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# Fourth World Film: Politics of Indigenous Representation in Mainstream and Indigenous Cinema

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Fourth World Film: Politics of Indigenous Representation in Mainstream and Indigenous  
Cinema

by  
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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted to the  
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## ABSTRACT

I evaluate the relationship of Indigenous, or Fourth World, Cinema, to Western Cinema in a society permeated by tropes of popular, western cinema. I examine the stereotypes of indigenous people commonly perpetuated through this mainstream cinema, while considering the relationship between these tropes and the social influences that have perpetuated them. I contextualize these tropes over the past ninety years within such social influences as imperialism, racism, and the developing disciplines of anthropology and evolutionary biology.

With a basis in Inuit culture and (colonial) history, I scrutinize the effects of mainstream cinema on the indigenous people it portrays. I also examine the function of Indigenous Cinema, the theories for and against it, and the possible colonial attitudes of its critics. I focus on specific mainstream cinema, and specific Indigenous cinema, looking at dimensions vital to indigenous culture, which also correspond with colonial appropriation: conceptions of geography and land, history and time, and language.

As Indigenous cinema negotiates its relationship between mainstream cinema, it must navigate through its colonial past, neither forgetting, nor forced to always speak in opposition to this past. Its emphasis on self-representation seeks to replace the tropes of mainstream cinema, and even as indigenous cinema negotiates with the effect of mainstream cinema, it is negotiating Indigenous identity. The Indigenous films by Isuma-Igloolik show that this emergence, acknowledgement of colonial crimes, and continual creation of new Indigenous cinema, beyond the bounds of Western cinema, can be possible.

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ABSTRACT (1)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT (1)

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: An Indigenous Cinematic Movement

The interaction between colonial ethnographic and documentary films of Inuit culture (such as *Nanook on the North*, Robert Flaherty, 1922), and postcolonial indigenous-made films depicting Inuit life (including the Isuma-Igloolik<sup>1</sup> films *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, 2001, and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, 2006, by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn), reflects the deeper historical relationship between imperial/colonial conceptions of the Inuit and present-day Inuit self-representation. This complex relationship is mired in hundreds of years of colonial history, politics of exploration and exotic desire, ethnographic assumptions, and forced acculturation, counterbalanced by Inuit politics of self-representation, self-determination, and reclamation of cultural history. Analyses of these films bring into question their different objectives, methods of depiction of Inuit culture, as well as issues of ethnographic authority and authenticity of source material.

The corpus of recent indigenous films I will discuss critiques and responds to incomplete or inaccurate representations and stereotypes often perpetuated by mainstream media. I will evaluate these films as response films, not only because they respond directly to *Nanook of the North* (Evans, 128), but because they are statements of self-determination. They respond to colonial oppression, exploitation and exoticization, in which *Nanook of the North* plays its own significant part. These films respond to extenuating circumstances that stem from the colonial past, which the general population and mainstream cinema have tried successfully to forget. Because they respond to

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<sup>1</sup> *Isuma-Igloolik* (*Isuma* means “to think” in Inuktitut), is an Inuit production company in Igloolik, Nunavut.

colonial issues, some scholars argue indigenous films are ultimately situated within mainstream, national films, and bound by the Western invention of the camera.

A new movement in film, called Fourth-World, or Indigenous, Film, sees indigenous film as moving away from any ‘indebtedness’ to national film, reclaiming its history and land, creating its own conventions and techniques of filmmaking, and finally an autonomous identity, separate from any national or Western influence:

Indigenous filmmaker Barry Barclay developed his notion of a Fourth Cinema by defining it against its First, Second and Third counterparts, all of which he designates ‘invader Cinemas’. An Indigenous phenomenon—‘that’s Indigenous with a capital *I*,’ notes Barclay...it [grows] outside the national orthodoxy.”

(Columpar, xi)

Fourth World Film’s insistent focus on the real, continuing imperial legacy of colonization requires a verdict from the viewers, and gives the indigenous people and artists “visual sovereignty” and restorative justice (Raheja, 1). I will ultimately explore the unique place of Indigenous Cinema against the backdrop of the history of Western, or mainstream, cinema (Columpar, 9-11); how it departs from early film traditions; and whether an autonomous Indigenous Film can be possible in an increasingly transnational, global world (Columpar, 9-11).

Ethnic studies scholar Arturo Aldama posits:

In the case of...Native Americans, we cannot discuss who ‘we are now’ without understanding the continued legacy of imperial violence and our strategic and spontaneous resistance to the forces of material and discursive colonialism.”

(Aldama, 3)

He goes on further to encourage “engag[ing] in strategies of resistance, opposition, and decolonization to colonialist practices of imperial patriarchal subjection” (Aldama, 3-4). He suggests only by first engaging in opposition to its own colonial history can the indigenous films then become autonomous.

It is precisely this resistance that has characterized Inuit political and artistic movements since the 1970s. The question becomes how integral resistance becomes to Inuit identity; has it simply led to a new sense of identity and reclamation of culture? Or is Inuit culture now locked in resistance against Western culture without an independent sense of identity?

## Chapter Two

### Anthropology, Imperialism and Cinema: Perpetuation of Racism

The legacy of cinema is inescapably tied up in the history of imperialism, as well as the beginnings of modern anthropology; both film and anthropology were invented at the height, and toward the end, of imperialism. The increasingly global world of the 1900's allowed many colonial explorers and travelers to go abroad, and fueled the desires of others to hear about such travels. The concomitant invention and ready availability of cameras allowed many short films to be made about far-off and 'exotic' places, which were then widely circulated by the early film companies. The Lumiere Brothers owned the first cinema company and delegated numerous camera-technicians all over the world; they were especially responsible, along with the current attitudes of imperialism and racism, for the prevalence and popularity of films that represented indigenous, or non-white people as ignorant, amusing, and 'other' (Barnouw, 11 &13). These short films were immensely popular, providing virtual travel, in which the viewers could "assume the role of colonial adventurers without ever losing their bearings" (Columpar, 6). It was just such a world that would be ready to be entranced by Robert Flaherty's feature-length film, *Nanook of the North* (Barnouw, 23).

These early films, *Nanook* included, deny their subjects any historical agency, "reduc[ing] them to a racial type that is reassuringly distinct from, but utterly legible to the typical white spectator" (Columpar, 4). This is the function and draw of the 'exotic':

During the nineteenth century...the exotic, the foreign, increasingly gained, throughout the empire, the connotations of a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be safely spiced...The key point here is

made by Renata Wasserman that ‘Indians exhibited at royal courts, or turkeys and parrots in cages’, could be seen as ‘innocent signifiers’ of an exotic other, one that could titillate the European public imagination while offering no threat since such exotics were, in her terms, ‘non-systematic.’ Isolated from their own geographical and cultural contexts, they represented whatever was projected onto them by the societies into which they were introduced. (Ashcroft, 94-95)

This important definition of the exotic is central to my interpretation of these films, and will be referred to multiple times. Early cinema relied on such decontextualized exotic for its material. It institutionalized the “looking relationship” between first-world viewers and fourth-world subjects, while conventionalizing representational tropes that are still present in present-day film (Wood, 6). Indigenous Film seeks to undo and refute these tropes, “remind[ing] the audience that ethnographic film is often merely a mirror reflecting the gaze of the Western viewer” (Raheja, 57-58).

This exoticization of indigenous people requires the indigenous to maintain their exact lifestyle and world-views as existed at the moment of colonial contact. This does not allow or acknowledge the Inuit culture’s development and responses to its changing world (Biesele, Hitchcock, & Schweitzer, 29-57). Exoticization denies indigeneity to the indigenous person or culture unless the ‘traditional’ modes or objects of exoticism or difference are displayed. Brian Winston, in *Claiming the Real, The Documentary Film Revisited*, devotes all of three pages to indigenous cinema:

But the camera is not a product of Navajo culture and nothing it produces can be anything other than Western...No amount of sophistication, it seems to me, will

allow a non-Western operator to produce anything but moving images almost entirely conditioned by or, at best...in struggle against the West. (Winston, 180)

Winston assumes that items are specifically bound by the culture in which they are made, that the globalizing influence of the Western world renders all differences obsolete and homogenized, and that all cultures that receive Western 'items' or technologies are suddenly transformed into 'Western' cultures, or at least only produce Western items. He denies that the camera in the hands of an indigenous person, beyond simply struggling against the Western influence, could transform the meaning of the camera and cinema. This argument is problematic, because of the underling assumptions concerning indigenous people that it is based on.

The roots of such thinking about indigenous cultures lie in the academic discipline of anthropology—which lies in the imperial exploits of European countries, specifically Great Britain—and within the academic discipline of evolutionary biology. As European imperialism and colonization of every part of the world went on, anthropologists began to 'scientifically' approach cultural or 'racial curiosities.' Anthropologists studied the indigenous inhabitants of new colonies, and their biological, cultural, and language differences, seeking to empirically delineate the similarities and differences between their 'civilized' society and the newly discovered indigenous 'savages.' The underlying politics of imperialism insisted that colonization was beneficial to the people being colonized; Spain even claimed all imperial profits were secondary to its religious mission. Imperialism worked best when justified by alleged good motives, and then theories of race and subordination. Anthropology aided imperialistic practices by giving scientific credence to and elaborating on theories of race, and providing racial

hierarchical ‘scientific’ systems (Gould, 402). These racial theories, which have since been scientifically proven wrong—in fact, obliterated—were arbitrarily elaborate and complex. Having different scales or methods of ranking societies and races, the one element they all had in common was that European white, upper-class people inevitably graced the top of the racial hierarchy, and generally people with darker skin were relegated to the lower places in the classification system. Before genetics and DNA were understood or available to clarify the nearly-identical genetic relationship between humans, these racial systems made broad guesses based on surface-level physical traits and measurements of arbitrary anatomical variations. While anthropologists’ systems of classification often contradicted other classification systems, they all agreed ultimately on white supremacy, and had great influence on continued imperialism.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural theories that tried to explain the ‘social evolution’ of civilizations were developed alongside racial theories. These theories justified the dominance of imperial England and other colonial powers, citing their ‘advanced’ and ‘evolved’ status as superior. Though early anthropological theories in social evolution and biological racism were soon replaced through advancing science and cultural understandings, fundamentals of them still hold credence for most of society, even in this ‘progressive’ era.

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<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists, led by Franz Boas, began working against racism, focusing on cultural variability, instead of biological determinism.

## Chapter Three

### Inuit Culture, Society, and History around Nunavut, Canada

The Inuit people are often referred to as Eskimos, which means ‘meat-eater’, but this is incorrect, because they are self-identifying as Inuit, which means ‘the people.’<sup>3</sup> It is generally considered correct to allow a culture to name itself, and the long use of ‘Eskimo’ is considered incorrect because the Inuit did not name themselves ‘Eskimo.’<sup>4</sup> The correct grammatical usage of Inuit is as an adjective or plural, or as a reference to the Inuit group as a whole. The correct usage, which I will follow in this paper, is as follows: One Inuit person should be referred to as an Inuk, or a person, two Inuit people are referred to as Inuuk, and three or more Inuit people as Inuit. An Inuk is not referred to as ‘an Inuit,’ and Inuit in the plural should not be referred to as ‘Inuits’ (“Way, Way Up!”).

