, Ivalu told Gale that "wearing the caribou *amauti* against her bare skin made her think of her parents and how they lived" and that she was glad to have been involved in the experience of making the video (62).<sup>31</sup>

Isuma also produced videos such as the 1998 documentary *Arvik!* [Bowhead], that dealt with contemporary issues concerning Inuit hunting rights and the recent history of Inuit land claims activism and Inuit efforts to reassert control over their political future, and the 1999 documentary *Nipi* [Voice]. In his 2010 book *The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat*, Evans writes that until Isuma produced *Arvik!*, "most of Isuma's work could be categorized as cultural re-creation, drawing authenticity—as Kunuk would emphasize—from the knowledge of elders and not, as in *Nanook of the North*, based on stereotypes common in the South. But *Arvik!*—arvik means "bowhead whale"—is more properly a political documentary, and effort to present a particular point of view in clear and direct terms (45). Isuma continued to make documentaries covering current issues even after beginning to produce fictional feature films. These documentaries included the 2008 documentary *Exile* about the forced relocation in 1953 of several Inuit families from Nunavik, in northern Québec to Ellesmere Island, and *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, which premiered in October 2010 at the imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts

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<sup>31</sup> Ivalu would go on to co-direct *Before Tomorrow* (2008) with Marie-Hélène Cousineau.



Festival in Toronto, and was also streamed live on isuma.tv. In his *Globe and Mail* review of *Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, Guy Dixon commented that it was “the first to ask Inuit elders to describe the severe environmental changes in the Arctic they are seeing and to do so in their own language” (“New Documentary”).

One of the founders of Isuma, Paul Apak Angilirq conceived and wrote the initial treatment for *The Fast Runner*. Sadly, Apak died in December 1998, before the film was completed. Apak received professional training in video making while working on the Inuksuk project. After the creation of IBC, he began working at the corporation’s Igloolik office, making a number of videos that were aired on the network. His first major independent video project involved a re-creation of the migration of several Inuit families from the Igloolik area to Greenland (Evans, *The Fast Runner* 38). Apak described how he learned filmmaking by experience in an interview with Fleming: “When I first started out, I had no idea about a story or about television. I was always trying to meet the deadline, so I tried to find easy things to do that could be done quickly. I ended up with videos on harness making, or skinning a seal. Later, when I became more relaxed, I had more time to think creatively” (Fleming 31). Hinting at what was to come in 1996, Kunuk explained:

We still leave a lot of sensitive subjects out of our videos, for instance, raising children and shamanism... We just show the basics, such as how to build in stone, how the Inuit hunted walrus, how they traveled. I want to do Inuit legends. Paul Aapak [sic] wrote a script based on legends. It’s one story, but a lot of people tell it differently. We thought of working with

categories—romance, violence, action. It would be longer than the usual half-hour format. Half an hour seems too short to the audience, but it is a lot of work for us. (Fleming 34)

Kunuk was speaking of what would eventually become *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, the first feature-length movie written, directed, acted, and produced by Inuit.

## Chapter 5: Isuma Productions and Indigenous Feature Filmmaking

Given the fact that the history of the feature-length fiction film is littered with stereotypical representations of Native Americans, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the format itself is somehow tainted, and that producing documentary films with real educational value is the only way to correct the damage. Knopf cites Elizabeth Weatherford, who commented in 1996 that, “Documentary has long been the genre of choice for Native directors concerned that Native American history and contemporary viewpoints lack authentic representation in American society” (60). This remains largely the case today in Canada and in other countries where Indigenous media producers are active. Knopf proposes a number of reasons to account for the prevalence of documentary film, such as relatively lower production costs compared to that of fiction film, especially feature-length films. Knopf notes additional reasons provided by Steven Leuthold, including “the place of documentaries in education, the natural adoption of electronic media documentaries by members of traditionally oral cultures, and the desire to document disappearing cultural practices” (qtd. in Knopf 59).

Citing Kobena Mercer, Knopf notes that Indigenous documentary film has been defined by “an urgent need to comment on *all* social and political problems and correct *all* misrepresentations in one film,” a sense of responsibility “which many pioneer Indigenous filmmakers will be familiar with” (60; emphasis in original). Yet a trend in recent years has shown that this is not the case. Knopf points this out in her 2011 book, noting that:

In the last few years, there has been a movement away from social and political realism in documentary form to a dramatized mode in which

filmmakers stay close to conventional filmmaking but also experiment with style, techniques, narrative forms, metaphoric plots, and a humorous subversive play with the dominant media discourse. (60)

In reference to this development, Knopf explains that the shift to “the dramatic mode” was driven by the desire of Indigenous filmmakers to make use of “the subversive potential of cinematic fiction,” an artistic motivation supported by “their entrepreneurial spirit in starting up small independent film companies and their ability to commit mainstream companies to cooperative projects” (60). She mentions *The Fast Runner* and Isuma’s second feature-length film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006) as recent examples of this emerging trend (60). While the subversive potential of dramatic fiction is notable, I would say it is only part of the issue. A shift to the dramatic mode is also simply a return to the creative enjoyment of telling stories, and the receptiveness of audiences listening to them.

Documentary has historically been regarded as the best way to advocate for social change, particularly by or on behalf of marginalized groups in society, including Indigenous people. *The Fast Runner*’s critical and commercial success in Canada and around the world allowed Isuma and other Inuit media efforts to achieve a national and international profile. Roth asks, “Given that direct, interpersonal contact between indigenous and non-native peoples is often limited, what role can the aboriginal electronic media play in shaping the general public’s attitudes about First Peoples issues?” (14). *The Fast Runner* was shot on a digital betacam video camera before being transferred to thirty-five millimeter film through a “smooth motion” process by

Vancouver based Digital Film Group, allowing Isuma to take advantage of the flexibility and relatively low cost of digital video, while producing a film with the image quality of thirty-five millimeter that can stand beside any production using more expensive digital film (“Filmmaking Inuit Style”). This has been crucial to give Isuma’s feature films a level of visual quality that was appropriate to the scale of the project. Extending Roth’s question to this growing area of Indigenous media production, I would suggest that as an alternative to the tradition of documentary film, *The Fast Runner* has shown that a feature-length fiction film can appeal to a diverse audience, while at the same time advancing the cultural role of a forward-looking practice of community-based ethnography.

### From Salvage Ethnography to Cultural Re-creation

Salvage ethnography was informed by the view, one that persisted well into the twentieth century, that the assimilation of Indigenous people and their “abandonment” of their ancestral cultural heritage was seen as something of a natural process, ignoring the fact that colonial policies actively suppressed Indigenous cultures, as the history of residential schools since the nineteenth century attests. In the Arctic and sub-Arctic, the introduction of trade goods by whalers in the late nineteenth century may be seen as part of a process of cultural exchange that had some usefulness for both Southerners and Inuit, leading to a shift in hunting techniques. However, some aspects of traditional culture, such as shamanistic practices and beliefs, were actively suppressed by missionaries and other representatives of colonial authority in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A number of aspects of *The Fast Runner* recall the *Netsilik Series*. Some of these are visual, emerging from *The Fast Runner's* documentary-style cinematography and a distinctive colour scheme associated with traditional Inuit culture, textured hues of fur clothing, caribou skin, bone tools and seal flesh. Others are simply the result of the perspective of a Southern audience accustomed to hearing Inuktitut in documentary films and news reports. Beyond these elements, the *The Fast Runner* and the *Netsilik Series* can be compared as examples of cultural reconstruction film that reenact and 'salvage' aspects of traditional Inuit culture for the benefit of future generations.

Since the 1980s, a number of authors have investigated the evolution of cinematic stereotypes of Native Americans in Hollywood film as well as the emergence of Indigenous feature filmmaking. An early example is *The Pretend Indians: images of native Americans in the movies* (1980) a collection of essays edited by Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet. More recent examples are *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (1999), by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film* (1999) by Elise Marubbio, and *Invisible natives: myth and identity in the American western* (2002) by Armando José Prats. Native American videographer and author Beverly Singer has made a notable contribution to this growing area of study. Director of the Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies at the University of New Mexico, Singer exemplifies an interest by Indigenous filmmakers to research and write about the work of their emerging Indigenous filmmaking practice, and Indigenous scholars are participating in research on Indigenous media more widely.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In her contributing essay to *Indigenous Screen Cultures in Canada* entitled "Taking a Stance: Aboriginal Media Research as an Act of Empowerment," Yvonne Poitras Pratt, who is of Métis ancestry, discusses "the unique position of the "native ethnographer"

Evans emphasizes that like Isuma's previous videos such as *Qaggiq* [Gathering Place] (1988) and *Saputi* [Fish Traps] (1993), "*The Fast Runner* "presents elders in a strong and respectful light." ("The Fast Runner" 49) Evans explains that, "In the interest of authenticity, Apak wanted to make sure that none of his films, including *The Fast Runner*, has characters who violated respectful address, used words or linguistic structures that were not common at the time the scene took place" ("The Fast Runner" 39).

