

Atanarjuat (2001) and *Eskimo* (1933) Cinematic representations of Inuit culture and orality

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Abstract

In an intense postcolonial context such as that of the Canadian Arctic, cultural and social tensions are such that they are bound to permeate many works of art, whether because they indirectly reveal those tensions, or because they are used as a direct means of expressing them from one viewpoint or another. The films studied in this work are two masterpieces, each in its own way, and both connect particular aesthetics with particular politics of Inuit/White relations. The emphasis is put on the relevance of audiovisual media to reinvent a modern Inuit orality.

Résumé

Dans un contexte post-colonial aussi intense que celui de l'Arctique canadien, les tensions culturelles et sociales sont telles qu'elles influencent nécessairement beaucoup d'œuvres d'art, que ce soit parce que ces dernières les révèlent indirectement, ou parce qu'elles sont utilisées pour exprimer directement ces tensions. Les films présentés et analysés dans cet article sont deux chefs-d'œuvres, chacun à sa manière, et mettent tous deux en rapport des problèmes esthétiques et des problèmes politiques particuliers liés aux relations Inuit/Blancs. L'article souligne la pertinence de l'utilisation des media audiovisuels pour réinventer une oralité inuit contemporaine.

Keywords: Nunavut, Canadian Arctic, *Atanarjuat*, *Eskimo* (the movie), orality, audiovisual media, cinema, postcolonial studies

Cinema has become a major artistic and popular medium over the last century, and has opened a broad forum where the populations who have access to filmmaking express their worldview, and where others confront those worldviews with their own. This cinematic meeting place reflects a world partly real and partly fantasized, and on such margins as those where Euro-Canadian mainstream society and indigenous societies connect, cinema both reveals and generates tensions. The Inuit have made recurrent appearances in popular cinematographic productions since the first decades of the twentieth century – each of which have informed the way they have been perceived by the audiences on a collective level. This paper will first address the issue of cinematic representation as a sort of postcolonial cultural battlefield, with a particular emphasis on the role of orality in audiovisual media. It will then present successively two films that are significant in terms of postcolonial studies, namely Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* (KUNUK 2001) and W.S. Van Dyke's *Eskimo* (VAN DYKE 1933). The aim of this paper is naturally not to compare both films, but to highlight two noteworthy examples of cinematic adaptation of Inuit orality and culture.

Part of the process of colonization was for the Europeans to force their perception of the world upon the colonized. As phrased in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: "They describe us...That's all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they create" (RUSHDIE 1988: 167-168). In the context of colonialism, where politics, warfare, economics, religion, ideology, and culture all interact, description came out as a colonizing discursive tool. The images produced reflected the trends of thought and needs of the colonizer rather than the colonized world as it was. This "power of description" was more than a mere upshot of the cultural effervescence which accompanied the expansion of the British Empire. Superimposed on the indigenous peoples they supposedly described, the distorted images eventually supplanted them. Thus indigenous populations became more than just victims of physical colonization, they were turned into signs instrumentalized to serve the colonizer's religious, ideological, political or economical purposes.

Cinema appears as an extremely effective vehicle for values, language and culture, and, as stressed above, in the case of a colonized population any medium imported from the hegemonic culture acts a form of propaganda for the colonized. The Inuit of the Canadian Arctic are under the direct influence of one of the most powerful media produced by a powerful civilization. For instance, Zacharias Kunuk's first contact with American films happened when the Canadian government decided to undertake the education of Inuit children in regional schools. Kunuk was taken from the land to stay year-

round in a school built in the settlement of Igloodik, and discovered westerns in the Community Hall:

That's when I started carving soapstone to get my money for the movies. I remember John Wayne in the West. He spearheads the US cavalry and kills some Indians at the fort. One time the scouts didn't return, we go out where there's arrows sticking out of dead soldiers and horses and one soldier says, "What kind of Indians did this!" I was shocked too. That's what I learned in my education, to think like one of the soldiers. (KUNUK 2002a)

Kunuk's personal experience is confirmed by an analysis made by the Honigmans about the role of movies in the context of tutelage in the 1960's:

Movies, the major spectator activity for Frobisher Bay Eskimos, undoubtedly exceeds any other mass medium (except possibly school books) as an effective medium of tutelage. [...] We believe that from these films our informant obtained a more concrete meaning of deserts, oases, and sandstorms; the importance of pasturage for cattle, and the meaning of heroism and treachery. Movies allow adults and children to sample more of the world's cultural and geographical variety than they could otherwise experience. (HONIGMANN 1968: 176, 179)

Through this statement one measures the extent of the gap that existed between the world projected by films and the realm of experience of the Inuit viewers. The Honigmans saw films as effective pedagogical tools, but the lack of self-representation within the media has had some opposite effects.