The Inuit inhabit the Northern, sub-Arctic and Arctic regions of North America, including Greenland, Canada, and Alaska, but there are many distinct groups within the larger Inuit group, such as the Itimuvit, Yup’ik, Aleut, Netsilik, Labrador, Quebec, Igloodik, and Baffin Island Inuit. The Inuit are related to other sub-Arctic and Arctic indigenous, nomadic groups in Russia and the Nordic regions, including the Nenets and the Sámi. For political reasons, including self-determination and self-representation, the Inuit identify with other Inuit groups, and other indigenous groups across national boundaries (Lehtola). However, they are traditionally and historically quite distinct; their linguistic, cultural, and technological histories are diverse and rich, and should not be lumped together. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper cannot begin to address this

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<sup>3</sup> One Alaskan Inuit does self-identify specifically as Eskimo (Chance, 24).

<sup>4</sup> Again, renaming a culture is a hallmark of colonialism (Rabasa, 3).

cultural and technological diversity. However, the Inuit of *Nanook of the North* are Itimuvit, while the Inuit of the *Isuma* films in Igloolik and Baffin Island generally identify generally as Caribou Inuit.

Issues concerning source material are relevant to the ethnographic content contained here, and the content of the films themselves. Source material, and specific Inuit knowledge, is a complex issue. Because much of Inuit cultural traditions were degraded and deemed 'sinful,' there is an unfortunate lack of Inuit accounts of their own traditions and cultural histories. Inuit oral history has been culturally appropriated and written down in large part by Western scholars who simultaneously degraded it, and, in many cases, misinterpreted it. The western translations of these Inuit stories cannot offer the full understanding or context within which they represented the culture. Instead, they are decontextualized artifacts of Inuit culture, incapable of offering a holistic account of it. Some Inuit oral accounts, as well as a continuous flow of Inuit ethnographies, were the main available sources of information concerning Inuit culture. Ethnography as authentic background material is a compounded problem when used in the context of a discussion of Inuit representation. However, I also take information equally from the *Isuma* archives, including interviews with elders, and the films themselves.

Although Indigenous film critics warn that one cannot gain a full understanding of a culture from its films alone, the knowledge of how these films were made to represent their culture is insightful. The understanding of how these films were conceived, constructed, helped reinvent the Inuit community around them, is vital to comprehending their role within the community. They function to reawaken memory within the Nunavut community, and within Indigenous cinema. Though the Inuit elders of Nunavut are main

sources for the Isuma filmmakers, Isuma also relied on western, ethnographic sources. As I rely on both ethnographic and oral indigenous sources, I try to be as accurate and holistic as possible. However, both the films and this ‘background section’ must contend with problems of availability of original Inuit sources—i.e. dating from the time period portrayed in the films.

Inuit culture has changed much since pre-contact time, mainly in subsistence and economy, as well as the adoption of technologies, while much of the culture’s important values and characteristics remain the same. The necessity of foraging, and the harsh environment in which the Inuit thrived for thousands of years have caused the Inuit people to create strong community systems and extensive kinship-networks. In such a harsh environment, Inuit developed a culture that required everyone to contribute to the survival effort, where every individual was sufficiently provided for. Their traditional social structure, as seen in the films discussed was, unlike modern traditions of the nuclear family (mother, father, children), one of extended kin, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, married children, and often adopted children.

Within this formidable climate, the Inuit developed and adapted advanced hunting techniques and a great respect for and understanding of their environment. Knowledge of hunting, as well as many other survival skills were passed from one generation to the next. The emphasis on and respect for knowledge gave experienced elders, with little regard to gender, authority and honor within the group. Generally the Inuit engaged in ‘traditional’ labor division, with men teaching boys to hunt, and women teaching girls to skin hides and sew clothing, although this custom was somewhat flexible; if there was no son or boy to teach, it was common for girls to learn hunting techniques too. Extended

kin groups frequently traveled together, hunted together and shared game. However, the society was not entirely egalitarian; if a hunter was not contributing equally or had bad luck hunting, he and his family would not be left to starve, but were certainly not given the choice parts of the kill. Group members, living in close proximity and in dependence upon one another, went hunting together. Sometimes a man would take his wife hunting with him before she had a child. The communal sharing of hunting and chores allowed both polygyny and polyandry—i.e. either the woman or man could have more than one spouse (McElroy) (Rasmussen, 106).

In such large groups, the Inuit developed subtle codes for social interaction and conflict resolution. Communal pressure encouraged passivity in interactions with others, and an emphasis on the peaceful resolutions rather than vengeance was considered the wisest way to deal with problems. This led to the quiet, subtle expressions of dissatisfaction or anger, promoted by the idea that it is important to sacrifice one's individual complaints for the survival of the whole group. Personal prowess at a skill was handled quietly and humbly; praise was something to be won, bragging discouraged. These traditional values are reflected within the films, especially in the contrast between Oki's and Atanarjuat's different behaviors (*Atanarjuat*). With increasing capitalism, there has been a rise in individualism in Nunavut, leading to some disconnect from the large extended kin-group (McElroy, 164-166).

Traditionally only conflicts that were very problematic or disruptive to the whole group would rise to the surface. Only issues that were deemed plausible by more than one member of the group were publicly dealt with; the 'public' dealing of inter-personal conflicts went so far as to discuss them openly, or allow the aggrieved parties to vent

their frustration through public speaking or songs. However, these public displays of conflict did not necessarily result in a winner and loser, but by putting the issue in the open the matter could be considered as dealt with. That is, conflict surrounding a woman, or property, would demand a verdict, as shown in *Atanarjuat*, but this was also considered the appropriate method of conflict resolution, or atmosphere for talking things through.

Many religious components of Inuit life were concerned with ensuring safety and plenty of food at all times. In such an ecological environment, Inuit developed systems of ritual, and certain taboos in the method of hunting, food preparation, and food consumption. The main deity observed by the Inuit, Sedna (or Sila), is said to live in the sky, while a certain animism would be attributed to all animals, especially those hunted, and land (Rasmussen, 82) (McElroy, 45-6). Sedna was said to observe hunting and wanted none of the animals killed to have their souls wasted, so almost all parts of the animal had to be used. This practice of conservation, backed by a religious reasoning, was certainly vital to a way of life in which food was often scarce.

All films I will be analyzing were filmed in close geographic proximity to each other, *Nanook* taking place in the Hudson Bay area of Canada, and the Isuma films being filmed somewhat further North, on Baffin Island. The vast change between historical, political, and colonial circumstances from the 1920's to the first decade of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century are important to keep in mind when discussing these films. The periods during which Robert Flaherty filmed *Nanook of the North* (1920-1921), and Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn filmed the Isuma films (1999-2006), represent vastly different levels of Inuit political autonomy. During the 1920's, contemporary with Flaherty's film,

Western exploration brought changes to Inuit culture in Northeastern Canada, present-day Nunavut. In contrast, the Isuma films of Kunuk represent the late 1990's and early 2000's, a period of increasing political autonomy and indigenous identity. The films do not cover all events and eras significant to the Inuit, *Nanook* least of all, but it is important to be aware of the history of Arctic colonization to gain an accurate understanding of the colonial and historical context of these films.

Colonization of Canada and the native Inuit people follows roughly the same colonial patterns of other Arctic regions, especially Norway, Finland, and Greenland (Hertling, 6).<sup>5</sup> In 1625 Jesuit priests arrived in New France, starting a religious conversion that would greatly change the culture of Inuit people. This was the beginning of the degradation and preaching against practices of shamanism, the spiritual belief system central to Inuit society, and the institutionalized shaming of Inuit religions and belief-systems. By the 1600's, the French had a monopoly on the Canadian fur trade, which was soon taken over by the British. Trading posts throughout Canada brought Inuit and other of the Five Nations into contact with European traders, and introduced them to European goods, and then to a cash economy. Early trading posts were vigorously opposed by Mohawk warriors, who defended their hunting grounds, but the posts slowly gained ground as Montreal's locally owned fur-trading North West Company became profitable. These trading posts formed the nucleus for networks of official government; during the initial plunder of the continent for goods, governing was based upon the interests of merchant companies. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) was the de facto government, from 1670 until 1821, by which time colonial government had been

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<sup>5</sup> The Five Nations<sup>5</sup> city of Oshalega, or Hochelaga, was colonized by the French in 1535, and became the present-day city of Montreal (Obamsawin).

established. The HBC continued to have a significant presence in Canada, up until the 1900's and the decline of the fur trade. Profit, rather than governance, was always the prime goal, and only after the decline of the fur and whaling trade that "the company evolved into a mercantile business selling vital goods to settlers in the Canadian West"<sup>6</sup> (McElroy, 33-36).

The initial influence of Europeans upon Inuit communities was economic; the hunt for whales and furs brought trade in Western commodities to the Inuit, and consequently caused the Inuit to be dependent upon this trade with the Europeans, and on a capitalist economy. After the decline of whale population due to excessive hunting (around 1900) the HBC began to trap the Arctic fox. This led the Inuit to increase dependence on a trade-economy. By this time the Inuit had adapted their lifestyle to hunt part of the year and live further south, or near trading posts the rest of the year. However, the decline of the Arctic fox in the 1930's drastically reduced the ability of the Inuit to participate in the trade-economy. A concurrent decline in subsistence animals rendered the possibility of returning to more traditional hunting life-styles implausible.

By the time of *Nanook of the North*, most Inuit had ceased to be entirely nomadic, a change more or less forced upon them by colonial goals of lucrative and unsustainable profit. Their slow modernization, though mourned by Flaherty and many Inuit, did not cause as great a disintegration or loss of traditional culture as the rest of the century would bring. The 1950's and 60's saw a focused attempt at 'modernizing' the country, which meant ridding it of its minorities and trying to make everyone 'fit in' and

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<sup>6</sup> During the 1600s several Inuit people were taken, or kidnapped, from Canada and brought back to Europe. (McElroy, 27) Here they were shown in circuses or special exhibits.

assimilate (McElroy, 124-7). Like the Russian, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and American national governments, the post-WWII Canadian government chose to implement mandatory housing for families and residential schooling for indigenous children away from their families (Thisted) (Hertling) (Chance, 50-51). This educational model, like the education around the rest of the country, was nationalistic and alienating. Intending to create progress and ‘modernize’ all Canadians, Inuit “children were beaten when they spoke Inuktitut or practiced Inuit traditions, destroy[ing] a fundamental part of Inuit culture” (Evans, 127).