Knopf notes that like *Nanook of the North*, *The Fast Runner* "exhibits ethnographic traits," by its depiction of pre-contract Inuit cultural objects and the use of facial makeup showing traditional women's facial tattoos (327). As Knopf points out, "Kunuk embeds these 'ethnographic facts' in a dramatic story," including a number of day to day activities such as eating raw meat, cleaning seal skins, building igloos, preparing a sled for a journey, singing and playing games (327). She observes that *The Fast Runner* does not contain scenes depicting marriage, initiation rites, or burial ceremonies, all of which "are generally essential elements of Western ethnographic films" (327). Knopf also notes that the film does not include any hunting scenes, differentiating it from every film ever made about Inuit since *Nanook of the North*. Reporting on an unpublished 2006 interview she carried out with Kunuk, Knopf explains that according to Kunuk, acts of hunting were not included in the film because they were

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within indigenous media scholarship" (172-3). After the provincial government in Alberta announced its decision to provide broadband connection to all of the province's communities, Poitras Pratt carried out "action ethnography" as a response to her concern for what the decision would mean for Aboriginal communities in the province (164). The study results were shared with the community and were published in an article entitled "All My Online Relations: Aboriginal Community Participation in Planning for Alberta SuperNet Broadband Technology."

not crucial elements of the legend. In other words, Knopf argues, “the presentation of ethnographic details was not the objective of the film” (331). She elaborates:

Kunuk shows aspects of traditional Inuit life from an inside perspective, without commentary, and unobtrusively. These aspects support a narrative, instead of being the sole purpose of a film that looks at the ‘other’, ‘exotic’ culture from the outside perspective. Thus, he weaves traditional cultural knowledge into the mythic narrative to acquaint non-Inuit viewers en passant with fundamental cultural aspects. (327)

While Balikci also decided not to use commentary and in some sense reduced the impact of the colonial gaze, he could only go part of the way, in part because he did not add a story. Knopf writes that, “By emphasizing some cultural elements and ignoring others, Kunuk denies the objectifying, ethnographic colonial gaze” (321). Significantly, this choice “not to give a complete picture,” is a reversal of the historical tendency for a single film to be seen to define Inuit for a whole generation of viewers (321).

In his 2009 documentary *Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian*, Canadian Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond traces the evolution of the “Hollywood Indian” from the silent film to the present. Beginning in Waskaganish, a small community on James Bay, Quebec where he grew up, *Reel Injun* follows Diamond as he drives West across the United States in a “rez car,” stopping at significant points along the way. Part road movie, part historical argument, the first half of the documentary is divided into chapters named for different stereotypes that have characterized the depiction of native



Americans on screen—including “The Noble Indian,” “The Savage Indian,” and “The Groovy Indian.” From there the film moves on to increasingly complex, three-dimensional cinematic depictions of Native North Americans in films akin to Adam Beach’s portrayal of Ira Hayes in the 2006 film *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006).

The final chapter of *Reel Injun*, entitled “The Renaissance,” looks at several films made by native directors in recent years, including *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Once Were Warriors* (1994). Diamond ends his film, and his journey, in Igloolik:

I’m at the end of my quest, back up North in the High Arctic community of Igloolik. After travelling across America, the answers were here, all along. It’s an unlikely place to have given birth to a film that has revolutionized Native cinema, and gone on to win at the Cannes Film Festival. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* captures one of the Inuit’s most cherished legends and brings it to the world.

In the film, Diamond interviews Kunuk in his hunting cabin, asking the director why he makes films. He explains: “We picked up the camera and we started recording our own history, the stories we used to hear when we were children. What do we believe? Why are we here?” Kunuk continues:

I had a problem. I wanted to do a romantic scene where two people were kissing, French necking, but French necking is not our culture. And so... We’re making this story... I’m sitting down with elders asking them, ‘How did you get married, what is Inuit kissing like? That’s what

we've been using the camera for. How much trouble they went through to get us here. To capture it now because ten years down the road, most of the elders will be gone.

Yet while Kunuk expresses a sense of urgency in the need to record oral history and tradition known by elders, *The Fast Runner* is not an ethnographic inventory of traditional culture, and is not burdened by a sense of duty to represent Inuit culture authoritatively, as a whole and once and for all.

While some of Isuma's filmmaking practices recall the salvage ethnography that has been a central feature of the history of ethnographic cinema representing Inuit and other Indigenous peoples (chapters two and three), Isuma's productions do not constitute a displacement and archiving of the remnants of traditional Inuit culture such as has been carried out under the rubric of salvage ethnography. Rather they are an occasion for its reenactment and recording in the medium of video. In this way, the salvaging process becomes part of the enjoyment of reconstruction—or better, re-creation to use the word coined by Evans in reference to Isuma's work—for the actors as much as the Isuma production team, one that is both a bodily and social experience of cultural memory. Isuma and the Igloodik community members involved in making the films are simply telling a story, and are participating in the culture as well as recording it.

### Oral Tradition and Film

Isuma's films embed ethnographic information—that is to say cultural knowledge—in the story in such a way that allows it to retain its imaginative force. Ethnography has often been concerned with the past, but this storytelling-inspired cinema

orients ethnography toward the future. In this way it aligns ethnography with the same forward-looking logic of oral tradition, which by necessity is always anticipating the next generation of storytellers to carry it forward. Although engaged in the revival of traditional knowledge through ethnographic reconstruction, this reconstruction of the pre-colonial past does not constitute a desire to frame out modern conditions—a critique raised against documentary’s history of ethnographic reconstruction since Flaherty—but instead aims to show the continuing relevance of traditional cultural heritage, including its stories and mythology, to the present despite the significant transformations of material, economic and cultural life that occurred in the twentieth century.

The introductory page of *The Fast Runner*’s official website explains that the legend has been carried by, “a continuous stream of oral history carried forward into the new millennium through a marriage of Inuit storytelling skills and new technology” (“Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner”). Knopf offers another argument that aligns with Isuma’s practice, noting that adapting oral tradition to film and video means that, “More people, be it members of the same or other Indigenous groups or members of non-Indigenous groups, will have access to it” (99). Knopf argues that, “Despite the loss of original cultural and situational context, oral cultural knowledge can be preserved and stored for future generations; translated into film, it can be used to teach about a particular culture as well as to bridge gaps of communication between different cultures” (99). *The Fast Runner*’s website includes a brief production reference to this method: “Our objective was not to impose southern filmmaking conventions on our unique story, but to let the story shape the filmmaking process in an Inuit way” (“Filmmaking Inuit Style”). This

means that the story, which is undeniably Inuit—which originated long before the colonial era—is the authoritative basis of the film.

In a discussion of “the relation between Indigenous oral tradition and film and the translatability of oral narration into electronic narration,” Knopf takes a close look at *The Fast Runner* (xvii). She writes: “My original working hypothesis was that there is a link between oral tradition and film/video, since the latter medium works with means similar to those of oral tradition...I assumed that film and video would be a much more appropriate medium for preserving oral tradition than the medium of print” (84). Knopf explains that her hypothesis was supported by the argument made by both Walter Ong and Marshal McLuhan to the effect that “electronic societies tend to be more like oral societies than literate ones” (85). However, “The medium of film and video does not replace or continue oral tradition; it might feed off oral culture as a different form it takes up some of its characteristics” (Knopf 115). However, in the end, invoking the staging: “A dramatized film stages an oral account—it does not present a physical storytelling” (Knopf 117).

In contrast to written stories, video has the added advantage of allowing the characters to speak in Inuktitut, while providing a translated version of their words in English or any other language. Language was a key concern for Isuma in making *The Fast Runner*. It is important in the film not only because the characters use it to communicate with each other as they participate in the events of the story, but also because it contains the grammar, the sounds, and inflections, the wealth of linguistic elements spoken by real people. The script was written in a more formal version of spoken Inuktitut (Old Inuktitut), which even the script writers had to carefully reconstruct

based on input from elders. As Knopf points out, “There are increasingly fewer among the younger Inuit generation who are capable of speaking their traditional language; by choosing to film in Inuktitut, the filmmakers foster pride in, and the survival of, this language” (332). Crucially, the language is not taught in an academic way, but to serve the telling of the story through a process of emotional engagement in the language that makes it seem less like work, and more like pleasure.