Studies have shown that communication within communities and families – which is a fundamental feature of traditional Inuit life – was deeply affected by the arrival of television in Inuit settlements (BERNARD-BRET 1999). Television, and films, taught children and young adults a language that the older generations did not understand. Their attention was diverted from what the elders had to pass on, and the shows exposed Western conventions and experiences with which the Inuit could hardly identify (GRABURN 1982: 12). Thus the media largely contributed to the generational rift which first appeared with welfare colonialism in the 1950's (COLDEVIN 1982: 32). Moreover the spreading of television and cinema entailed a degradation of self-image among the Inuit. Since the arrival of television in Arctic communities in the 1970s-1980s, the Inuit perception of the Qallunaat society has switched from a distant, welfare-providing government to a dazzling world of urban life, technological advancement, and material abundance within the domestic scope. The living standards exposed by the media were much higher than those of the Inuit, who, by comparison, literally discovered their poverty (COHN 2002).

Self-representation in a post-colonial context is a two-way mirror. It allows the indigenous peoples to see themselves reflected in the media and to gain self-confidence from the images they create and see, but it also provides the outside, Western eye with a view on the Other. That window is not an unbiased reflection of reality, however it yields a

relatively accurate, and unarguably legitimate, representation of the indigenous society insofar as it is produced from the inside. As stated by Lionel Larré in an article about the appropriation of writing by North-American Natives (LARRÉ 2004), seeing oneself truthfully reflected in what usually is the mainstream medium, and becoming the agent of one's representation in a context of cultural endangerment, has proved a vital necessity. A parallel must be drawn between the issue that arises from the appropriation of an administrative structure such as the government of a Territory, and of a cultural medium such as literature or cinema. In both cases the adoption of a domineering signifier may be regarded as a form of subserviency and a denial of indigenous traditions. The systematically pessimistic discourse held by a number of acculturationist outsiders is not devoid of consequences. The acculturation theory (WENZEL 2001: 39-41) which has long dominated anthropological debates about the Inuit, is the perspective according to which the Inuit as a First Nation are doomed to extinction, which naturally reminds one of the fantasy of the vanishing Indian which prevailed at the end of the 19th century in North-America. As Canadian anthropologist George Wenzel observes, the acculturation theory, "despite the counter-proofs of two decades of adaptationist research¹," somehow endures. That statement is well-illustrated by such discourses as that of French philosopher Michel Onfray:

La fiction du Nunavut se propose réellement, sous des travestissements symboliques qui laissent imaginer un avenir vers l'autonomie ou l'indépendance, de capturer la civilisation inuit, désormais moribonde, et de transformer ses instances en chambres d'enregistrements qui accélèrent les consignes américano-canadiennes. L'École, l'Église et le Nunavut travaillent en profondeur à l'achèvement de l'acculturation, à la mise au point définitive du scénario colonisateur. Doucement, imperceptiblement, par des moyens bureaucratiques savamment dosés, pas trop visibles, la machine occidentale broie un peuple sans défense, assisté, soumis et exsangue. (ONFRAY 2002: 125)

Onfray, cloaked in what sounds rather like self-satisfied lyricism, considers that the change that has occurred in the Inuit way of life has endangered, if not destroyed, their whole civilization, and that under the guise of Native empowerment the birth of Nunavut has already eradicated any remain of Inuit identity. This discourse holds the achievement of the Inuit up to ridicule and turns the efforts of the government into an evil, misanthropic conspiracy. Along the same lines, one often encounters the simplistic postulate according to which orality is strictly opposed to literacy, and that the former exclusively emanates from indigenous cultures, whereas the latter belongs to the Western world and is the upholder of its rationality and civilization. That idea rejects the legitimacy of hybridization and confines the Inuit to a fantasized realm of superstition and to an illusory fixed past

¹ Adaptationism as defined by Wenzel is the assumption that "much of the change in Inuit material culture [is] adaptative" rather than detrimental, in WENZEL 2001: 41.