Flaherty presents a ‘pure’ and unchanged Inuit culture in his film. Imposing this identity upon the Inuit people allows only for a ‘pure’, ‘untainted’, ‘primitive’ culture, and sees all indigenous identity not as transmuted and adapted, but Westernized, acculturated, and thus obliterated. In reality, many Inuit people certainly had desires to incorporate Western cultural variables into their Inuit identity by the 1920’s. Though ‘forced’ toward this by an increasing capitalistic economy, the changes of this era pale in comparison to the forced assimilation and intentional destruction of culture of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

In the 1950’s and 60’s the Canadian government was also forcing small Inuit populations to relocate to the high Arctic (Marcus, Relocating Eden). This “experiment”, as the Canadian government referred to it, was supposedly intended to reduce the financial burden of the Inuit on the government.<sup>7</sup> By relocating small populations, Inuit would not be able to rely on non-traditional culture or government subsidies, and would

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<sup>7</sup> A small amount of aid was being given to Inuit on welfare, because they were unsuccessful in either hunting or in gaining jobs paying enough, due to practices of unequal payment to Inuit (Marcus).

be able to revert to their traditional ways of life, including hunting and fishing. This was fraught with problems; the government chose sites where there was archaeological evidence of Inuit settlements from 500 years before, but did not question why Inuit groups had moved away from there. The Inuit from Port Harrison, far south, were not used to the long periods of darkness during winters, and there was hardly any game to hunt. The government only allowed groups of ten or so to live close together, so large kinship-groups were torn apart. The government also denied the new settlements hospitals, schools, or interaction with nearby oil-drilling camps. Reasons cited for this were that such interaction would defeat the purpose of de-colonizing the Inuit, or “returning them to nature” (Marcus, 62).

The misconceptions of the Canadian government here are clear; it fell prey to the myth that Inuit cultural adaptations and skills were ‘ingrained’ and simply needed a harsh climate to be brought out again. Assuming Inuit who were accustomed to modern conveniences had these ‘innate’ abilities within them unknowingly perpetuates biological race myths, confusing culture with biology. This inability to see culture as adaptive and changing is a fundamental flaw of government decisions in many countries. The greatest crime of the Canadian government was relocation without discussing the issues with the Inuit themselves. Other forced relocations included forced medical evacuations of children, to Canadian Hospitals (McElroy, 56-8).<sup>8</sup> These relocations were long-lasting and devastating to families and individuals’ identities.

Ethnographic assumptions relegate all ‘responsive’ films that portray indigenous Westernization, and indigenous-white interaction, as wholly Western-situated. This

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<sup>8</sup> This common occurrence is depicted in the film *Map of the Human Heart* (Vincent Ward, 1993).

ignores the necessity of acknowledging the effect of Westernness on indigenous cultures. It occludes the possibility that an indigenous culture can maintain its separate identity through changes, adaptations, and integration of modern technologies—i.e. camera and cinema. I will later evaluate the indigeneity and independence of the Isuma films against the claim that such films are “conditioned” by Western films (Winston, 178).

Out of these various circumstances and forms of colonial persecutions, an Inuit movement for self-determination, decolonization, and self-rule grew throughout the 1970’s and ’80s. Isuma filmmakers Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk have responded to this national denigration of culture, which Kunuk himself was affected by, and incorporates into his films. In 1999, the Inuit won a political and cultural victory for self-determination, and the territory of Nunavut won self-rule, now governed by an Inuit parliament. The Inuit demanded and received funding to rediscover and re-teach the Inuit language Inuktitut in the schools in Nunavut.<sup>9</sup> Many Inuit of Nunavut see this as a huge victory but it is important to note that the Canadian government has granted self-rule to them, as the majority population (McElroy, 216). Isuma filmmaker Norman Cohn sees: “The nascent Nunavut government. . . as another example of the standard postcolonial shuffling. When one system is pushed back, the system that takes its place, he believes, has been shaped and trained by the initial power in the first place” (Evans, 128). Even so, Nunavut is a central location for the continuing reclamation of Inuit culture, and Isuma Productions is located in Igloolik, Nunavut (McElroy, 157-160).

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<sup>9</sup> Just as the Inuit have diverse cultural, technological backgrounds, Inuktitut has many dialects, including Kalaallisut (Greenlandic), Inuinnaqtun, Natsilingmiutut, Inuttut, Inuktitut. Attempts to consolidate and unify ‘one’ Inuktitut language within Nunavut have created tensions among speakers of dialects, who see their dialect threatened (Quinn, 3).

## Chapter Four

### *Nanook of the North:*

*Nanook of the North* is one of the best-known films in the history of cinema; bringing documentary out of its “period of decline” it was a landmark film in terms of visual representation, cultural representation, and, I argue, a hallmark of colonialism (Barnouw, 30). *Nanook* is the point of departure from which I will examine representational tropes of the 1920s Inuit culture, and colonialism. I will compare *Nanook* to Indigenous response films made by the Isuma-Igloolik production company.

Born in Michigan in 1884, Robert Flaherty worked as a mineralogist and land surveyor for companies expanding business in the Hudson Bay area of Canada. His interest in portraying the Inuit people to America, and the rest of the world, led him to solicit funds for a ‘documentary’ film. Out of his efforts, with the great assistance of Inuit, *Nanook of the North* (1922) was made, and had great success. Flaherty went on to make *Moana* (1926) and *Man of Aran* (1934), in the South Pacific and Ireland, trying to create further portrayals of man versus nature, but with only limited success.

The word ‘documentary’ describes Flaherty’s work (Winston, 8). ‘Documentary’ referred to ‘real’ or ‘true material’, such as the Inuit culture Flaherty ‘captured’ on film, that was later ‘treated’—i.e. given dramatization and a fictional quality to engage the audience. However, Flaherty’s film was represented as unedited reality, not ‘treated’ material, and under today’s definitions of documentary.<sup>10</sup> *Nanook* would not be considered documentary. At the least, it should be described as docu-drama, its

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<sup>10</sup> Documentary" has been described as a "filmmaking practice, a cinematic tradition, and mode of audience reception" that is continually evolving and is without clear boundaries (Nichols i).

dramatization emphasized, and source material questioned. Within the discipline of Film Studies, *Nanook* receives a fitting treatment and recognition as the original idea of a documentary, while in areas outside of Film Studies it is still considered a documentary.

Flaherty began filming *Nanook of the North* without any concrete idea of what he wanted to create—there was no script or original plan—and he took a long time editing sequences after the filming. When viewing this film it is important to keep in mind that the footage is not natural action; instead, Flaherty very carefully crafted scenes, creating a directed cinematography. This is central to the film and its place in cinematic history, and the issue of indigenous representation. Flaherty's careful reconstruction of indigenous life, as he wanted it to be, is coupled with, yet directly opposed to, his attempt to make everything seem 'natural' and unscripted. By trying to make the Inuit people exactly what he thinks they should be, he fails to even see who they really are (Barnouw, 39).

Flaherty downplays the cultural assimilation and the presence of Western products and culture among the Inuit, and creates a false, idealized conception of Inuit culture for himself. Bemoaning the loss of traditional native culture and life-style, though he does not convey this to the audience, he attempts to recreate the traditional culture again, an uncompromised culture, to record it before it is lost. Thus, Flaherty did not allow the use of rifles in his film, which he considered un-indigenous and modern, although the contemporary Inuit hunted with rifles. I will discuss the notion of culturally specific artifacts and tools, including hunting weapons and the camera, when I juxtapose Flaherty's and Isuma's modes of production.

Flaherty reproduces inadvertently racist stereotypes of the Inuit, as becomes clear in his opening vignette,

The sterility of the soil and the rigor of the climate no other race could survive; yet here, utterly dependent upon animal life, which is their sole source of food, live the most cheerful people in the world—the fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo. (*Nanook*)

The assertion that no other ‘race’ could survive here appears to be an affirmation of Inuit culture. Instead, by crediting ‘Eskimo’ biology or race, Flaherty’s narration deliberately works to further situate the Inuit as ‘other.’ Flaherty does not emphasize cultural innovations of the Inuit, although he saw and utilized the film-value of igloos, which would appear ‘exotic’ to his audience. Flaherty’s exposition and neglect of culture suggests that he did not see the Inuit as having created their culture; instead, he saw it as a-historic and static, as if it had always existed this way, and therefore could not adapt to the changes of modernization.

In this opening vignette Flaherty presents himself as an authority on the Inuit. His claims and representation of the Inuit, which the audience is supposed to accept unquestionably, begin from this point, and depart from a partial truth—i.e. the Inuit are the only people in the Arctic and they did adapt innovatively, to a misrepresentation—i.e. generalizing characteristics of the Inuit as “fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky.” These attributes, better suited to describe a pet than human, stereotype and generalize the Inuit as a mass of people all with the same personality, thus denying them individuality. Flaherty usurps the voice of the Inuit in the film; the only voice is the authoritative voice of the narrator, himself. This is especially ironic, given that Flaherty and the Inuit involved in the film’s production knew enough combined English and Inuktitut to communicate, so including Inuit conversations would have been simple (Flaherty, 57&

124). Flaherty uses vignettes to narrate the Inuit, and later utilized specific music and soundtracks to reinforce the Inuit as ‘simple’ and ‘happy-go-lucky,’ which was played in theaters with the film, and finally adapted to the film itself.

The Inuit depicted in the film were also greatly involved in the technical and narrative aspects of the film, actively helping with filming and technology. However, Flaherty downplayed this publicly, and listed them only as ‘actors’, not even crediting their real names. This shows the Inuit were aware of aspects of their life that were most suited to narrative, and understood the ‘complex’ idea of a film. Inuit involvement in production narrows the gap between Inuit and the Western man; by creating the film of which they are subjects, they are no longer just subjects, but claim an identity denied them by Flaherty.

Yet *Nanook of the North* is a recreation of Inuit culture, simplifying and objectifying the Inuit as people. By portraying the Inuit according to his imagination, Flaherty staged his fantasy of noble, traditional native people, untainted by Western civilization. Yet exerting his power as an outsider, he inevitably played the role of the powerful colonizer. Ironically, Flaherty creates this illusion of the simple and primitive Inuit through the use of technology, ultimately introducing and teaching the Inuit complex technologies while maintaining an illusion of a ‘pristine’ and ‘simple’ Inuit culture on the screen. In a loaded gesture, he achieves his ideal image of the Inuit in the film by renaming them, a hallmark of the imperial control exerted over the colonized (Rabasa).

Flaherty insists on engaging in salvage ethnography and depicting the Inuit as they were a generation or more before his film. During his making of *Nanook of the*

*North*, Flaherty witnessed an important period of change in Canada, a change he claimed to regret. Yet the film does not depict these important cultural changes and adaptations. He personally struggled against the changes brought by westernization, and cites this as a vital reason for making film (Barnouw, 45). However, he never expresses this to the film's audience. Instead he creates the 'ideal' or 'pristine' depiction of a culture as unchanged and unsullied. He wrote, "I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples", believing the 'primitive' Inuit were 'made' less Inuit by the increasing westernization (Barnouw, 45). The possibilities of Inuit cultural adaptations do not occur to him, situated as he is within cultural evolutionary ideology.