## Storytelling

In “The Storyteller: Reflections on the life of Nikolai Leskov,” Walter Benjamin concerned himself with the decline of European oral tradition, what he referred to simply as storytelling, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He suggests the decline of storytelling in Europe mirrored the rise to prominence of the novel, a development closely associated with the emergence of a literate middle-class in Britain, continental Europe and the United States during this period. He points out that the novel differs from other forms of prose—he gives the example of the fairy tale and the legend—in that it “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it,” a characteristic which distinguishes it markedly from storytelling, which is closely associated with oral tradition (87).

Benjamin argued that the proliferation of information in industrial society was an important reason for the decline of storytelling in Europe. “If the art of storytelling has become rare,” he wrote, “the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs” (89). Benjamin set up a strong opposition in the essay between storytelling and information. On the one hand, there is storytelling, with its roots in oral tradition that thrived in Europe in a pre-industrial society dominated by the rhythms of agriculture and rural life. On the other hand there is information, which flourishes in the industrial age dominated by the rise of the urban middle-class in the nineteenth century, the age that saw the expansion of literacy and the proliferation of print media, the age of photography and mechanical reproduction, and finally, the age of cinema.

As the full title of Benjamin’s essay indicates, its specific subject is the nineteenth century Russian short story writer Nicolai Leskov, who drew heavily on Russian storytelling traditions.<sup>33</sup> Many of Leskov’s stories take the form of a *skaz*, a narrative form found in Russian literature in which an anonymous narrator encounters the protagonist, who then relates the tale orally to the narrator. In Leskov’s stories, writes Benjamin, “The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (89).

Benjamin emphasizes the opposition between storytelling and information in reference to the daily newspaper, which was the dominant format of mass communication at the time he penned his essay in the mid-1930s. “Every morning brings us the news of

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<sup>33</sup> According to Thomas Aman, “It is generally considered that Leskov is one of the masters of the short story in Russian literature” (424).

the globe,” he wrote, “and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation” (89). The withholding of explanation is the means by which the storyteller opens a space for one of the most powerful ingredients of a good story: the imagination of those who hear it told.

Carried across time and space in the minds of human beings and subject to the limits of human memory, in the context of oral tradition, a story’s brevity is a matter of necessity; so too are the key points of reference that mark out its basic structure and make it memorable for both the storyteller and her audience.<sup>34</sup> In these circumstances, a good story doesn’t have to be explained, only told; the explanation is generated by the listener, sometimes long after the story is first heard, from the cultural frame of language and a person’s family, community and personal experiences and memories.<sup>35</sup>

In view of Benjamin’s argument opposing information and storytelling, how can we imagine a form of storytelling that is filled with cultural information and yet still free of the burden of explanation? How can the need to withhold explanation that is key to good storytelling be combined with the information rich activity of visual ethnography? I would argue that it is possible, and that video—a technological and historical offshoot of photography and film—provides an effective means of accomplishing this. In this regard, Evans argues emphatically against the idea that video undermines oral tradition, arguing rather that video “should not be seen as a threat to a tradition of oral narrative; rather, it

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<sup>34</sup> Oral stories are not always brief, as Homer’s *Illiad* demonstrates.

<sup>35</sup> Clifford refers to “The Storyteller” in his 1988 book *The Predicament of Culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. According to Clifford, Benjamin’s essay “describes the transition from a traditional mode of communication based on continuous oral narrative and shared experience to a cultural style characterized by bursts of “information”—the photograph, the newspaper clip, the perceptual shocks of a modern city” (119).

should be seen as the logical next step in an evolving process” (*Isuma* 13).

Singer writes in *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (2001) that, “The comprehension of culture as it relates to Native filmmaking comes from the storytelling approach that always pays homage to the past but is not suspended there” (9). At the centre of this process of cultural reproduction, of cultural creativity, is a community of people. Evans argues that, “The Inuit have a long tradition of storytelling, and this storytelling often took on highly visual and dramatic forms of expression. Storytelling lends itself naturally to video, and vice versa, and in many parts of the world, video is where storytelling has gone” (*Isuma* 13).

### Isuma and Community-based Filmmaking

In his 2008 book surveying the emergence of the Indigenous feature film in the last two decades, Houston Wood argues that, “every Indigenous film reflects the specific storytelling traditions of the native peoples being represented. Though these traditions and the resulting films are often very different from one another, all offer alternatives to movies based entirely on non-Indigenous traditions” (1-2). McCall emphasizes that, “It is the *process* of making the film which is of primary importance at Isuma,” and that in this context, “video art is above all a social practice, an act of community building and of knowledge exchange” (191; emphasis in original). Isuma does not see filmmaking as a matter of personal vision, as did Flaherty, but as a practice of community-based video as storytelling, as a guarantor of “cultural authenticity” (“Filmmaking Inuit Style”).



The involvement of the community began at the very beginning of the production process. “First we recorded eight elders telling versions of the legend as it had been passed down to them orally by their ancestors,” the film website explains. “Isuma’s team of five writers then combined these into a single detailed treatment in Inuktitut and English, consulting with elders for cultural accuracy and with our Toronto-based story consultant, Anne Frank. This same bi-cultural, bilingual process continued through the first and final draft scripts” (“Filmmaking Inuit Style”). Doris Baltrushchat notes that while both Flaherty and Balikci claimed that their films—*Nanook of the North* and the *Netsilik Series*—were made with the active participation of their Inuit cast, Isuma’s approach to film-making is “fundamentally different in that it starts with community involvement in all production processes” (133).

Fleming noted in a 1996 article on Igloolik video that at the time, many Igloolik residents, including children and youth, gained professional experience shooting and editing video, preparing scripts, fundraising, acting, interviewing, narrating and storytelling, or making traditional clothes, tents, houses, kayaks and tools for use in the productions (27-28). Thirty of Igloolik’s approximately eleven hundred residents were involved. This continued with *The Fast Runner*. Outlining the range of benefits of local media production, Evans writes: “For some, videography offered an opportunity to explore and express aspects of Inuit culture and history in a more complete fashion than was available through other media. For others, videography was a way to capture important information and perspectives, preserving them for future generations” (*Isuma* 11-12). He notes that for many it was also the benefit of a job (*Isuma* 12).

Ginsburg cites Kunuk's recollection of the first time *The Fast Runner* was shown in a packed gymnasium in Igloolik:

The first screening in Igloolik in December 2000 was my scariest moment because we finally put in on the table to the people what we are making.

We have no theatres in Igloolik. We found the biggest room we could find which was a gymnasium. We bought a video projector, a wide screen. We put out four hundred chairs, and when we opened the gym, kids were running, pouring in. They were sitting on the floor. Elders were sitting and people were standing in the back for almost three hours. Sometimes there was silence, sometimes there was laughter, and then silence again. And when the credits rolled, people were clapping and crying and shaking our hands. That day I knew that we did our job right. For three screenings each night, about five hundred people came out of twelve hundred people.

[laughter] Inuit loved it. Kids loved it. Kids were even playing Atanarjuat on the street. (qtd. in Ginsburg, "Atanarjuat Off-Screen" 829)

Kunuk's comment that children in Igloolik not only loved *The Fast Runner*, but also "played Atanarjuat in the street," demonstrates the way in which the film has allowed a story from Igloolik oral tradition to take on new life in the community. This is no longer a participant-observation model of viewing films about Inuit, but rather an experience of emotional engagement that is accessible to anyone.

A year after *The Fast Runner* was released, Isuma published a book about the movie that included the screenplay in both Inuktitut and English. The book provides much ethnographic background knowledge to the film. The final page is a reproduction of a sheet of lined yellow paper showing Apak's handwritten transcription, in Inuktitut syllabics, of one of the versions of the legend told by an Igloolik elder. Coming at the end of a two hundred and forty page book containing essays, drawings, maps, illustrations, black and white and colour photographs, video stills, and the bilingual screenplay, it is a reminder and a statement: *This is a story*.

Isuma commissioned the Canadian anthropologist Bernard Saladin d'Anglure to write an ethnographic commentary for the occasion. A short introduction to the text explains that d'Anglure's text provides, "an ethnographic interpretation of the legend of Atanarjuat by explaining facets of Inuit life that appear in the film—most notably shamanism..." (197). d'Anglure holds a doctorate in ethnology from the École pratique des hautes études de Paris. Now retired, his work is centered on Nunavik and Baffin Island—particularly the community of Igloolik, Nunavut—and Inuit shamanism. He played a key role in establishing the academic journal *Études Inuit Studies*, the biennial Inuit Studies Conference as well as the Inuit and Circumpolar Studies Group, which has contributed significantly to social science study of Arctic peoples. In other words, d'Anglure represents the anthropological establishment.