(GOLDIE 1989: 232-23; McCLINTOCK 1995: 30) However, as Lionel Larré argues, the appropriation of discursive tools is an act of resistance which empowers the culture in which it is carried out: “C’est ainsi que le contenu des premiers écrits indiens n’est jamais un aveu de totale soumission. Ils sont surtout, enfin, des affirmations d’identités qui ne veulent pas disparaître sous la chape sémiotique qu’est la représentation du monde euro-américaine” (LARRÉ 2004). In that sense the appropriation of a Western medium such as cinema or television to reinvent a form of orality should not be seen as an unfortunate slip of Inuit orature into the southern pop culture, but as a recovery of the past through cultural enrichment.

Atanarjuat is a fine example of the way filmmaking can be invested with Inuit meaning and values and is evidence that the way the Arctic is represented and conceived of in the Western society is the sole fruit of an external point of view. The image it offers of the Arctic and of the life of the Inuit hardly fits any of the representations we have had before, and while it may escape a Westerner’s notice, it exposes a relation between the characters and the land which does not reflect the usual severance of Man from Nature that is found in films set in the North such as Jacques Dorfmann’s *Shadow of the Wolf* (DORFMANN 1992) or more recently *Le Dernier Trappeur* (VANIER 2004). Dorfmann sets his dramatic storyline in a context of constant struggle and *Le Dernier Trappeur* is meant to depict the union of one man with a glorious and benevolent nature, and ends up somewhere between a politically-correct ecological tale and a typically Western romantic fantasy about a lost Eden. In *Atanarjuat* there is no hint of a fight against nature, as even hunger or cold are suggested as the results of social failure – an evil family refusing to share its resources – nor is there a bombastic praise of the union of Inuit with nature, since the omnipresent nature per se is not even a subject in the film. The land appears almost coincidentally, as an element which surrounds the characters and their story while never being filmed for itself. Wide shots of the land always include human life, and are mostly used to express movement and distance, so that the land is valued not as a sublime, oppressing whole but as a sum of tracks – both visible and invisible – of travelers. The wide shots also work as a contrast with the vital confinement of the dwelling place and the camp which is suggested by shots ranging from close-ups to full shots.

The closeness and precision of the digital video camera allows to highlight the Inuit sensuous approach to the world. Visual details and background noises bring out the texture of leather and cut flesh, and every sound is recorded from the creaking of snow to the scraping of women’s knives on skins. These images and sounds appeal to one’s senses to create the atmosphere of the film. The noises are rarely covered by music, which is used in a particularly subtle manner. Instead of being superimposed on most scenes to romanticize dramatic tensions or sentimental moments, it is meticulously inserted in key

sequences. Percussions and didgeridoos accompany running Inuit, such as Atanarjuat's father trekking back to the camp with an empty sled, Atanarjuat running for his life on the sea-ice, or traveling back to Igloolik at the end of the film. In all of those cases the intense and primitive rhythm of the music merges with the human rhythm of breathing and running.

Another subtle use of music is the appearance of singing voices as the main sound effect to suggest the use or presence of shamanism. Therefore shamanism is not expressed by a burst of special effects, and an apparently trite moment can grow into a mysterious, magical one. Atanarjuat is running naked on the sea-ice, an old man standing on the other side of the wide crack yells at him, waving where he must cross the crack, over which Atanarjuat leaps. The old man's resonating voice, the singing voices in the background and Atanarjuat's leap in slow motion are enough to suggest that the old man is the spirit of a shaman, and that what Atanarjuat is doing is a supernatural feat. Thus shamanism is inserted in the tale as subtly as the music and sounds are in the film. Shamanism is one of the most complex elements of the past *Atanarjuat* deals with. Zacharias Kunuk presents it here as being one of the main goals of the film:

When missionaries came they proclaimed shamanism was the devil's work. But they didn't look into what the shamans felt, or how they gave life to the dying, visited the dead, found trails over land and underground or took to flight through the air. When the missionaries forced their religion on us, storytelling and drum dancing were almost banned. Our film *Atanarjuat* is one way of bringing back lost traditions. I have never witnessed shamanism. I have only heard about it. One way of making it visible is to film it. (QUAN 2002)