Flaherty's attempts to create an image of a human struggle, a primitive, primordial struggle focused on the struggle of the hunt, of man against a great animal, preferably bigger than himself.<sup>11</sup> In reality, Flaherty's crew was dependent upon the fur trade to a much greater extent than subsistence hunting, as explained in Flaherty's journal, "Through the busy weeks that followed, time and time again Nanook reminded me of the many, many moons it was since he had hunted walrus" (Flaherty, 134). Instead of hunting walruses and other big game for subsistence, Allakariallak has been concentrating his energy on hunting foxes, and other furred animals, for barter or money.

Flaherty's depiction of the Inuit people is an instance of the colonial desire for the exotic, characterized and framed by sexuality. The colonizing power descends upon the 'pristine', untouched, or 'virginal' landscape, desiring it for its virginal quality, untouched by Western civilization (Rabasa, Ashcroft). Yet as it colonizes the land, the

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<sup>11</sup> Allakariallak suggested filming a hunt of a polar bear, but they never found one (Flaherty, 123).

land becomes less virginal. As colonizers entered Inuit land, they attempted to ‘civilize’, Christianize, and westernize the land, simultaneously longing for a renewed virginity.

By introducing the land, significantly the homeland of the Inuit, with phrases such as “barren lands”, and “sterility of the soil”, Flaherty works subconsciously within the sexual component of the colonial relationship. In postcolonial discourse, the sexuality of the colonized, indigenous, or ‘exotic’ people is threatening, yet alluring, to the colonizer. Flaherty’s use of explicitly anti-sexual languages at the beginning of the film foreshadows his complete avoidance of mentioning the sexual and marital relationships between his subjects/actors. This is ironic, as Flaherty had a son with Nyla, an Inuk who acted in the movie, although Flaherty was already married to Francis Flaherty (Marcus, 206) (*The Story of Nanook*).

Further investigation into the funding of this film shows that Flaherty was responsible for the avoidance of issues of sex, the shallow representation of Inuit culture reflecting the sexually restrictive values and attitudes of America at the time. The funding of *Nanook* came from Revillon Frères, a French fur company that was focused on the potential business such a film could generate. Flaherty used one fur post in their “vast networks of fur trading posts” as the “nucleus for [his] work” (“How I Filmed *Nanook of the North*”). As predicted, the success of *Nanook* popularized ‘Eskimo’-themed commodities, from ‘Eskimo-Pies’ to fancy furs (“The Flaherty Seminar”).

Flaherty films both of Allakariallak (Nanook)’s two wives, Cunayou and Nyla, but refuses to identify them as his wives or even define the group as a ‘family’. Yet Flaherty’s visual treatment of women, especially Nyla, exploits them as images of the ‘exotic.’ Filming the family getting dressed and undressed, he captures the two women,

one on each side of Nanook, each time, the camera lingering on the woman on the left (Nyla). While his shots are not very clear, his camera captures more of her breasts on film than is necessary for any narrative or ethnographic purpose. Examined along with the fact that he had an intimate, sexual relationship with this ‘subject,’ this is especially exploitative. Flaherty’s relationship and ability to film Nyla nude is not an objective, ethnographically reliable window through which to view all Inuit women. This is a fundamental flaw of documentarists and ethnographers; in attempting to convey an ‘unbiased’ view, they often conceal their own biases, but this concealment of subjectivity and ‘treatment’ further distorts the ‘pure’ portrayal which the ethnographers claim to convey (Stien, 106).

Flaherty frames Allakariallak as “Nanook, the kindly, brave, simple Eskimo,” portrayed as the quintessential Inuit. In the introduction, he calls Nanook “the Bear”, which is a direct translation of Nanook. Thirty-four minutes into the film, Nanook sees a fox and goes into hunting mode. Knife held aloft, he creeps along on all fours toward the camera, ostensibly toward the fox, looking much like a bear. Flaherty set up this shot so that the sun is behind Nanook, who seems to be creeping out of it. The effect is that Nanook’s whole face and body is obscured in shadow, and it is impossible to distinguish his human features or face. Flaherty effectively and literally portrays Nanook, ‘the hunter’, as ‘the Bear’, creating a new identity for him. This is racially significant, as Flaherty essentially suggests the Inuit people, “the only race who could survive here”, do so because they are inherently more ‘animalistic’ or ‘wild’ than the viewers.

While maintaining this insistence that the Inuit are ‘simple’ and ‘happy’, Flaherty still must cloak the social structure of the Inuit people in Western terms, “hunting ground

of Nanook and his followers is a little kingdom in size...”(Nanook). He names Nanook the Chief, a simplification of Inuit culture where a more likely description of a male with authority would be a shaman, although shaman is a loaded term as well, and one western culture consistently simplifies. This presentation of hierarchy leaves does not admit the agency of the wife, or wives, of Allakariallak, sharply contrasted by the Isuma films.

It is a significant pattern that Flaherty maintains the everyday of the Inuit, while neglecting or ultimately ignoring the central differences of core belief systems between Inuit and Western religion and philosophy, an integral aspect of Inuit life (Wood, 6). As mentioned above, Flaherty hides and awkwardly ignores Nanook’s second wife, and thus deliberately obscuring the cultural allowance for polygamy among the Inuit. Similarly, he never even touches upon the Inuit tradition of shamanism. Flaherty’s selective employment of the exotic—i.e. isolating the interesting, but safe, aspects of the Inuit, is characteristic of the colonialism of his time-period. By depicting the Inuit as “happy-go-lucky” (Nanook), he introduces this ‘safe spice’ to his viewers; the Inuit are stripped of their significance and cultural context (Ashcroft). Effectively, this diminishes the extent to which Western and Inuit culture diverge, and masks how greatly Inuit culture is changing due to a new proximity to Western culture.

Flaherty uses mythological or fairy-tale terms, referring to their hunting grounds as a ‘kingdom’. The Western consumer and audience, who will view Flaherty’s film, are grounded in and always returning to the feudal system that is the setting of traditional fairy-tales with which Western audiences grew up; it is the initial framework through which Western children conceive the world, both simple and idealized in childhood imagination. This framework is an important building ground for Western mainstream

and Hollywood cinema. The Arctic land, though harsh and dangerous, like the enchanted 'forest,' was Flaherty's own colonial fairy-tale locale (Worman, 3171). His representation of the Arctic, indigenous landscape is further exoticized by this 'situated' view of the land, parallel the reality of fairy-tales, which the Western world perceives as outdated but classic-traditional. Both realities are seen as outside the spatial/temporal existence of any national or modern reality, in which wonderful yet barbaric things are the norm. In this realm of the fantastic, the sexual fantasy of the Western mind thrives (Ashcroft, 94-5).

The first thirty minutes of the film Flaherty employs an *iterative* style. The iterative sequence, commonly employed in contemporary popular Hollywood films, shows a series of what the audience understands to be everyday shots or common shots. Iterative sequences contain a few shots that suggest the representation of one action or similar actions that occur many times. This is often used to show a drastic change in circumstances for the protagonist, but in a documentary or ethnographic film it can easily be used to convey the way of life of its subjects (Barnouw, 44). In *Nanook*, these include ethnographic representations of traditional Inuit activities such as igloo-building, sled-building, methods of hunting, and building fires. One vignette narrates Nanook building a fire with moss, saying, "This is the way Nanook builds a fire." This use of language tells the audience that these activities are common, insisting that this is their way of life, not just a filmed representation. The continuity evoked by these iterative shots implies a continuity of culture, unchanged by interactions with western culture. The effect of using iterative sequences instead of plot for much of the film reinforces the Western audience's sense of the un-reality of the Indigenous temporality. The use of iterative sequences

further conveys a sense of uninterrupted culture in a timeless place. Thus, Flaherty removes Nanook's family, or 'band,' from the modern temporality or existence, which effectively removes them from the contemporary consciousness. He restricts the audience from viewing Nanook, and all Inuit, in any time but a pre-contact time that has no interaction with the audience's reality. This prevents the audience from any political consciousness of the repercussions of colonialism (Appadurai, 6) (Raheja, 38-9).

Flaherty does include a few sequences of Inuit/colonial interactions. The scarcity and style of these colonial interaction sequences suggest the Inuit people live far from the reach of western culture and settlements, both in distance and in lifestyle. He shows Nanook examining a gramophone, curious about how "white men 'can'" sounds<sup>12</sup>, and Nanook's son eating 'white' biscuits, getting sick and then taking a spoonful of medicine. These do not show the intensity of the interactions with the Western/Canadian culture, and the subsequent attention to the Inuit traditional way of life insists Inuit life has not changed. Instead, Flaherty stages the Inuit showing only a mild curiosity and an innocuous liking for artifacts and commodities of the Western world. The infrequency of these scenes works to minimize the actual frequency of such interactions. Flaherty "occludes [the facts that the Inuit bought blankets from Manchester and] listened to fur prices on the radio" ("University of Glasgow").

The effect of the iterative sequences, juxtaposed with non-iterative sequences, allows Flaherty to present his version of the reality of Inuit culture: that which is common (the traditional), and the novel (the interactions with a different culture). In an

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<sup>12</sup> According to Michael Evans, an Isuma scholar, "when elders in Igloolik watch *Nanook* they howl with laughter" (Evans, 141); while Flaherty portrays Inuit as baffled by Western artifacts, the Inuit are in turn baffled by his Western portrayal of them.

anthropological, genuinely ethnographic film, the mundane would be represented more faithfully, including the custom of polygamy.<sup>13</sup> The ritual parts of culture, such as shamanism, would be represented. By denying the reality of contemporary Inuit culture, Flaherty denies his subjects historical agency and “reduce[s] them to a racial type that is reassuringly distinct from, but utterly legible to the typical white spectator” (Wood, 4).

Beyond the first half of the film, consisting of iterative sequences, Flaherty attempts to string together a plot or narrative sequence. He shows the family setting out to live on the land in the winter, and portrays a whole winter through the creation of a few non-continuous days on film. These consist of a few more ethnographic moments and performances of culture that Flaherty had not been able to incorporate earlier in the film, including a list of ‘household’ items, and the building of an igloo, presenting the ingenious use of ice as a window, and mentioning that sleds are built with sealskin. He is eager to represent the Inuit as “ever on a quest for food” (*Nanook*), again insisting on their static way of life, and unchanging state throughout their year.<sup>14</sup>

*Nanook of the North* ends with a final vignette that once more links Flaherty’s metaphors of wildness to the people and claims a deep understanding of the Inuit: “The shrill piping of the wind, the rasp and hiss of driving snow, the mournful wolf howls of Nanook’s master dog typify the melancholy spirit of the North.” The 78 minute long film is supposed to quantify the “spirit of the North”, which Flaherty describes as “melancholy”, to which the Inuit respond with “cheerfulness” (*Nanook*). Flaherty’s wife

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<sup>13</sup> Compare ethnographic field-notes of Margaret Mead (Robben).