As with the involvement of the Toronto-based story consultant Anne Frank, this exemplifies the manner in which Isuma works: a process that involves the community and is controlled by the Isuma team, all but one of whom is a native of the community, with help from Southern consultants, or in Cohn's case, founding members. This is

particularly significant in view of how the films discussed in the previous chapters were made, where the filmmaker or anthropologist accepted—or rejected—the advice and help of a “native consultant.” With Isuma’s community-controlled process, the relationship is, appropriately, reversed.

*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001): Cinema as culturally informative storytelling

Retelling a centuries-old legend from the oral tradition of the Igloolik Inuit, *The Fast Runner* tells the story of a hero’s struggle and ultimate triumph over forces of evil that threaten his family and community. The first feature film to be produced entirely in Inuktitut, film scholar and documentary filmmaker Gordon Gray provides a detailed summary of the movie as follows:

An evil shaman enters a camp of Inuit and upsets its already fragile bonds. The shaman curses the band with envy, avarice, and lust for power. After the camp leader is murdered, the new leader Sauri belittles his old rival Tulimaq. However, over time, power within the camp begins to change when Tulimaq has two sons—Amaqjuaq, the Strong One, and Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner. Their rival, Oki, the leader’s son, envies their success. This is exacerbated when Atanarjuat wins away Oki’s promised wife-to-be, Atuat. Encouraged by his father, Oki and his friends attempt to murder both brothers while they sleep. Amaqjuaq is killed, but

Atanarjuat miraculously escapes, running naked for his life across the ice. Atanarjuat eludes his pursuers with supernatural help, and is nursed back to health by an old couple who had fled the camp prior to the curse years before. After learning to reclaim his spiritual path, and with the guidance of his elder advisor, Atanarjuat returns to rescue his family from both human and supernatural evil. Spurning a chance to continue the cycle of hatred, envy, and killing, he breaks the curse. (91-95)

*The Fast Runner* contains a great deal of information about the traditional Inuit way of life made meaningful within the framework of an entertaining story. In this context, video tells a story and shows it visually, as well as through sound, which crucially includes language, presenting an environment full of cultural information that can be seen and heard by audiences who may have varying amounts of prior knowledge concerning the cultural contents of the movie. *The Fast Runner* is both a new and traditional expression of the value and pleasure of telling and being told stories, pastimes that have been part of the human experience for millennia.

## On Location on the Land

*The Fast Runner* dramatizes a legend closely associated with the location of Igloolik and its surroundings. For centuries, the story of Atanarjaut was passed from generation to generation by the Inuit living on and around the island of Igloolik, which sits off Melville Peninsula in the north Baffin region of the Canadian Arctic. The legend

provides the narrative context for an ethnographically detailed reconstruction of life in the Igloolik area before the arrival of Europeans. *The Fast Runner* follows a series of episodes that occur in different locations on and around Igloolik Island. Its narrative grounded in place, the clarity and specificity of *The Fast Runner*'s images—not only expansive Arctic horizons but also close shots of domestic life, ceremonial practices, conversations, local sounds and other environmental details—recall previous efforts to record “life as it is” on film since *Nanook of the North*.

In *The Fast Runner*, the land is the physical and symbolic site of cultural affirmation. As d'Anglure points out, “The film follows the legend point for point, but the legend is short on details about the psychological, social and religious setting of the events it recounts” (203). He explains: “To turn the legend into a believable screenplay, Apak and his screen-writing associates (Zacharias Kunuk, Pauloosie Qulitalik, Norman Cohn, Hervé Paniaq) had to *imagine in detail* the material and social life of Inuit before the coming of Europeans” (203; emphasis added). Emphasizing their pedagogical role, Cohn explains that the Isuma team felt it was important to get the cultural details right. As Cohn put it, “our film is designed to teach future generations, to make sure they know how to build igloos, or sealskin tents, or make these costumes...so our authenticity comes out of having quite a different mission than just making a film” (qtd. in Hearne 325). Notably, they did not choose to overemphasize this to the point where the flow of the movie was undermined. Cohn comments that the ethnographic realism seems to make the film more entertaining to both Inuit and Southern audiences, such that “universality is also in a way tied to an authenticity of detail” (qtd. in Hearne 325).

## Storytelling Cinema

In an interview with Diamond for his documentary *Reel Injun*, Cohn refers to the scene in which Atanarjuat is running from his would-be murderers across the sea ice. He comments that Atar Ungalaq, who plays Atanarjuat, “was so committed, responsible to the requirement of his role, which is an iconic legend in his culture, that he willing to do things that most people, even if they were willing to do, maybe couldn’t do.” (*Reel Injun*). Cohn goes on to say that Ungalaq “knows the story; he knows that he’s going to have to run naked across the ice, in this movie. That’s the iconic image. There might be all kinds of other things we can change in this film, but we can’t change that.” (*Reel Injun*). As many reviewers have noted, Wood suggests *The Fast Runner*’s success with non-Indigenous audiences has a great deal to do with its “embrace of familiar themes” (145), although the same can be said for the youth and children of Igloolik and other Inuit communities. Until this sequence, Wood comments, the film “likely seems to most non-Inuit audiences to be moving forward very slowly, more like an ethnography or a documentary than a feature film. The violence and terror surrounding the chase sequence abruptly infuses new meanings into the long, meditative scenes that have come before” (145).

Before focusing his research on the Canadian Inuit, d’Anglure studied under the famous French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In a letter to d’Anglure included in the book publication of the script of *The Fast Runner*, Lévi-Strauss comments on how he was “captivated by many ethnographic details,” in seeing *The Fast Runner*. He writes: “it is exciting to see Inuit people reconstitute themselves from an emotionally moving

legend—the framework of their traditional life, the daily tasks, and the life events” (9).

Lévi-Strauss’s use of the words “exciting” and “emotionally moving” is significant, since the words point to what Balikci seemed to strive to keep to a minimum: the emotional impact of images as components of a story.

Produced from a composite of oral accounts given by community elders, but also drawing on images and text gathered from explorer’s diaries and drawings, ethnographies and museum artifacts, *The Fast Runner* exemplifies a willingness to make use of materials produced under colonialist conditions and a desire to re-appropriate their contents in a manner that reverses the relationship between Indigenous fragment and colonial text. Isuma consulted drawings and museum artifacts to help reconstruct the legend, reaching as far back as the 1820s when the British Admiralty initiated a number of attempts to navigate the Northwest Passage under the command of Captains William Edward Parry and John Ross. The Captain G.F. Lyon participated in these attempts and later published his journals, which were filled with detailed drawings Lyon made during the voyages. d’Anglure writes: “These drawings would later prove to be invaluable for reconstituting the costumes, weapons, tools and woman’s tattoos used 175 years later in the film *Atanarjuat*” (205-207).

As d’Anglure describes it, “All this information, collected over two centuries, would have ended up gathering dust in archives if Igloolik Inuit had not re-appropriated it and enriched it with new accounts of their own” (207). This appropriation—I think the more appropriate word would be repatriation—was not limited to image and text. The kayak used in *The Fast Runner* is a replica of the one in the collection of the British Museum. I see this as an extension of the movement in the last several years to return



museum artifacts taken from Indigenous communities, although in this case they are put into a film that becomes accessible for viewing on the web. The context of the artifact is now “curated” as part of a story, where it is useful to Atanarjuat as a character in a story.

## Depicting Shamanism

Earlier I noted Hearne’s observation that *The Fast Runner* does not include the requisite seal hunting scenes. This is because they are not necessary to advance the plot or to situate the characters within the story.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the film fills in an important gap in the history of cinematic representations of Inuit by way of the central place given to the traditional Inuit belief system. A taboo subject since the 1940s, Inuit shamanism was suppressed by both Catholic and Anglican Church missions. Shamanism is conspicuously absent from both *Nanook of the North* and the *Netsilik Series*. Heider makes the point that, “Because of their pedagogical purpose, the Netsilik films focus on technology almost to the exclusion of social life, and there is no hint of Eskimo religious practices” (46). He suggests that given the fact that Netsilik in the 1960s had already been a Christian community since the 1940s, “perhaps they were unwilling or unable to re-enact” their former religious practices (46). In contrast to the *Netsilik Series*, Isuma’s creators were motivated to accurately depict shamanism because it was a key element in the story. Houston Wood cites Kunuk’s comment linking the banning of shamanism and

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<sup>36</sup> We do see various characters leaving and returning from a hunt, such as when Atanarjuat and Amarjuat’s father Tulimaq returns from a hunt with little to show for his efforts, only to be mocked by Oki’s father, and later when the fortunes of Tulimaq’s family changes as Atanarjuat and Amarjuat grow up to become successful hunters themselves. In both cases, the depiction of this part of the practices of hunting and meat sharing scenes serve to develop the story.

dance and storytelling and song: “When the missionaries forced their religion on us, storytelling and drum dancing were almost banned. Our film *Atanarjuat* is one way bringing back lost traditions. I have never witnessed shamanism. I have only heard about it. One way of making it visible is to film it” (qtd. in Wood 146).