Kunuk's experience of shamanism appears here as one of someone simply researching on a lost culture. However, since many Inuit are now fervent Christians, shamanism has been subject to a voluntary disregard in the Arctic. While many elements of traditional Inuit cosmology have endured in everyday life, specific shamanistic performances remain a problematic subject. Ironically the arrival of Christianity meant for the Inuit the erasure of all the taboos and prohibitions which were imposed by shamanism, but it also confined that spirituality and its practices into silence. In the Inuit oral culture, as underlined by Wendy Rodgers in *The Northern Review*, "language and reality coincide; the spoken word is the embodiment of truth, reality and spiritual order" (RODGERS 1996: 49). Thus silence is almost tantamount to a denial of its very existence. What is more, the study of shamanism among ethnographers was long neglected, mainly because the hosts, translators and mediators between the Inuit and the researchers were often local missionaries (SALADIN D'ANGLURE 1997: 22). However, Rodgers reports the words of K.J. Butler, who says that "People are not willing to discuss... anything about shamanism if confronted on the subject, but they will put the same material into drawings because there's no Church taboo regarding drawings" (K.J Butler, cited in RODGERS 1996: 49). The

key concept here is the use of visual expression, for we are told here that missionaries focus more on words – and on the Word – than on images. One realizes that shamanism in *Atanarjuat* is forwardly shown but never spoken about, a cinematic trick which further justifies cinema as a medium which can revive Inuit mythology and orature without colliding with present dogma.

A film and an oral tale share the ability to suggest a space-time continuum, a set of events, an atmosphere. This interpretation of an independent narrativity was argued by linguist Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (GENETTE 1980, cited in KENNEDY 1997: 213). In *Playing Dead*, Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe reflects on Inuit poetry and recalls Robin McGrath's approach to the translating of Inuit orature into English literature:

As Robin McGrath has pointed out, Inuit "oral poetry has the reputation of being the best primitive literature known to man." At the same time she notes that in English we are three times removed from its true genius: "we read it rather than hear it, we read it in translation, and it must be read without the benefit of [its traditional] musical accompaniment" (McGrath, cited in WIEBE 1989: 82)

Compared with the alterations that translation from orature to literature implies, the conversion of an oral tale into a cinematic narrative may possibly come out as appropriate. Cinema produces the simultaneous experience of listening and viewing. The theater is a dark room which conveys an impression of confinement, and all are gathered to share a story. Watching a film is a strong communal experience which literature cannot achieve unless it is read to an audience, that is to say translated into orality. A film can also produce an intricate soundtrack, and in the case of *Atanarjuat*, while non-Inuit audiences have to read subtitles, they are permeated by the sound of Inuktitut. As argued in *The Empire Writes Back* the presence of the local language can be significant:

Such language use seems to be keeping faith with the local culture and transporting it into the medium. Thus the untranslated words, the sounds and the textures of the language can be held to have the power and presence of the culture they signify – to be metaphoric in their 'inference of identity and totality.' (ASHCROFT *et al.* 2002: 51)

In that sense cinema may be interpreted as a specific form of orature, which must not, and cannot, substitute oral story-telling, but which can evolve parallel to it and draw stories from it, as it already does with literature (GARDIÈS 1993: 5). *Atanarjuat* shows that both oral story-telling and Inuit traditional values may benefit from a tangency between orature and cinema.

Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (FLAHERTY 1922) is sometimes criticized for its staged scenes, its anachronisms and its underlying colonial paradigm (GRACE 1996: 123). On the other hand, the cultural study of the film by scholars, while being fundamental for its appreciation of *Nanook* as a complex post-colonial filmic text, is not sufficient to comprehend the impact of the film as a representation of the Inuit. *Nanook of the North* has been completely appropriated by the Inuit as a celebration of their traditional life and of their ancestors (THERRIEN 2005). Zacharias Kunuk himself expressed his feelings about *Nanook of the North*:

Robert Flaherty did his piece 400 miles south to my community and I'm really glad that he did it because he recorded that culture. I would have comments because he is a filmmaker. Of course he set up scenes, but I'm happy for these documents. I'd be happy if somebody else would make another *Atanarjuat* from a different point of view. (KUNUK 2002b)

What Kunuk suggests here makes it all the more important to acknowledge the quality of another far less known film which is closely related to *Nanook*, W.S. Van Dyke's *Eskimo*. Only eleven years separate *Nanook of the North* and *Eskimo*, and Van Dyke came to make his film mainly because he had met, worked with, and been inspired by Flaherty on the set of *White Shadows in the South Seas* (VAN DYKE 1928) (SADOUL 1972: 255-256).