<sup>14</sup> Allakariallak did starve to death on a hunting trip, a few years later; however, he did not have to constantly search for food; his interaction with white trading posts changed this traditional ‘constant search for food’ (Barnouw)(*Year of the Hunter*).

later described him as always “searching for the ‘spirit’ of the people” he filmed (“Interview With Francis Flaherty,” *Nanook*). His colonial objective is impossible to accomplish, but is an example of the simplicity with which imperial Western culture viewed ‘primitive’ cultures, and the simplicity they expected from such cultures.

## Chapter Five

### *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner (2002)*

Igloolik-Isuma Productions is based on the island of Igloolik, in the Nunavut territory. Isuma's Zacharias Kunuk was working for the Inuit Broadcasting Company (IBC) and already making Inuit films in the 1980's, when he decided to create Isuma, which would give him more freedom from Southern, governmental influence. He created many films to represent his Inuit family and community before collaborating with Norman Cohn on *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. Kunuk was raised on the land, and recalls his father hunting for much of his youth. However, Kunuk was connected to an Anglican church community near Igloolik, and attended a residential Canadian school. Kunuk discusses growing up going to church, his fear of Satan, learning anti-shamanistic teachings, warnings against traditional dancing, as well as his discovery of Inuit beliefs and shamanism. He does not consider himself fluent in Inuktitut, but his work on *Atanarjuat* greatly expanded his knowledge of traditional culture, customs, and language, as he relied on the knowledge of Inuit elders.

Director Norman Cohn has worked closely with Isuma Productions and Zacharias Kunuk since their collaboration on the *Atanarjuat* script. After studying film in Montreal, he became connected with Isuma's political and artistic mission. Also secretary-treasurer for Isuma, Isuma credits him with "develop[ing] with Kunuk, elder Pauloosie Qulitalik and the late Paul Apak, Isuma's signature style of 're-lived' cultural drama, combining the authenticity of modern video with the ancient art of Inuit storytelling" (Isuma-TV).

“Igloolik Isuma maintains a[n] antagonistic stance toward Ottawa and the South. The problem, as the Isuma producers see it, goes back to initial contact with Europeans, and it has been exacerbated by several downturns since then” (Evans, 127). Igloolik Isuma’s purpose is to represent their Inuit culture according to the colonial reality they have experienced their whole life. Beyond refuting and replacing the media legacy of *Nanook of the North*, which Kunuk and Cohn have specifically cited (Evans, 140-155), they seek to gain control over their community, which they view as still under colonial (Canadian, or Southern) power, beginning with Inuit media. “Isuma insists on the Inuit’s right to tell their own stories, and the differences in the products [films] that result serve to reinforce the importance of this authenticity” (Evans, 155). Isuma-Igloolik focuses on Inuit authorship, but is inclusive of its whole community, posting other films and productions on its website ([www.isuma.tv](http://www.isuma.tv)) by indigenous (mainly Inuit) amateur filmmakers, including women and teenagers. Isuma-Igloolik, as an agent of Indigenous Film, hopes to be a positive indigenous influence in Igloolik, and for all Inuit, promoting the Inuktitut language(s)—all films are filmed in Inuktitut—while maintaining an identity separate from the Southern, national influence of Canada (Evans, 18).

Where *Nanook of the North* fails to portray an ethnographic portrait of the Inuit culture, *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* triumphs. Both films capture the vast, beautiful Arctic landscape that the Inuit inhabit, both films are aesthetically, cinematographically comparable according to their times of production. However, while Flaherty superimpose the landscape upon the Inuit to describe them, Kunuk and Cohn strive to show the cultural negotiations of the Inuit to survive in their environment. Flaherty’s authoritative explanation of the Inuit culture through ethnographic snapshots is comprised of simple,

crude and absolute stereotypes, while Kunuk and Cohn depict Inuit culture through the larger story of an epic Inuit legend, the cultural aspects a backdrop rather than the focus of the film. *Atanarjuat*'s historically-situatedness and portrayal of an important historical legend in traditional history differs dramatically from *Nanook of the North*.

*Atanarjuat* tells the story of an Igloolik legend that occurred a thousand years ago, which has been passed down orally. When an evil shaman leaves another group's leader dead, he "upsets [the group's] balance and spirit of cooperation. The stranger leaves behind a lingering curse of bitterness and discord" ("Isuma: The Legend Behind the Film"). The new person in power, Sauri, proves to be a poor leader, and his children, Oki and Puja, in turn cause discord and imbalance as they group. Oki and Puja have rivalries and interactions with Atanarjuat and Amaqjuat, the brothers around whom this legend exists. Atanarjuat is famed for his incredible speed, and Amaqjuat for his incredible strength. When Atanarjuat wins Atuat as his wife, who was promised to Oki, Oki plans revenge. When Oki's deceitful sister, Puja, becomes Atanarjuat's additional wife, she brings only mischief and pain to his family, refusing to help Atuat and Amaqjuat's wife with the work, and seducing and having sex with Amaqjuat. During the uproar that ensues when Puja and Amaqjuat are discovered, she runs to her father's camp and says that her husband tried to kill her. Oki responds by stabbing Atanarjuat's tent while he is asleep; he kills Amaqjuat but Atanarjuat jumps out and runs away naked on the ice for hours until he finds a sympathetic shaman, who left the group after the evil shaman killed its previous leader. Here Atanarjuat hides while he regains his strength and waits for the ice to be strong enough, so he can return. In the meantime, Oki kills Sauri, becomes the

new leader, and rapes Atuat. Atanarjuat returns with the old shaman, to restore balance and peace to the group.

*Atanarjuat* is a powerful statement about indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs. The film begins with a scene inside an igloo, with an old woman saying, “I can only tell this story to one who understands...”, beginning to tell a different story within the film, but it is also a statement from the directors to the viewers. This Indigenous film demands a new kind of viewer, one who can recognize this film as independent from First, Second and Third-world cinemas, and can take the film on its own terms, according to its own context. It subtly shows the extremes of society: Sauri, and Oki, as the villains; Atanarjuat and Atuat, as the protagonists and exemplary moral examples. Meanwhile, the foreign shaman who brings chaos and evil to the group is metaphorical for the colonial Western presence (Raheja, 48).

Through specific characters Kunuk and Cohn represent the agency of women, the importance of shamanism, and the Inuit value of balance and harmony. Oki’s grandmother, Panikpak, is a character that displays female power, as well as shamanic ability. She has a special connection with Atuat; though they are not kin, the grandmother calls her ““Little Mother,”” saying, ““You’re just as beautiful as I remember you when I was a child in your arms...that’s why I named you Atuat! I recognized you right away!”” This brings up an important aspect of Inuit spiritualism, the belief in reincarnation and the importance of names. This introduces Oki’s grandmother as a powerful, albeit quiet, figure. Atuat’s relation to the rest of the community is unknown, yet Panikpak, her ‘Little Daughter’ has the authority to name her as a child. Panikpak is also instrumental in helping Atuat maneuver out of her betrothal to Oki. Throughout the film, as Panikpak

senses the evil shaman's presence helping Oki, she calls on her dead shaman husband, and her absent shaman brother, to aid Atanarjuat and Atuat.

The significance of the community not taking action against Sauri and Oki shows its deference to balance, and its disinclination to restore that balance at the price of communal peace. The shaman's evil was not just murder, but also that he brought an imbalance to the community and did not follow traditional customs and taboos. Sauri's patricide was taboo, and also an impulsive, imbalanced action; instead of waiting for his father's natural death he brought upon them a tumultuous change, and this as much as the patricide made his actions unacceptable.<sup>15</sup>

Before Oki kills Amaqjuat, the two sisters-in-law discuss the situation, saying, "How will we all live together now?" upset at the betrayal, but mostly by the breach of peace. Puja returns, sobbing, offering to "do all the work" and "behave better". Significantly, it is the sisters-in-law who have the authority to give Puja a second chance, which the Atanarjuat and Amaqjuat must accept. Since the women, "have forgiven her", the men also agree to.

Atuat's security when Sauri was leader of the group is contrasted to Oki's treatment of her; now Atuat and her son, joined by Panikpak (Oki's own grandmother), are not provided extra oil or meat. The control of the group under Oki's rule emerges as a state of imbalance and chaos. Meanwhile, Panikpak plans to restore balance, calling to her brother, the shaman who took in Atanarjuat, to return. Her plan for making right the imbalance, and removing the evil that taints their community is slow, but inexorably powerful when it comes about.

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, Kunuk and Cohn do not consider the antagonists to actually be "evil" (Evans, Isuma: Video Art).

As one of the first Indigenous feature-length films to represent the Inuit culture and landscape to the world, *Atanarjuat* subtly portrays important cultural characteristics that have been largely ignored and misconstrued by popular media. *Atanarjuat* does not return to kill his enemies, but instead to overpower them and then declare, “The killing stops here.” This seems counter-intuitive and anti-climactic, but Kunuk and Cohn are targeting an indigenous audience, not a Western, Hollywood audience. This great Indigenous cinematic work is inherently different from the mainstream films it succeeds, because it presents a narrative and set of values completely different from the Western values. In fact, Kunuk explains that the first ending did involve *Atanarjuat* killing Oki and his gang, but when speaking to the elders, they realized they have the power to change things—i.e. to change their own futures (Evans, 88). These values of *Atanarjuat* reflect Inuit traditions, hopes for the future, and a new philosophy informed by traditional Inuit knowledge that comments on modern-day issues.

Additionally, the final hero and banisher of Oki and Puja is not *Atanarjuat*, who is the film’s main character, but Panikpak, their grandmother, restored to her authority and power as a wise woman and elder, with her shaman-brother at her side. The sentence she places upon her grandchildren restores peace to their group and resolves the conflict and tension that occurred within the group for decades.

Flaherty, describing the Inuit as “simple” and “happy-go-lucky,” misinterpreted these valuable cultural characteristics. Instead, Kunuk demonstrates the intense emotions of the Inuit, marked by silence and long-suffering for the sake of the group. What Flaherty mistook for simplicity, and perhaps the West mistakes for weakness, is a culturally complex peacekeeping strategy and subtle negotiation to maintain calm in what

can be a stressful community of individual desires. Of course, the epic hero of Western tradition largely involves the assertive individual, who is always ‘brave’ and most often forceful, aggressive and violent. Flaherty’s presentation of Nanook, the brave and individualistic Inuit hero was not accurate, especially in the 1920s.