As Oosten writes, “In the past, the beliefs and practices relating to shamanism were embedded in a framework of traditions that connected people to the land and its human and non-human inhabitants—the animals, the deceased, and the wide variety of other beings that populated the universe” (36). As Knopf points out, Isuma refrains from special effects to depict magical occurrences, presenting shamanistic and spiritual activities as part of daily life (336). In this way, they are “absolutely believable within the realm of the filmic world,” an approach that “re-introduces the traditional shamanistic heritage into contemporary Inuit cultural knowledge and counters the colonialist erasure of this knowledge” (Knopf 336-7).<sup>37</sup> The film thus acts as a means to reintroduce, in a compelling and memorable medium, knowledge about shamanism. However, this was by no means a simple task for the creators of the film.

d’Anglure reports that, “The most challenging part in writing the screenplay was undoubtedly the description of shamanism—the foundation of the entire system of Inuit beliefs and practices before the coming of the Whites” (203). He highlights the extent of the challenge of writing shamanism into the script:

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<sup>37</sup> Writing in reference to Edward S. Curtis’s efforts to represent the Kwakwaka’wakw [Kra-kuitl] religious figure of the sorcerer, Hearne suggested that, “while Curtis’s film undermines the validity of a Native belief system by presuming its demise, Kunuk’s film demonstrates its power through the depiction of shamanic communication and reincarnation” (320).

On the one hand, this system was so well woven into traditional life that the legend says nothing about it. On the other hand, eighty years of Christianization had made it very difficult for Paul Apak and the elders who advised him, to paint a true, undistorted picture. Judeo-Christian moral values had shaped the upbringing of the Inuit founders of Isuma and these values could not simply be swept away. The shamanism reinvented for the film is therefore, one that integrates the main ritual and beliefs of the past with the Christian ideas about good, evil and forgiveness. (203)<sup>38</sup>

To be sure, forgiveness is not a Christian invention. In a sense this is the way in which oral history differs from written history—it can be adapted, though this time we also have the video archived interviews of the elders. d’Anglure notes that “such a sympathetic portrayal of shamanism would have been unthinkable twenty years ago when even discussion of these practices was strictly forbidden by the Church” (203). And yet, it is not simply the return to the representation of shamanism that is significant, but the ability to change the story told by Igloodik elders to align it with present day points of view from the now primarily Christian Inuit community. This is an acknowledgement of history, and of the present reality of Inuit beliefs and values, which are a product of that history. The process of deciding on how to do this was done in the community, with the involvement

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<sup>38</sup> Revenge plots, or more precisely, stories about villains who are killed by the hero in a justly concluded war between good and evil, are common in oral stories around the world, including the West, where they have become a staple of Hollywood films. For me, as for some reviewers, banishment seemed to be an “authentic” example of an Inuit solution to the problem of wrongdoing. I wonder how many other times, in this film and others, I have seen something that I took as “authentic” simply because of its context or presentation, while it may in fact have been a contemporary adaptation of something—my general ignorance of Inuit traditions a precondition for this misunderstanding.

of Southerners, but the final decision was made in and by the community, with the full knowledge of the elders and the members of the Isuma team. Though largely out of site of the cinema-going public, the alteration of the ending of the legend is a significant act.

d'Anglure provides an explanation for a particular ethnographic alteration in *The Fast Runner* relating to shamanistic practices. In the scene following the ritual tying-up of the two shamans, a necklace is passed from the murdered camp leader to Oki.

d'Anglure explains that necklaces were used “to signify the shaman’s powers, as signs of authority and power. Tuurngarjuaq, the evil shaman, wears a necklace of polar bear claws and teeth. Kumaglak, the camp leader murdered at the start of the film, wears one of walrus teeth and small walrus tusks. In both cases, the animal is their helping spirit” (219).<sup>39</sup> According to d'Anglure, the necklace was not the most important sign of power, it was instead a belt, although the Isuma scriptwriting team chose to use the necklace. He explains that in the Igloodik region, the belt, which was embellished by animal bones and teeth, claws and pieces of animal skin, was a shaman’s “identity card” and his most important adornment (217-219). From a strictly informative, ethnographic standpoint, this alteration is quite significant.

As Jessica Shadian notes, “Canadian Inuit were also subject to ongoing religious rivalries, as Protestants and Catholics fought among themselves to be the first to convert the Inuit” (87). Shadian explains that, “both missionary groups began conversions by targeting the Inuit shamans. To successfully de-legitimize Inuit religious beliefs, they first had to falsify the work of the Shamans” (87). Whether Protestant or Catholic, the *angakoq* (shamans) were the “common enemy” (Shadian 98). Citing Mitchell, Shadian

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<sup>39</sup> Helping spirits, part of the Inuit shamanism belief system, are mediums between the living and the ancestors.

notes that, “The Christian missionaries in particular measured their progress toward religious conversion through “the absence of Shamanistic paraphernalia” (87).<sup>40</sup> The centrality of the paraphernalia in *The Fast Runner* then, is in part a response to this history. This is a community with the confidence to deliberate and to change a key point in a myth. But this does not mean that the ethnographically accurate version is lost, as it has been recorded in video, transcribed and stored.

### *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen (2006)*

While shamanism is an important part of the story in *The Fast Runner*, it is the central theme of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, Isuma’s second feature film. Co-produced by Igloolik Isuma and the Danish production company Barok Films, the movie premiered at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival. It tells the story of the Inuit encounter with the Danish/Greenlandic explorer Knud Rasmussen and his companions Therkel Mathiassen and Peter Freuchen in 1922. Rasmussen left behind a large body of material, much of it in diaries he kept during his long Arctic voyages.

Set in and around Igloolik in the year 1922, the script is based on two of the twenty-six volumes produced by Rasmussen of his observations and conversations with

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the details of this history see “Traders, Missionaries, and Police: A Community of Interest”, in Marybelle Mitchell’s 1996 book *From Talking Chiefs to a Native Corporate Elite: The Birth of Class and Nationalism among Canadian Inuit*.

Igloolik Inuit in 1922.<sup>41</sup> Rasmussen's journals were combined with Igloolik oral tradition and the memories of elders in the community, producing a screenplay that, "reflects the self-understandings of the contemporary Inuit of Igloolik as much as what Rasmussen's journals record" (Wood 147). Rasmussen spoke Inuktitut, "enabling him to record the songs and stories of the peoples he befriended and sought out as subjects" (Rowin). One of those subjects was named Avva (Pakak Innuksuk in the film), the last of the Igloolik shamans. As Wood explains, the film "provides a glimpse of how Christianity took root among the Inuit by focusing on one family, led by the shaman Avva... as its members agonize about the prospects of abandoning traditional customs and spirits" (147).

The opening scene fades in to the sound of men's voices singing; several people in traditional clothing are standing in a small dark room (a tent) lit by a hanging kerosene lamp. In the foreground, a kettle sits on the edge of some kind of stove. The credits introduce the title of the film, "A series of events reported in... The Journals of Knud Rasmussen." It gradually becomes clear that the people, including a young woman crouched in the foreground, are preparing to pose for a photograph. The title indicates the time and place: Arctic Canada, January 1912. Finally, the man who has been busy setting up the scene sits beside the young girl, smiling and facing forward, ready for the camera to take a picture. After a few seconds the music fades out and the image becomes still. A few seconds later the frame fades to black and white before the camera begins to zoom, Ken Burns style, to a close up of the girl in the foreground. As it pans towards her face,

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<sup>41</sup> Rasmussen spoke Kalaallisut, the language spoken by the Kalaallisut Inuit of West Greenland, as well as Inuktituk, which is closely related. He spent his early years living in Ilulissat, Greenland among the Kalaallit Inuit. His Inuit-Danish mother, whose own mother was Inuit, was Lovise Rasmussen, née Fleische.

we hear the voice of an elderly woman: “I am called Usarak, though I was named Apak when I was a young woman...during the time of the story I am telling you now.” This reversal of the technological lineage of the camera, from video back to black and white photography, presents a metaphor for the process of recollection that is taken up by the story.