Eskimo is an extremely dramatic fictional tale, however the diegetical world it composes is impressively well-documented. The fact that it is fiction is beyond question, but the film starts with intertitles explaining that the main purpose of the story is to bring to light the contrast between Inuit and Western morals. Van Dyke was admittedly not an anthropologist, nor did he live with the Inuit for extensive periods of time before he made the film. Rather, what makes the ethnographic value of *Eskimo* is the fact that Van Dyke based the screenplay on several of Peter Freuchen's works, and that Freuchen himself work on the set and act in the film. We are told in the preface of the film that "the Books by Peter Freuchen were notable for their discussion of the Moral Code of the Eskimos.... This record attempts to present that Code."

There is no obvious narrator to the story, most of which unfolds through the interactions between the hero, Mala, and other Inuit in their indigenous language. That language is further underlined by the translations offered by intertitles which reproduce in English the specific way in which Inuit address each other. The Inuit have developed specific behavioral patterns which structure interactions and ensure the preservation of social balance in the group. Subtle turns of phrases used to express things suggestively and cautiously rather than in an upfront manner are manifest throughout the film. "It seems one has been to the white men," Mala says to Inuit visitors who are just coming back from trading with whalers. Indirectness is in addition suggested in the avoidance of first person sentences. Therefore a hunter who is offered hospitality by Mala in the camp answers "A poor hunter is glad to stay." The modesty the hunter shows also demonstrates a voluntary

submission meant to rule out any potential rivalry. The subtlety and complexity of Eskaleut languages, and the values and social patterns they reflect are in this way relatively well conveyed by the translations.

The story of *Eskimo* is embedded in a body of practical, social and spiritual details about Inuit daily life, but the intensity of the human tragedy prevents the film from becoming a catalogue of ethnographic features. The strict dividing of gendered tasks, the activities centered around hunting are not depicted as fascinating curiosities, but quite matter-of-factly. Even more surprisingly, the sharing of wives is displayed in a context of balanced social relations and of mutual agreement and trust, and is contrasted to the rape of an Inuit woman by a White whaler. The characters are not all very well rounded, but the cultural conflicts from which the tragedy stems are not used as a pretext to either incriminate the Whites or diminish the responsibility of the Inuit. The latter are first drawn to the whalers by their will to trade for guns and iron needles – the responsibility of each gender being thus involved. Among the whalers one man is respectful of the Inuit ways, and among the Inuit the translator shows little concern for the way they are treated by the captain.

The film makes a complex statement about the reality of cross-cultural relations in the Arctic – namely that in the case of colonization in the Arctic, cultural destruction may result more from cross-cultural incongruities than from actual malevolence – which likely comes from Freuchen's extensive experience as a mediator between Denmark and the colony of Thule (LIUKKONEN 2005). For that and other features that make it particularly original as a 1933 film, *Eskimo* would undeniably deserve to be exhumed and celebrated as much as *Nanook* is today.

In the realms of arts and politics the Aboriginal populations have found their voice, and this voice has been increasingly acknowledged by mainstream society, especially in the late twentieth century (MILLER 2001: 410-411). Indigenous peoples have become consumers of Western media, subsequently becoming able to criticize the way they are reflected in those media. The way the Indigenes and their experiences have been dealt with as a subject in Western fiction has consequently raised the much-debated issue of misrepresentation and misappropriation (Moss 1995). In many cases misappropriation of voice appears to go hand in hand with misappropriation of land, especially in oral cultures in which mythology connects the people to their territory. Therefore, as a Westerner one should be cautious in one's appreciation of such films as *Eskimo* or *Atanarjuat*, for an exclusively post-colonial approach may confine them to their marginal place in relation with the Western center. Métis filmmaker Loretta Todd recalls that "the discussion about Native theories of representation, about our 'art,' of 'diverse aesthetic values' continues to be reinterpreted according to dominant values, whether mainstream or on the

peripheries” (TODD 1992: 77). That said, we are witnessing at the dawn of the 21st century a substantial movement towards the reappropriation and the reimagination of indigenous cultures. The Nunavut Territory and the work of Isuma Production show us that it is possible to integrate Inuit values and know-hows into political and esthetical infrastructures that were originally imported from the Western world without losing social or cultural relevance. Cinema might be considered as the most suited vehicle for modern orality – but again not as a substitute, since orality itself always goes beyond its medium, and cinema can only be one piece of the puzzle that the Inuit are building today.

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