Some film critics view *Atanarjuat* as an “ethnographic eye” because it records the ingenious technologies of the Inuit (“Isuma-TV”). It captures the building of sleds, fires, and igloos, but without ethnographic or anthropological commentary or interpretations. Instead of isolating the ‘exotic’ artifacts and habits by bringing attention to them (as is the habit of the anthropologist and was the goal of Flaherty) Kunuk and Cohn use these culturally significant items, practices, and knowledge as an authentic historical background to their narrative. The background of the Inuit traditional ways of living is holistic homage, as is the whole film, to their ancestors’ old knowledge and culture. This differs greatly from Flaherty’s almost entirely de-contextualized presentation of the building of igloos and sleds, devoid of narrative and context, and exoticized for the entertainment of its western audience.

*Nanook of the North* presents a fabricated, decontextualized, and a-historical view of Inuit culture. The Western conception of an indigenous legend considers it as ‘timeless,’ a-historical and geographically void. This western conception often plays out in cinema, either through ‘mythological’ recreations of exotic cultures in some timeless past, or through salvage ethnographies such as *Nanook of the North*. By not situating a culture historically, salvage ethnographies both ignore and naturalize their colonial interactions.<sup>16</sup> Flaherty’s film, and all salvage ethnography, implicitly draws on theories

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<sup>16</sup> ‘A-historical’ is always pre-historic, occurring before contact.

of social evolution to posit the ‘ethnographiable’ as fascinatingly ‘uncivilized’ and ‘undeveloped,’ without history, located before and outside contact-era and the written Western history.<sup>17</sup>

*Atanarjuat* opposes this by returning indigenous ownership of history and land to the Inuit. Kunuk and Cohn filmed on the historical landscape where the “Legend of the Two Brothers” (Isuma: “About Us”) occurred, making the landscape itself an integral component of the film. This emphasizes the importance of Inuit land, location, and memory, and identity, as well as the issues of forced relocation (versus migration) by the Canadian government. This renewed connection and intimacy with the land is an important indigenous ownership of knowledge, a healing of this perceived ‘homelessness’.<sup>18</sup>

This use of traditional landscape restores power to the Inuit and gives *Atanarjuat* a cultural meaning and strength, as well as historic validity, and also (re)claims ownership of the land. This instance and claim of home and the importance of the land can be seen as resistance to other films that portray the indigenous as a-historical, a-temporal and a-geographic. *Atanarjuat*, as Indigenous film, responds from its unique position: within the geographical framework of First Film, yet a-temporally, and from its traditionally disadvantaged place (Columpar, ix).

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<sup>17</sup> This mode of thinking assumes all ‘uncivilized’, a-historical societies to be both progressing and becoming ‘tainted’ as they are Westernized.

<sup>18</sup> One Inuk woman, 30 years after forced relocation, was “left in a state of confusion and homelessness that is with her to this day” (McElroy, 137).

## Chapter Six

### *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006): Reclaiming Shamanism

I have delineated the representations of indigenous history, geography, and time through western thought, and through western and Indigenous cinema. I have discussed *Nanook of the North*, which denies its indigenous subjects voice, land or historical context, and I have described *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*, as a reclamation of land, history, and indigenous voice. I now turn to *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, a more complex film in its relationship to Indigenous and Western representation, and sources. I argue that it is perhaps more holistic, and, covering a more disadvantaged subject of Inuit culture, its reclamation of this dialogue and history is more triumphant.

The importance and astonishing impact of *The Journals* lies in how it functions as a distributor of a lost and buried piece of Inuit culture. Kunuk wrote into the screenplay the exact words as spoken by Aua in 1922, recorded in Rasmussen's journal, "and never spoken again by Inuit until now" because of the related shame of discussing shamanism (*IsumaTV*). By retelling this story and these words, Kunuk and Cohn have reopened a dialogue on shamanism. The rediscovery of Aua, a powerful shaman who resisted and clung to his traditions, and the re-telling of his story, is a recovery of Inuit strength and pride. Its re-telling is a banishment of shame and concealment concerning shamanism that has been prevalent since the conversion of the Inuit.

The source material for this film is the Fifth Thule Expedition, undertaken by Knud Rasmussen, and his companions. Rasmussen pinpoints the date in his film as January, 1922, very recently after Flaherty filmed *Nanook of the North*, and in roughly the same area, somewhat further north. The stark contrast in their representations of

‘acculturation,’ as well as religious traditions, is a fundamental difference. Kunuk recreated one family’s struggle between tradition and Christianity, one that is historically and culturally more accurate than Flaherty’s romanticized ‘documentary’ of reality.

Although *The Journals* was made 8 decades after the events, Kunuk suggests, through Apak’s narration, it is only in hindsight that the real history and repercussions of historic events can be known. Much of the basic plot, and moving speeches given by Aua in the film are recorded in Rasmussen’s personal memoir of the Arctic (Rasmussen, 110-140).

*The Journals* begins with a shot of Inuit in traditional dress listening to an Inuit song/hymn played on a gramophone, then posing for a photograph. The shot freezes into a picture, and then fades to still shot of a black-and-white photograph. The photograph suggests a post-contact world, a black-and-white artifact of white men traveling with an exotic people (Columpar, xiii). Differing greatly from Flaherty’s ‘narration,’ a woman’s voice-over narrates, pointing herself out in the photo and beginning the story. Usarak, called Apak as a young girl, introduces herself as the narrator, and her father Aua as a powerful shaman.

The second sequence occurs ten years later, and shows Apak in a virtual spirit world, white-washed, having sex with the spirit of her dead husband, accompanied by throat singing and disembodied voices. Where Flaherty ignores, or is unaware of spirit-world interactions and shamanism, Kunuk acknowledges and focuses on it. Due to the oppressive attitudes of Christian missionaries, shamanism has been virtually tabooed and publicly ignored by Inuit in the last 100 years, so it is a bold topic for this film. Apak also has shamanistic powers, and she is visited by different *tuunqaq*, or helping spirits; one immediately after inter-spiritual sex, who laughs, “Why always have sex with dead men

instead of live human beings?” to which she replies, “Asshole.” The common interaction with the spirit world and with the helping spirits sets the stage for the rest of the film, demonstrating the tension between shamanism and Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

The three white characters traveling with Aua’s camp are the historical figure Knud Rasmussen, Danish anthropologist Therkel Mathiassen, and a trader, Peter Freuchen. Since this film takes place in the 1920’s, about the same time Flaherty was filming *Nanook of the North*, the blatantly different representations of the same historical era become evident. Through their interactions, Kunuk demonstrates the Inuits’ establishing acquaintance with Western cultural commodities, which Flaherty represents as being scarce, or novel, and purely European.

The Inuit are comfortably incorporating modern commodities into their lives, such as jump-ropes and sketchbooks. Whereas Flaherty depicts the Inuit as inept in using adaptation of these goods into their lives; “It’s tobacco!” Aua says happily, easily recognizing Rasmussen’s gift.<sup>20</sup> The belief that the Inuit would be as intrigued with European artifacts as Europeans are with Inuit artifacts is demonstrated and mocked when the anthropologist in the group generously gives all the girls thimbles, which amuses the Inuit.

Although the family represented in *The Journals* is represented as aware and at ease with modern technologies, the father and shaman, Aua, is averse to changing his old ways, saying, “My family doesn’t work for Whites,” and “I have no more room in my

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<sup>19</sup> This also reflects life before the sexual constraints put upon Inuit by Christianity.

<sup>20</sup> The fact that the Inuit were the camera crew for Flaherty’s film is proof enough that the Inuit were capable of utilizing complex technologies.

mind for any new [Christian] songs.” He also refuses to shake hands—a foreign way of greeting, puts higher value on foreigners who can speak Inuktitut, and maintains great love and respect for his *tuungaq*, or helping spirits. Aua’s traditional values system is a projection of what Inuit, and Nunavummiut—those from Nunavut—have grown to care about, especially today. The identity he maintains with pride and doggedness, but must eventually give up, parallels the Inuit people throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kunuk’s representation of Aua as the hero, or protagonist, is an assertion of Inuit values that have been diminished or degraded by acculturation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Aua’s emphasis on his Inuktitut language serves as the basis of today’s Inuktitut programs within Nunavut, while his loving and moving description of shamanism is a brave and defiant movement against the shame that Inuit have felt toward their enduring beliefs. Aua is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Inuit hero within the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, enshrined by Kunuk and his present-day audience through the *The Journals*, “as a vehicle of time-travel for the benefit of humanity” (“Isuma-Tv”).

Aua’s birth and history are rich in shamanistic history and tradition. He describes to the foreigners how his parents appeased the spirits and adhered to taboos so that he would be born, in spite of another shaman’s curse. He proudly describes how his parents knew he would be a great shaman even before he was born. Of becoming shaman, he says: “Then I would feel lonely and melancholy, but suddenly feel happy for no reason. And I would start singing, ‘Joy! Joy!’ Just like that. Suddenly, it was so strong I just became a shaman, it was amazing!” Of his helping spirits, he says, “They are bright and thoughtful and always cheerful when you call them,” describing them as integral to his identity.

As Aua's group, heading toward Igloolik, are met with impassable weather and a serious food shortage, their Western companions become desperate, mentioning that they saw other people passing by, implying either Aua's group will be able to travel as the other group did, or Aua's group can ask for help from them. Aua's family replies that the men passing were not human beings, to which the anthropologist concludes patronizingly, "Well, maybe you didn't see them. It was snowing, hard to see." The insight these foreigners gain into the spiritual is accidental, partial, and never explained to them or fully understood by them. Their curiosity is fueled by their desire to write down the traditional Inuit culture, stories, and beliefs, ultimately because they believe they will be obliterated (McElroy, 167). Their curiosity remains checked by a European scientism that gives them curiosity to hear exotic beliefs, but does not allow them to believe what is before their own eyes.

The audience is amazed to see that some of the Inuit characters, present throughout the whole film, are ultimately identified as *tuunqaq*. The visual representation of the helping spirits shows the close proximity with which shamans perceive them as present all the time. The forced rejection of shamanistic practices and *tuunqaq* at the end of the film is thus demonstrated as a tangible loss of culture, of and loss real members of the Inuit community. Whether or not the outsiders in the camp are aware of the helping spirit's presence is unclear, because they are simply present, and not interactive with the whole group. The spirits are an essential part of the group, while the travelers—unaware of the spirits—are never more than outsiders.

The strength of Aua's shamanistic powers is juxtaposed with a former shaman who is traveling with a band of Christian Inuit, who says:

I used to be [a shaman]. I was not strong, but able. Then one day I heard a priest. He talked about Jesus, and doubt came into my mind. I ate the pieces of meat shamans are never supposed to eat. The next time I tried to call them, my helping spirits wouldn't come. (*The Journals*)

The Inuk looks solemn and sad, and then laughs, “What a story!” This anecdote presents Aua, and the audience, with exactly what will happen if he becomes Christian. However, the Christian group, equipped with much food, gives Aua's group an ultimatum that is a metaphor of the ‘choice’ of conversion during the 1920s. The Christian leader proclaims, “Tonight, we will cross over, eating organs shamans are forbidden. This way, we become Christians. We become ready for heaven!” The difficult decision for Aua and his family is reduced to terrible choice: food, or shamanism?—life or lifelong beliefs? Though Aua understands the importance of his traditional life, he gives up tradition and identity, adapting to a new ‘path’ and identity, as a survival strategy.