In his review of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, Michael Rowin suggests that, “The real drama is in the sorrowful disappearance of shamanism, Aua (sic) and his small tribe’s way of life, tradition, and source of comfort and joy.” The very last scene of the film dramatizes this simply and powerfully, where Aua (sic) and his band, must join with a group of Inuit who have been converted to Christianity and who have much-needed provisions. Walking along in the expanse of snow, it is dusk and he is alone, like the lone man in the first scene of *The Fast Runner*. He stops, and sighs, before speaking. “I am grateful for all the help you have given me in my life,” he cries in a plaintive voice, “But now I have to send my spirit helpers away.”

The scene cuts to two men and an older woman, there is nothing to indicate they are not actual people. “Now I will follow the road of Jesus and you have to leave me.” “So now, go away!” They look at him and continue to do so for several seconds: “You all have to go away! So now, go away! You have to leave now!” The figures begin to wail and cry, and the elderly woman is helped by the others as they turn and walk into the distance wailing and crying. The scene cuts back to Avva in close up, then to a medium shot of him alone in the dusk, and as he walks back out of the frame alone, there is no sound. The scene fades to black to the tune of an Inuktitut singer, then credits roll with a

series of historical photographs showing Avva, Rasmussen and his companions and several other characters who featured in the story.<sup>42</sup>

If there is something that people of any culture and any age can understand, it is that the need for friendship is a universally understood part of what it means to be human. The experience of losing a friend is a universal way to communicate the feeling of loss. And here Avva must expel helping spirits that are conceived as ancestors who were there to guide and help him. This is very clearly shown by the helping spirit who showed Atanarjuat the right way to go when he was escaping his would-be murderers. It's the simple kind of help that one would expect from a good friend. The experience of losing one's friends communicates a basic and quasi-universal experience as a means to communicate the importance of a historical experience faced by Inuit communities forced to give up their traditional belief system. It is not really the acceptance of Christianity per se that causes the damage, but the insistence that Shamanism be abandoned. As many syncretic religions show, Christianity can coexist with traditional religion.

This scene, perhaps more than any other in the film, expresses in a very elemental and easily understood manner what it must have been like to be forced to abandon a belief system and religion. It is a loss of helping spirits, a loss of help, and Inuit are alone. In contrast to the difficult scene that introduced *The Fast Runner*, it is a powerful demonstration of the argument that cinema as storytelling can be a very good cross-cultural ambassador—we must just listen, not analyze, without being afraid of being lost in the story and identifying with it. This scene expresses the true ramifications of the

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<sup>42</sup> The music is the great Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, who rose to international fame at the turn of the nineteenth century, singing *M'appari tutt'amor*.



church's imposition of Christianity and its inability to accept any Inuit religious remnants. d'Anglure and other Arctic anthropologists have carried out extensive research on shamanism. Laugrand and Oosten's book on the transition from Inuit Shamanism to Christianity adds to this body of literature. It provides a detailed anthropological record with elders input that is an excellent reference. Yet the final scene in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* communicates the sense of human loss on a level that can be understood by almost anyone of any age. No amount of excellent scholarship could communicate this painful experience in such an elemental way. It is a universal image.

*The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* was less commercially and critically successful than *The Fast Runner*. I would argue that this is due in part to the fact that the story is not as compelling, but also because the editing seems not to really consider the need to draw in and hold the attention of the audience. Stories are told within the story, but it is about an anthropologist encountering Inuit, and seemed like it was mostly an exercise in cultural documentation. According to Rowin, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* "serves as a record of those long vanished practices, customs, and values of a culture radically altered by its encounter with the West." Rowin comments that the results of this cultural recording "are simultaneously revelatory and pedantic," given that "large stretches of the film involve Aua (sic) speaking to Rasmussen, his Danish partners, and the camera as he explains how he became a shaman or teaches the fundamental principles of the religion."

The film certainly didn't feel like the kind of film that would inspire children to role play in the streets, although it can be an important means for the community to make peace with a painful episode in its history. As a Southerner with limited knowledge of Inuit shamanism, taboo practices, or the history of Igloodik in the twentieth century, I

found that the balance between what was “discoverable” through observation and what required background knowledge made *The Fast Runner* more accessible than *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. *The Fast Runner*’s themes of brotherhood, adultery, good vs. evil, the usurper, and even the clarity of the running scene meant that while there were things I didn’t understand, they didn’t prevent me from understanding and engaging in the flow of the story. Yet it was more the explanatory aspect of the characters, the documentary style interviews of Awa that broke the fiction of the story in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. According to Rowin’s appraisal, “Cohn and Kunuk don’t do quite enough to engage narrative interest.” He continues:

a harlequin romance a la Malick’s Smith and Pocahontas clearly wouldn’t be appropriate, but the love triangle involving Avva’s insolent daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik) and two husbands—one inept and cast out, the other dead and her partner in rapturous, hallucinatory sex dreams—doesn’t contain a high level of conflict or spark. Likewise, the sociologically vital but otherwise unremarkable scenes of the Inuit people’s increasing dependence on foreign trade make little impression.

Rowin comments that it is likely that Terrence Malick’s film *The New World*, a historical drama depicting the founding of the Jamestown, Virginia settlement and dramatized by the characters of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas released a year earlier to great fanfare, would eclipse any possible distribution of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. He suggests:

Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk have fashioned out of their source material a complex, haunting treatment every bit as vital as *The New World*, but without the distracting showiness or big-budget gloss. Here's a prediction: may *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* ever see the light of day (or dark of theater) in America, it won't receive nearly the amount of attention as its counterpart, brutal and abstract and unsexy as it is.

The same problem faced Burden when he made *The Silent Enemy*. As Benjamin commented, "Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep the story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (89). Perhaps this was more difficult to do given that the script was based on the journals of Knud Rasmussen, whose interest in the Inuit of Igloolik was as an ethnographer and explorer, as opposed to a storyteller.

### Recreating the Legend of The Fast Runner

In the legend as told by the Igloolik elders, Atanarjuat avenges his brother's murder by killing Oki. In his synopsis cited earlier, Gray wrote: "After learning to reclaim his spiritual path, and with the guidance of his elder advisor, Atanarjuat returns to rescue his family from both human and supernatural evil. Spurning a chance to continue the cycle of hatred, envy, and killing, he breaks the curse" (95). In the film, Oki, along with his two henchmen, are banished, a move that while possibly a fate similar to death, signals that at some point in the future the groups could be reunited. The ending begins

when Atanarjuat arrives at Oki's camp in the spring. Oki doesn't seem to be threatened by Atanarjuat's reappearance, although for a while I have the impression that he is faking it, getting ready to finish off what he started with his two henchmen when the group is not present. But the two henchmen confirm that Oki is indeed under a spell, after having eaten an Arctic hare he caught the day before. Atanarjuat invites them inside as a sign of reconciliation. He prepares the interior floor to make it smooth with water, then creates what could be characterized as skates or boot grips which he buries just outside the entrance of the igloo along with a piece of wood that looks something like a policeman's truncheon: a weapon of sorts, intended to warn, but not to kill.

When they wrote the ending of *The Fast Runner*, the Isuma script-writing team wanted it to carry a message of reconciliation rather than of revenge. This was the wish of Paul Apak Angilirq, who first conceived the project and who wrote an early version of the script before his death in 1998 (d'Anglure 203). There is a careful method at work here: discussions involving a script-writing team, elders and a sense of how the community wants to represent itself: to members of the community (now and in the future), to other Inuit in the North and beyond, to Canadians and to the world. I suggest that this is both in real and metaphorical terms, an example of a community that is at once preserving its cultural patrimony, while adapting it to current circumstances.

In a 2002 review of *The Fast Runner*, Amir Hussain writes that while the Arctic landscapes shown in the film are striking, "there are many disappointing facets to the film." (par. 3). Most of Hussain's critique focuses on the way in which the story is told. "To begin with," he writes, "the opening section with the mysterious stranger is quite confusing. Without naming the stranger as a shaman or an evil presence, the action could

have been better scripted to explain the plot to the viewers—the vast majority of whom know very little about Inuit myth and culture” (par. 3).

Hussain mentions other “minor irritants” but focuses his argument on *The Fast Runner*’s narrative (par. 4). “At a deeper level,” he argues, “what is more troubling is this “Joseph Campbell lite” understanding of mythology. While Campbell did much to popularize an understanding of myth, he also reduced it to the hackneyed story of The Hero, the myth of the modern male-existentialist loner” (par. 5). According to Hussain, the film can best be described as “a pastiche focused around yet another Brown saviour figure, this time sadly constructed by a colonized people” (par. 5). In this regard, argues Hussain, the non-violent ending is the culmination of the film’s capitulation to mainstream Western cinema’s narrative requirements: *The Fast Runner* “does what colonizers want Brown saviours like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, or Nelson Mandela to do: he lives out the gospel of non-violence. The evil ones are not killed, but only banished” (par. 6). Hussain finds this troubling, as if it represents the internalization of colonial power, a kind of post-colonial cinematic imposition disguised as Indigenous affirmation.