Aua explains early in the film, “All our beliefs and taboos come from life and turn toward life,” suggesting their practicality. It is possible to view this in terms of the continuity of Inuit culture that must engage in survival strategies and has undergone cultural adaptations throughout its history. The film makes it clear to the audience that this is never a natural impetus for change, as Christianity was a forceful, detrimental, and often violent agent of change.

The Isuma website describes the importance of *The Journals*, because to the Inuit it links past and present, and has repercussions in Inuit circumstances today (“Isuma: About Us”). Isuma describes the film as restorative justice, a necessary revision of official history, and an assertion of Inuit history, with an Inuit voice. “We recover the

past not to change it then but to change it now...[but] to avoid making our own present a shameful past for future generations” (“Isuma: About Us”). By confronting the past now the Inuit people are able to gain a better understanding and identity of the past, and begin a new ‘reclaimed’ identity, as well as a new future.

Through “the advent of High-Definition digital distribution” the Isuma films can be reached by anyone with Internet, no matter how distant (“Isuma: About Us”). This innovative use of film is a new method of story telling, for the benefit of the Inuit. The Inuit are using the technology of from the very colonizers who brought them shame to restore the pride of their culture. This confrontation of the past simultaneously confronts the present circumstances caused by this imperial history, and seeks to create a present environment that will promote a restored future.

Apak’s narrative authority contrasts with the title, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. This blatantly denies ‘authority’ to the Western, colonial, and in this case European, understanding of Inuit life and culture. Rasmussen does not truly comprehend the deep conflict within Aua’s family in either the film or in the original source, his journals. The journals describe Rasmussen encountering Aua first as a shaman, and then as a Christian, whereas Kunuk places the Westerners at the scene of the forced conversion, possibly for narrative continuity, but more likely to visually place the conversion within the physical boundary of the colonist. Only Apak, who encourages her father’s conversion to Christianity, sees the whole story and understands what a drastic event this is, and even she only comprehends this in the retelling. Though she does not witness her father’s sending off his *tuunгаа*, she has the hindsight and experience of a lifetime to understand the repercussions.

A long time frame is a characteristic of Isuma films, adapted from Inuit oral tales: both *The Journals* and *Atanarjuat* show narrative forces at work within the communities, over a long period of time. *The Journals* shows interactions between these Inuit and western outsiders years before Aua's conversion, suggesting the slow process of acculturation. *Atanarjuat's* protagonist is not even born until the middle of the plot, and the climax and resolution of the conflict do not occur until he is a grown man. It is a characteristic of Inuit culture and indigenous propensity to look at things in the long-term, and assess how change affects a group over time, especially concerning the process of westernization. Contrasting with Flaherty's use of iterative sequence, and his attempt to freeze-frame the Inuit people, this instead shows processes of change. This characteristic of the Isuma films marks an important difference from mainstream cinema; this difference in understanding time is the indigenous ability to view life as a continuum of whole, compared to the Western focus on life as a moment in time.

It is significant to note how the film departs from the Rasmussen source. In a chapter entitled "Faith out of Fear," Rasmussen suggests Inuit reliance on their shamanistic beliefs and adherence to taboos was based on fear, and that Inuit conversion to Christianity simply gave them refuge, "...there was no mistaking the earnestness and pious feeling which inspired [the singing of hymns]...these poor folk had plainly found in the new faith a refuge that meant a great deal in their lives" (Rasmussen, 119). Kunuk and Cohn take this instance of Inuit conversion to shamanism, and displays it in a tragic light. Instead of Aua's 'refuge' in Christianity, as perceived by Rasmussen, Aua as represented in *The Journals* experiences great loss and tragedy in sending his helping spirits away.

Interestingly, Rasmussen's report includes the facts that Inuit still adhered to certain taboos, and still practiced some form of shamanism, if altered to coexist with Christianity. What does the Isuma representation of the absolute loss of shamanism do, then? The poignant picture of Aua sending his helping spirits away, banishing them, in fact, is a picture of absolute deviation from one life to another. A betrayal of the spirits, Aua does not expect his joyous spirits to come back. It is possible that Apak, telling this story in hindsight, sees this as the turning point to decades of tabooed discussions or reference to shamanism. It is also a metaphor, or a precursor for the cultural genocide of the 1950's, when Inuit language was castigated.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Inuit re-writing of a colonial historical account is also perhaps political, and poetic, justice for Europeans who assume they wrote all of Inuit history.

## Chapter Seven

### Mainstream Versus Indigenous Methods of Production

Early cinema, complicit with colonial attitudes and producing overtly racist themes, had a vastly different audience in the 1920's than it does today; and as society has progressed, cinema has progressed as well. Not only has cinema advanced in technology and narrative, but also along with progressive social ideas of humanism and political correctness. However, many of the underlying stereotypes of early cinema are still reciprocated today, now in more complex, or veiled tropes. If mainstream media continues to 'disallow' Indigenous films access to the camera and does not admit that the indigenous can wield the camera in powerful ways; or if it insist on viewing Indigenous film as locked within a Western framework, it will continue to inadvertently perpetuate colonial attitudes of the earliest cinema, which express themselves in contemporary, supposedly 'modern' and progressive cinema.

Indigenous scholars Wood and Columpar discuss a continuum of films between non-Indigenous and Indigenous films. They suggest there are only degrees of Indigeneity in this not fully-formulated genre. Thus the content and meaning of a film, which I have discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, is not the only consideration of an Indigenous film. A basic, objective consideration of the different methods of filmmaking including funding, logistics, camera crew, intentions and philosophies, as well as censorship, is instructive to contextualizing these films within their places in national, international, and Indigenous cinema.

Robert Flaherty's methods of film production were based upon the common assumption of The Extinction Myth: the inevitability of assimilation, which leads to and justifies forced assimilation and the muting of a culture (McElroy, 167):

Based on assumptions about its transparency and objectivity, [he] considered cinema to be, like its predecessor still photography, a perfect means by which to capture and save for posterity documentation of races regarded as always, already vanishing. (Columpar, 3)

Regarding a culture as vanishing because of interaction with Western culture suggests that the culture is weak, and has always been static and unchanging. In fact, these 'uncivilized' culture were considered independently unstable, because they were premature in the social evolution process.

"Flaherty was interested in using film as a means to capture the passing existence of traditional societies, which he saw as both noble and untainted by modern values" ("Film Reference"). Conceiving of an idea for a film on the Inuit people during his surveying trips, he soon solicited and received funding for his film from Revillon Frères Fur Company. Flaherty's financial allocation went to production costs, equipment costs, and travel (\$16,000) and to goods to share with the Inuit (\$3,000) (Barnouw, 36). During most of his filming he lived near the Inuit in a small hut, near the trading post. In accordance with the norm of compensating the Inuit less than a white person, Flaherty gave little reimbursement to the Inuit with whom he lived, depended upon, and who worked for him.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Norman Chance describes companies in Alaska that paid Inuit a fraction of the standard salary, although the work was the same. This was justified by the assertion that

Flaherty claimed to have “lived with the [Inuit] as one of them and shared daily hazards of finding food” (*Nanook of the North, Extras*). However, his journals suggest something different, describing the hard work his Inuit crew put in for the film, work never shared by Flaherty:

Nanook was always busy at some work or other...to see that the stoves kept drawing; to keep the drift from clogging up my cabin windows. On days when there was film developing, the [Inuit] shuttled from the cabin to the waterhole, with dogs and sledge hauling water for the kablunak’s thirsty coils of film—two ice-clogged buckets at a time...One of Nanook’s problems was to construct an igloo large enough for the filming of interior scenes. The average Eskimo igloo, about twelve feet in diameter, was much too small.” (Flaherty, *My Eskimo*, 139)

The Inuit did most manual labor for the film, including keeping Flaherty’s little cabin insulated, as well as giving him many ideas for the actual film itself. Flaherty’s account makes it abundantly clear he not only took this service for granted, but also that he did not regard the Inuit worthy of wages as he would have any Western film crew rendering the same service.

Eighty years later, Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, the directors of the Isuma films, create Inuit films that are considerably more Indigenous in production methods and authentic in content, although the ‘indigeneity’ of a film is considered to never be absolute (Wood). Basic Inuit values, include the “sharing and distribution of resources, avoidance of waste and excess, and continuance of egalitarian rules of conduct,” are central to his production methods (McElroy, 167). Kunuk and Cohn employed (and paid)

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Inuit didn’t use cash as much, which may have been true initially, but the low pay prevented Inuit from successfully participating in the new cash economy (Chance, 176).

all indigenous actors, as well as traditional hunters to hunt on the land to provide food for the film crew while filming in deserted areas. This was not only in the spirit of Inuit tradition; to fly in food would be too expensive, and unreasonable. By employing those in traditional employments, Kunuk not only helped stimulate the Nunavut economy, but also perpetuated the value of traditional subsistence hunting.

Unlike Kunuk, who relied heavily on his hunting crew to feed the acting and filming crew, but without ever filming the actual hunt of the animal, Flaherty was concerned only with capturing the hunt on film. He said to Allakariallak:

‘Suppose we go, do you know that you and your men may have to give up making a kill, if it interferes with my film? Will you remember that it is the picture of you hunting the *ivuiik* that I want, and not their meat?’” (Flaherty, 136)

Flaherty, who paid for little of the food he consumed while with the Inuit, here shows his utter inconsideration for their basic survival. A closer and more critical look reveals his shocking disregard for the Inuit safety, where all that mattered to Flaherty was filming:

It has been the day of days. Morning came clear and warm. Some twenty walrus lay sleeping on the rocks. Approached to within 100 ft & filmed with telephoto-lens. Nan stalking quarry with harpoon—within 20 ft they rose in alarm and tumbled toward the sea. Nan’s harpoon landed but the quarry succeeded in reaching the water. Then commenced a royal battle—& Esk straining for their lives on the harpoon line at water’s edge—this quarry like a huge fish floundering—churning in the sea—The remainder of the herd hovered around—their “Ok! Ok!” resounding—one great bull even came in to quarry and locked horns in attempt to rescue—I filmed and filmed and filmed—The men—calling

me to end the struggle by rifle—so fearful were they about being pulled into the sea... (Flaherty, 136)

“Flaherty later wrote that he pretended not to understand their appeal and just kept cranking” (Barnouw, 36-37). Aside from Flaherty’s representation of Inuit culture as primitive, his journals reveal his production methods to be particularly exploitative of Inuit knowledge and labor. He also had no qualms leaving his crew in danger in order to obtain good shots for his film. Whereas the Isuma films have been beneficial and helpful to those they represent, Flaherty’s films did little to help its subjects, or even give proper credit for creative and manual help.<sup>23</sup>

While the Flaherty film was intended for a western audience, and romanticized to appeal to that demographic, the Isuma films were made initially for the Inuit population and premiered in Nunavut for a predominantly Inuit audience.<sup>24</sup> Kunuk explains:

Somebody was going to try to establish a film company here. There are filmmakers up here; movies were coming, and we could see ourselves getting hired to drag them around and build igloos for them. But why not try it ourselves? We know it the best! I think it was successful because it is just about this group of people and their problems, with no other culture interfering. We were aiming the film to our Inuit audience. I had no idea that the film would speak to everyone and

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<sup>23</sup> Social emphasis on the value of human and animal life has increased since the 1920’s. Films are now required by law, and public demand, not to harm either people or animals involved for the sake of the film (“The Coen Brothers”). This explains some of the differences in film productions, but can hardly acquit Flaherty.

<sup>24</sup> The Inuit who worked on the project did see the finished product, however (*My Eskimo Friends*).

be so successful. But my other partner, Norman, was planning it. He knew it. He knew that this film could work on an international level. (Isuma: “About Us”)

Because Isuma’s initial funding came from a grant from the Film Board of Canada (FBC), the funding seems to place the film within the ‘framework’ or boundaries of a nation-state, which appears to support the assertion that indigenous films can only be made within a national framework. However, the Indigenous entity Isuma was created in opposition to the Canadian government’s Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), “a colonial enterprise...with a Native face” (Evans, 123). I argue that, since the FBC does not intervene in Kunuk’s cinematic choices as the IBC did, it does not diminish the Indigeneity of Isuma’s films.

A more complex problem that might diminish the Isuma’s indigenous autonomy includes some source material from non-indigenous sources or records—such as anthropologists or traders. Having lost or forgotten some oral history and indigenous knowledge through acculturation and taboos, much has been recovered, sometimes through documents of explorers or other westerners. However, this recovery of information is most often through original source: the memory of the Inuit elders. In fact, Isuma filmmakers’ primary reliance on the elders as a source places the Isuma films toward the Indigenous side of the spectrum.

Aua’s wife, Orulo, said of her discussion of the worst thing that ever happened to her (famine)<sup>25</sup>: “Today I have been as it were a child again. In telling you my life, I seem to have lived it all over again... There are so many things we never think of until the memory awakens...” (Rasmussen, 153). Embedded within in the film *The Journals*, is

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<sup>25</sup> This is also important to Aua’s decision to send away his *tuunqaq*, because famine was the worst horror imaginable.

this self-reflexive comment; the film, a retelling of an old Inuit story and change, is a memory being awakened within the Inuit community. In the process of the community making these films, these films reawakened memories of Inuit culture and history, and caused many lost things to be relearned.

*Atanarjuat* screenplay is written by Paul Apak Angilirk (Apak), who relied completely for the material upon Inuit elders in Inuit 'language' classes, said: "Well, Inuit, they tell legends. They tell stories. I first heard the story from some of the elders when I was young, but I didn't pay too much attention to it until later on" (Isuma: "About Us"). Once Apak and Kunuk had applied for grants, they began working on the film at drama classes in Nunavut. Apak explained:

These men and women [there] had already begun living their characters' or 'living their traditions' by growing their hair, by learning rituals and rules of behaviour and by practicing speaking Inuktitut using the dialect of the elders used when Inuit lived on the land. (Isuma: "About Us")

While the film was inspired by this relearned legend from the elders, the film also inspired others to further discover and envision old traditions and laws. Paul Apak says:

We go to the elders and ask information about the old ways, about religion, about things that a lot of people have no remembrance of now... Myself, and Zach [Kunuk], we are able to speak Inuktitut, but we speak 'baby talk' compared to the elders. But for *Atanarjuat*, we want people speaking real Inuktitut. So that is why it is important for us to have the elders with us. (Isuma: "About Us")

Even for the filmmakers, and for everyone else involved in the project, much of the filmmaking was a learning process, a research project, to rediscover some all-but lost

history and culture. However, this history was, and still is, known among the Inuit, even as it is being regenerated. While anthropologists and other westerners have ‘recorded’ Inuit culture, the Isuma Productions relied heavily on Inuit knowledge and the elders in an attempt to remember, reconstruct, and review their own culture. *The Journals* utilizes Rasmussen’s report—reclaiming this observer’s account as indigenous property—to reopen Inuit dialogue about shamanism; there are now films on Isuma’s website that record Inuit discussions of shamanism, from very young children to elders. These films rely on the authenticity of indigenous knowledge above any other source.

In her article, “Reading Nanook’s Smile”, Michelle Raheja credits the importance of these indigenous sources, placing the Isuma films in the context of...

discussions of visual sovereignty as a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass-media, but that do not rely solely on the texts and contexts of Western jurisprudence...” (Raheja, 14)

For example, *The Journals* relies on Rasmussen’s original texts, where, “in addition to the actual journals, the filmmakers sought out Inuit people now living in that area, who've had the knowledge of that time passed down to them, to help tell the other side of the story” (Sasano, 2). It is important for the Inuit that *Atanarjuat* does not rely on non-indigenous sources, but primarily depends on oral knowledge and remembered Inuit history. According to Kunuk:

*Atanarjuat* was special because the story happened here. You can actually go to places where the story happens. People in Igloolik were the people we cast because they were the closest to the characters we were ever going to get... A lot

of it was shot on this island. We actually went to the real place where Atanarjuat ran to, that little island, when he gets buried in the seaweed. That's the actual place where we set it. It is more than a legend; it really happened.” (“Isuma-TV”)

These films represent the vital importance of geography and history of land to its indigenous people, while mainstream cinema represents indigenous cultures, a-historically, a-temporally, and geographically displaced. European colonizers considered the Americas *terra nullius*, an empty land, before European ‘discovery’ and colonization, and recognized pre-contact history. They employed “a strategy wherein knowledge and representation indissolubly institute and erase territories” (Rabasa, 3). By renaming the land in European-specific names, Europeans claimed the land and erased geographical landmarks of indigenous history; thus rewriting indigenous (oral) history and depicting it solely as situated within European history. This practice also began the severing of indigenous identity from its land, the first instance of ‘homelessness’ the indigenous were to experience in colonialism. Western culture justified colonization by excluding indigenous history from its validated and recognized history, by separating written history from oral and traditional knowledge. Since colonization, Mainstream, First, Second, and Third-world Cinema has been perpetuating “the signaling power of the Atlas [which] reopens territories to domination and appropriation within a historical dimension...” (Rabasa, 4).

A culture represented thus, a-historically and geographically disconnected from the colonizing power—or its viewers—can never have its colonial losses sufficiently conveyed, though it is constantly being re-colonized, and having its history and lands appropriated. This naturalizes the European colonization and reinforces the *terra nullius*

myth that perpetually justifies colonial history and existing colonial attitudes. This myth is reinforced by the losses suffered by indigenous people as forced relocations have severed their ties to their traditional homelands: somehow one loss justifies the other. However, the directors of *Atanarjuat* respond to and contradict this myth by creating a film that celebrates Inuit oral history and reclaims homeland through a traditional connection with a geographically powerful location (Marcus, 120).

## Chapter Eight

### Concluding Remarks

I have argued that the colonial and evolutionist legacy of mainstream media, particularly cinema, has represented Inuit, and all indigenous people, as simplified and uncivilized; as ‘timeless’ and a-historic, invisible inhabitants of an uninhabited land, thus unable to lay claim to their *terra nullius* land. The assumption that the Inuit have had a static culture without complexity or flexibility is rooted in assumptions that all cultures must ‘evolve’ in a certain trajectory, and that western civilization is the ultimate goal of this progressive evolution. This assumption concludes that Inuit culture must disappear following interaction with western culture. Such assumptions have been central to colonial—both governmental and artistic—interactions with Inuit. Government strategies have been unfortunately geared toward ‘progressing’ the Inuit to this stage of evolved civilization, while ignoring their culture and history; meanwhile, artists have romanticized the inevitable loss of Inuit culture.

I have discussed one colonial film, *Nanook of the North*, which engages in salvage ethnography, and the two Indigenous Isuma films, which respond against the colonial attitudes postulated by the Canadian government, *Nanook*, and other mainstream films. I have discussed the theories of film scholars, some who see Indigenous film being ever-situated within national film and the political boundary of their particular nation (Winston), others who see Indigenous film as carving its own place within cinema, outside of national boundaries (Wood and Columpar).

The early colonizers viewed indigenous cultures as one-dimensional and easily obliterated by western culture. The continuing assumption that Fourth Film is situated within western cinema similarly assumes that indigenous culture cannot incorporate western artifacts/technologies and attributes without becoming 'tainted', weakened, or less indigenous. I argue that scholars who see Indigenous cinema as ever-situated within Western cinema and history are themselves ever-situated in a misguided colonial mindset, forever perpetuating colonial arguments and attitudes.

It is true that the progression and growth of Fourth World cinema is a resistance to the imperial impetus that belongs to cinema's legacy. In fact, this is vital to the identity of Indigenous Cinema. While Winston suggests that this imperial history forever imposes itself upon Fourth World cinema and the efforts of Isuma Productions (Winston, 178-80), Aldama suggests that these indigenous productions must first 'understand and acknowledge' the legacy of imperial violence before engaging in present-day strategies of resistance (Aldama, 3-4). Rather than remaining eternally situated within the constructs of Western cinema, Inuit culture is utilizing the camera to shape its relationship with Western nations, and to redefine itself as it adapts cinema to its culture. Cinema, long considered an invention, tool and hallmark of imperialism of the Western world, is now being essentially changed as Indigenous cinema creates its own new conventions and autonomous rules.

I argue that Inuit, and all Indigenous film, is still developing, but has already achieved cinematic work that should prove to all scholars it has broken out of its 'Western-situatedness.' Based solely on the works of Isuma-Igloolik, the future of Indigenous cinema should not be underestimated, its Indigenous films not relegated to

‘resistance films’ alone. It will continue, and it will be Indigenous, whether or not it is always engaged in strategies of resistance. Anthropologist McElroy says of Inuit art, culture, and language:

Many of the people I interviewed held a vision of the future in which Inuit culture and language would persist, a culture not merely of carvings in art galleries and artifacts in museums, but of people procuring food and materials for their livelihood from the oceans, rivers, and mountains. (McElroy, 167)

Just as the Inuit culture has progressed on its own terms, maintaining its own tradition, and is not simply a culture of the past to experience at the museum (where it is viewed as vanished and gone and reconstruct-able in the abstract by anthropologists), so indigenous art has progressed, no longer a trope in mainstream cinema, but to its own place, within its own vital context of history, geography, and language. An autonomous force, indigenous people can utilize Indigenous Cinema, with tools long considered ‘Western,’ to represent themselves, bringing alive ignored history, both pre-contact and post-contact, and exerting their force on the colonial enterprise of politics and film alike, erasing and writing over old stereotypes, changing their colonial-controlled existences, ultimately determining their future for themselves.

## Filmography

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