I believe Hussain misses the point: it is in fact the use of the popular story that motivates audiences to pay attention despite the potential feeling of confusion, which in a museum or classroom—or documentary—might lose the attention of the audience, certainly in social media or in reviews there would be less buzz. This is not a capitulation to colonial history, but a claim to be in history, and to have the right to live well both as Inuit and as the ancestors of a community that had been Christianized, one that does not

have the option to go back in time to the days when Inuit shamanism defined Inuit spiritual beliefs.

Doris Baltrushchat points out that, “Isuma’s narratives are rooted in Inuit spirituality and symbolism, which are not “translated” to provide non-Inuit viewers easier access to their meaning” (133). Sophie McCall discusses the fact that some of the songs are not fully translated in the subtitles: “The film’s strategy of partial translation highlights the space of cultural contact and difference in acts of textualizing orature and orality, resisting the powerful explanatory impetus of the genre of the ethnographic monograph or film” (189). Balikci wanted to resist this as well. Making a similar point, Peter Dickinson also notes that both in their earlier works such as the *Qaggiq* [Gathering Place] (1998) and in *The Fast Runner*, Isuma’s choice not to orient Southern viewers, with explanations using maps or voice over narration, differentiates their concern with ethnographic reconstruction from the tradition of ethnographic films (98-99). Griffiths notes that in the early days of cinema, “spectators of visual anthropology seldom possessed the kind of extrafilmic information required to decode an image’s intended meaning” (169). This situation continues in the present. *The Fast Runner’s* story invites the viewer to identify with the characters so as to understand what is perhaps imperfect, but still important—as useful as any scientifically detached ethnographic objectivity. What is so interesting is the manner in which this ethnographic observation and the story interact.

Lucas Bessire argues that the overwhelmingly positive response of critics to *The Fast Runner* can be explained in part by the fact that the film provided an occasion for

“primitivist escapism” (834).<sup>43</sup> Bessire notes that Cohn, the only non-Inuit member of the Isuma Productions, “has explicitly framed the film with primitivist terminology,” referring to *The Fast Runner* as “a timeless story...set far in the past” (835). He also notes that this same language was used to promote the film, including on the official website (in this case quoted by reviewer Randall Smith) which claims that the film tells, “a universal story with emotions people all over the world can understand. It is also totally Inuit” (quoted in Bessire 835). Bessire notes Harald Prin’s argument:

As Prin notes, it is precisely the primitivist double bind that allows such familiar cultural niches of the public imagination to be modified or influenced from within. *Atanarjaut* (and other indigenous dramas) can be seen as a deliberate political engagement with social categories of primitivism in order to open a space within dominant signifying practices for indigenous voices, as well as tap into financial and material resources—thereby undermining the perpetuation of primitivism through simultaneously activating it. (836)

This is a risky strategy, given that it triggers stereotypes—noble savage, vanishing race, happy-go-lucky Inuit survivor - that have dominated the history of cinematic representations of North America’s Indigenous people. In this sense, Bessire sees *The Fast Runner* as “an activist film par excellence,” but also “a gamble in optimism” (836).

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<sup>43</sup> Bessire compares *The Fast Runner*’s success to *Dances With Wolves* in this respect, and notes that *Smoke Signals* received neither the critical nor box office success of *The Fast Runner*, possibly because it was a contemporary film (835).

But does showing pre-colonial life of Inuit necessarily mean activating a primitivist experience for the viewer? Flaherty saw his film as a means to correct the stereotypical representation of Inuit that preceded it. Bessire asserts that *The Fast Runner* is clearly not a primitivist film, and this is in part because it was motivated by a desire to teach traditional Inuit culture to younger members of the Igloodik community.

I believe that there is another important reason why reviewers loved the film. Southern audiences have been accustomed through anthropological film, documentaries and photography to be presented with information about Inuit. This “showing how” legacy of *Nanook of the North* and the *Netsilik Eskimo Series* appeals to an observational mode of viewing. However, while this is still very prominent in the experience of the film, the fact that the drama is the reason for showing all this, and not simply anthropological curiosity or a desire to learn about “the other” is a significant change.

*The Fast Runner* does not represent the present, or the colonial past. The movie is set long before the arrival of Europeans or their North American descendants; there is no encounter, and the conflict occurs between Inuit, who are not identified as “Inuit” but simply as the people in the story. Bessire suggests that the sense of the film’s universality, as commented on by many reviewers, “may play into dominant society’s desire to appropriate indigenous identity,” which Bessire notes has been well documented—he cites Ward Churchill’s 1992 book *Fantasies of the Master Race: literature, cinema and the colonization of American Indians* among other works (834). However, as Knopf writes:



Flaherty felt that Inuit are only good at showing their external activities; Kunuk felt the opposite, and made a film about spiritual conflicts and human relations set in a melodramatic plot about love, hate, murder, and revenge. In doing so, he very often works with close-ups on faces in order to suggest thoughts and feelings. By showing humor, sex, and bodily functions (such as a scene in which the brothers are peeing into the snow), Kunuk normalizes Flaherty's immaculate Inuit superhero and the notion of the noble savage without bodily needs. (329-330)

Although *The Fast Runner* and the other works by Isuma have done more than most to undermine long-standing stereotypes of Inuit, Southerners were not the intended audience of the film. This is not to say that the filmmakers wanted to appeal only to Inuit, as the presence of subtitles makes clear; for a feature film costing two million dollars, limiting it to an Inuit only audience would be impractical, as the film's marketers knew well. If the film itself may be difficult to follow at times, the official Isuma website for the film is very helpful. Offering online diaries, historical maps and other materials, the website is not simply a promotional tool; it provides audiences who may be interested with detailed background information to supplement what is available through seeing the film itself. *The Fast Runner* was made to appeal to Inuit in the same way other filmmakers make films about their life, their culture, telling their stories to people who are part of a cultural and linguistic group. This is especially important to Inuit in light of a long history of being represented, both to others and to themselves, by sometimes racist but often ostensibly sympathetic and observant Southerners such as Flaherty.

Delphine Jeanroy argues that *The Fast Runner* is “an assertion of the existence of an independent Inuit cinematographic art,” and suggests that the film’s message in this regard is “all the more forceful in that the film seems to be welcoming the Western viewer as an unexpected guest” (136). This is about welcoming a Southern audience, not packaging Inuit culture to appeal to one as Curtis, Burden, Flaherty, and even Balikci had done. The film’s website states that, “Atanarjuat gives international audiences a more authentic view of Inuit culture and oral tradition than ever before, from the inside and through Inuit eyes” (Isuma TV, “Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)”).

Isuma’s claim to authenticity does not depend on a technological argument, but on cultural values, memory practices, and the desire of Inuit audiences to view productions that are made from their point of view. Here, the camera provides the means to re-assert the continuing relevance of traditional practices and oral traditions and their close connection to the land and place. The fact that the film takes place before colonialism not only liberates Inuit to think of their story as simply a human story, it also liberates the southern viewer to think of Inuit simply as human beings dealing with the problems of life, community, survival, power and human relations. This means that even though the specificity of the ethnography is informative, and will be so in fifty years, the story, like all great stories, will be relevant to each new generation.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In 1995, the year Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak Angilirq, Pauloosie Qulitalik and Norman Cohn began working on an idea for a feature film based on the Igloolik legend of *The Fast Runner*, Faye Ginsburg discussed the relationship between Indigenous media and ethnographic film in an article published in *Visual Anthropology Review*. Ginsberg argued:

Because the assaults on Indigenous people have been so severe, these current efforts to re-assert a cultural and historical presence through a widely accessible media form are particularly important, because their self-consciousness about cultural production suggests a close parallel to the project of anthropology, yet one whose urgency is far greater than any academic agenda” (Ginsberg, “Parallax” 64).

Indigenous media is especially important, given that, as Ginsburg wrote several years later in 2003, “the capacity to narrate stories and retell histories from an indigenous point of view...through media forms that can circulate beyond the local has been an important force for constituting claims for land and cultural rights, and for developing alliances with other communities” (“Screen Memories,” 79). As part of this effort, Isuma’s publication of the script of *The Fast Runner*, repeated again with the publication of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen: a sense of memory and high-definition Inuit storytelling* in 2008, engage with sources of colonial and post-colonial intellectual authority, as do the

films themselves. This is part of what Ginsberg is suggesting when she notes that film and video by Indigenous people and communities have served as a productive counterpoint with which to view ethnographic film, a kind of dialogue on representation (“Native Intelligence,” 237).

In *Isuma: Inuit Video Art* (2008) and *The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat* (2010), Evans provides a detailed account of how a small production company based in the remote Inuit community of Igloodik in Nunavut produced one of the most successful Canadian films in recent decades. Based on research Evans carried out in the community over a period of nine months, the books are excellent resources for readers interested in learning about Isuma’s community-based filmmaking practice. Evans’s 2010 book on *The Fast Runner: Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat* is the first publication in a new book series launched by the University of Nebraska Press (xi). In the book’s introduction, editors Randolph Lewis and David Delgado explain that the series will produce books that feature individual films “by and about indigenous people,” noting that books on *Dances With Wolves* (1990) and Walt Disney film *Pocahontas* (1995) are currently in preparation (xii).<sup>44</sup>

Lewis and Delgado explain that one of the objectives of the book series is “to encourage teachers to use more Native film in the classroom” (xii). With this in mind, they suggest Evans’ book, “strikes an appropriate balance between scholarly depth and narrative flow, making it both teachable in the undergraduate classroom and readable by the non-specialist. Anyone interested in the intricacies of a great story—and the legend of

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<sup>44</sup> Joanna Hearne’s 2012 book featuring *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising* is the third publication in the series.

Atanarjuat certainly qualifies—will enjoy this book” (Evans, *The Fast Runner* xii-xiii).

While the educational mandate of the series is commendable, I believe that the categorization of *Dances With Wolves* and *Pocahontas* as “native films” alongside *The Fast Runner* and *Smoke Signals* downplays the historical importance of *The Fast Runner* and other feature films made by Indigenous directors and their communities, as a response to the long history of cinema about native people. *The Fast Runner* is an important milestone in the ongoing effort by First Nations, Metis and Inuit media creators and communities in Canada to take greater control over the means of their representation, both to themselves and others. The critical and box office success of *The Fast Runner*—it was the highest grossing Canadian film in 2001—demonstrated that a community-based Indigenous media production company could produce a feature-length fiction film that appeals to a wide audience (Bessire 832).

In the book containing the full script of *The Fast Runner*, published jointly by Coach House Books and Isuma in the year following *The Fast Runner*'s release in 2002, Kunuk asked a series of questions: “Can Inuit bring storytelling into the new millennium? Can we listen to our elders before they all pass away? Can producing community TV in Igloolik make our community, region and country stronger? Is there room in Canadian filmmaking for our way of seeing ourselves?” Ten years on, it is safe to say that the first three questions can be answered in the affirmative. As for the final question, the jury is still out. As Gray pointed out in his recent book *Cinema: A Visual Anthropology* (2010), in the context of the development of Indigenous media productions in the last several decades, feature films like *The Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*

“remain something of an exception to the rule, largely due to lack of resources and training” (96).

Introducing her book *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens* Beverly Singer explains: “This study grew out of my interest in tribal storytelling as a transfer of cultural information and in its intersection with the growth of filmmaking by Native Americans...My discussion of these films and videos draws on my experiences as both a Native American and a video maker” (1-2). A filmmaker by profession, Singer acknowledges that all filmmaking is by nature “a risk-taking adventure,” although she asserts that “too often the rationale given by funding organizations for rejecting Native American film proposals is that they are not as good as other proposals and that as filmmakers we lack experience” (9). Singer suggest that, “The underlying attitude is that we Native filmmakers are unconventional in our approach to filmmaking and too often personally invested to a fault in wanting to make films about our people” (9) She counters that “it is only by our participation in filmmaking that we can help to create mutual understanding and respect” (9). As Singer affirms:

What really matters to us, is that we be able to tell our own stories in whatever form we choose. This is not to say that whites cannot tell a good Native story, but until very recently whites—to the exclusion of Native people—have been the only people given the necessary support and recognition by society to tell Native stories in the medium of film.

(2)

For most of my life, I have lived in an urban centre not far from the Canada/United States border. While I now live in the Yukon and have visited Nunavik, I have never been north of the Arctic Circle, although I hope to visit Nunavut, and in particular Igloolik, at some point in the future. I share my remote point of view relative to the Arctic with the vast majority of Canadians and an even larger majority of international audiences, past and present. These audiences have depended on the informative value of written accounts, objects, drawings, sculpture, photographs and films brought back by explorers, photographers, filmmakers, anthropologists, journalists, and politicians—most of them visitors to the North—to see and learn about the Inuit culture and history. After seeing *The Fast Runner* a decade ago, I understood that not only was it vital that Inuit themselves communicate their culture and its stories, but that this could be done in a manner that, on the one hand, allowed me to appreciate that there is much that I don't know about Inuit culture and history, while on the other hand I identified with the characters portrayed in the film in many ways.

## Postscript

In 2008, Isuma launched Isuma.tv, a free Internet video portal for global Indigenous video that made it available to both local and international audiences. A year later, Isuma launched the Nunavut Independent TV Network on the platform of Isuma TV. The network allows remote communities to access a high-speed version of Isuma TV without the broadband access that makes even YouTube difficult to view (Ginsburg, “Native Intelligence” 248-9). “One of the key aspects of Isuma TV,” writes Baltrushchat, is “to create an archive of stories, cultural practice and traditions for future generations, while promoting international access to indigenous media” (139).

The website for *The Fast Runner*, now part of the Isuma.tv website, includes a Production diary with interviews with Apak, Kunuk and Cohn, as well as a page entitled “Filmmaking Inuit-style,” which includes an optimistic appraisal of the potential spinoff value of *The Fast Runner* for Igloolik and Nunavut more generally:

Altogether, the production employed approximately 60 Igloolik Inuit as cast, crew, and support staff. Inuit jobs and local spending on Atanarjuat pumped more than \$1.5 million into the local economy of Igloolik. This film will be the cornerstone of a new Nunavut film industry: job-intensive and Inuit-owned. With Igloolik's 60% unemployment rate and ten times the national rate of suicide, these economic and cultural benefits were and are both deserved and desperately needed.



Despite these hopes, after two decades of existence, Igloodik Isuma Productions filed for receivership in 2011, exemplifying the challenges of using community-based video as a means for economic development. Fortunately Isuma.tv is not affected by the closing of the company and will continue to operate (CBC News). In a December 2011 story about Isuma's closing in the *Globe and Mail*, Guy Dixon reported that earlier that year, Isuma was "forced to file for receivership in Quebec, citing reportedly \$750,000 in debts" ("Out in the cold"). The move was imposed by the Rankin Inlet based Atuqtuarvik Corporation which had lent Isuma \$500,000 in 2009. Dixon reported that there is concern for Isuma's extensive film archive. He quotes Norman Cohen who said at the time of the announcement: "We're dealing with a receiver that's a large accounting firm in Montreal who has no stake and no interest in the cultural value of the company or of the materials" ("Out in the cold").

Knopf points out that, "Today there is a large market in the governmental and educational sectors for documentaries about Indigenous cultures and issues. Indigenous filmmakers only have a small share of this market and these neo-ethnographic films compete, often victoriously, for space against autonomous documentaries by Indigenous filmmakers" (56). The closing in 2011 of Isuma shows that the struggle is very much an ongoing one. A dramatic series, for example would have the added benefit of allowing viewers to learn in between episodes, either by viewing and reading web-based learning materials, or by interacting with others through social media.

Dixon reported that Derek Mazur, chief executive of Nunavut Film, sees potential in online film distribution, and Isuma.tv's continuing existence certainly provides a

platform for further development in this direction. He quotes Mazur, who said that, “The work that’s being done is being sold around the world. It’s not just for a Northern audience” (“Out in the cold”). *The Fast Runner* has an important role to play in making this happen, with the historical development of Indigenous media since the 1970s as the larger context for this achievement. Yet as Dixon comments:

Getting a broadcaster (or, even harder, a film distributor) to agree to take on a project is another challenge, particularly given the notion that films made in the North appeal to a limited audience. Most broadcasters are only able to help fund documentaries and smaller projects, creating a structure that discourages feature-length dramas.

Attempting to pick up where they left off, Kunuk and Cohn founded another company in 2010 called Kingulliit Productions. According to Isuma.tv, Kingulliit (Inuktitut for “the next generation”) is “a majority Inuit-owned multimedia production company based in Igloolik, Nunavut” that “updates and replaces Igloolik Isuma Productions Inc.” (*Isuma TV*, “About Kingulliit Productions Inc”). Kingulliit continues the tradition established by Isuma for producing independent Inuktitut-language films and TV from the Inuit point of view, while recognizing the importance of new media and innovative technologies to the future of communications in the north in the twenty-first century.

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