

**KNOWLEDGE AND PROCESS:  
THINKING THROUGH ISUMA'S VIDEO**

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## ABSTRACT

Both salvage ethnography and indigenous media produce texts that build knowledge and preserve aboriginal cultures. Yet, the means and meanings of the preservation and production of knowledge are radically divergent in these two projects. This thesis examines the work of Igloolik Isuma Productions, the first independent Inuit-owned production company, as an ongoing practice that continues the oral tradition using video. Although I concentrate on their early body of work, attention is placed less on the texts than on context, that of their practice, within the history of Northern communications development, and that of their products, the production and spectatorship of Isuma's videos, to examine how traditional Inuit knowledge is preserved through the videos' production and how knowledge is produced through spectatorship.

In examining Isuma's work as cultural preservation, the critical anthropology of James Clifford and George E. Marcus are employed as a theoretical framework, particularly as these writers reconceptualize dominant understandings of culture, cultural contact, and Westernization. The conceptual dichotomy between the traditional and modern is central to my discussion as a binary that ethnographic preservation has been

founded on and perpetuated but that is thrown into question by Isuma. With respect to knowledge production, I draw on David MacDougall's theorization of film spectatorship as an epistemological process as well as Vivian Sobchack's understanding of film as a perceptual activity rather than meaning system. Both theorists' view of spectatorship as a sensory and visceral experience is particularly appropriate due to the observational style of Isuma's videos. A phenomenological study of two videos is included to demonstrate how the spectator acquires knowledge progressively.

Process is central to both the preservation and production of knowledge in Isuma's entire practice. Knowledge is not only presented as meaning within the texts but materializes through the performance of history and the observation of daily life that constitute the videos. Isuma's work is firmly grounded in experience and place, revealing the limitations of dominant Western assumptions, perceptions, and practices.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: Inuit Television from Ottawa to Igloolik .....	11
CHAPTER 2: Tradition and Technology .....	41
CHAPTER 3: Observing Subjects of Knowledge .....	68
CONCLUSION .....	99
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	103
FILMOGRAPHY .....	109

## INTRODUCTION

“Our name Isuma means ‘to think’ as in Thinking Productions”  
--- Zacharius Kunuk

During the recent turn of the century, two events in Northern Canada have not only drawn growing attention from the South but also signaled to the rest of the world that the Inuit are active political players in the world, determining their own future. The first is the creation of Nunavut on April 1, 1999 as a new Canadian territory with an Inuit government. The second, following a year later, is the completion of the first ever Inuit produced Inuktitut-language feature film, *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner, 2000)* by Igloolik Isuma Productions. The film premiered at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, impressing the public, press, and judges. Since then, it has received immense praise and attention from academic journals to entertainment magazines and daily newspapers, generating a great deal of recognition for Igloolik Isuma Productions, the four-member collective that has been working for over two decades as an independent production company dedicated to community video. While their early videos have been primarily exhibited to specialized audiences of art galleries and Inuit television, *Atanarjuat* and its success have generated broad public attention from the South.

Taking seven years to make (including writing, production, acquiring funding, and training an entire Inuit cast and crew), the time and care put into the film, along with the experience of its producers, is evident in the final product. After winning the Camera D'or (Best First Film award) at Cannes, the film received The Best Canadian Film award at the Toronto International Film Festival, numerous Genie awards, and was chosen as the official Canadian selection for the Academy Awards. Throughout this time the film has obtained immense media coverage. The success of *Atanarjuat* has further generated interest in Isuma's early work, which was recently exhibited as a retrospective at Hot Docs 2002 as well as the prestigious Documenta 11 exhibition of contemporary art in Germany. The feature was released in Canada in April of 2002 and remained at a first-run theatre in Toronto for five months, then opened in New York in June, grossing almost two million dollars (U.S.) in one month. Critics and journalists have expressed astonishment at the amount of interest and attendance this film has received (Fox, F9).

What has further surprised many is the kind of audience the film is attracting, more wide and varied than the typical art-house crowd. Why such immense interest? Both journalists and viewers have stated that the film brings something extremely different and fresh to North American screens in terms of both form and content (ibid.). As our cinemas are constantly bombarded with fast-paced, computer-generated, profit-driven and glossy images, *Atanarjuat* certainly offers a radical alternative. The film is slow-paced, concentrates on daily activities, uses authentic materials, and gives value to history and knowledge. While it presents a setting, culture, and story that are new and unfamiliar to a Southern viewer, each of these are actually thousands of years old. What



is particularly new then is Southern exposure, and in Canada it is our lack of awareness that ought to be surprising.

In Western scholarship Isuma's work, Inuit video, and indigenous media generally has been of little interest, particularly in film theory. Although Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) has been a staple of the undergraduate curriculum, contemporary video practices of aboriginal self-representation receive marginalized attention if any. What minimal interest indigenous media has garnered (mostly from anthropology) has initially been driven by a view of these practices as a sort of media revolution (see Banning, Ginsburg 1992, and Michaels 1994). Indigenous uses of television and video present a challenge to a post-modernist theory that views media as a monolithic, oppressive, and homogenizing force. According to Eric Michaels, post-modern theory has overlooked and does not make room for indigenous media production (Michaels 1994, 143). These community video practices have thus revived some of the optimism (without the utopianism) of the 1960s rhetoric that viewed video as a vehicle for democracy. The invention of the video portapak brought with it much idealism as politically committed artists saw the medium as opening social and political possibilities. This idealism spawned various projects and movements that called for putting video in the hands of the people through guerrilla television and community video. As both the movements and idealism faded, the general public's understanding of video has been limited to television broadcasting and home movies. Nonetheless, many artists and political activists continued to use the medium, creating a vibrant experimental video history and culture in Canada. However, "until recently, art video and community video have been mutually exclusive terms. Video artists have had to distinguish their work as

Art – video art – by linking it with the non-utilitarian concerns and institutions of high art in order to procure funding” (Marchessault, 23). While Igloolik Isuma is certainly part of the history of Canadian video art, it has always successfully merged both artistic and political goals.

While practitioners and curators have written on work in video, the medium and its uses have received little theoretical attention in film studies despite the fact that both have undergone major development over the last few decades. The audience for video work is expanding from the limited spheres of galleries, arts organizations, and small exhibition groups. With the union of electronic media and digital technology through the invention of digital video (which *Atanarjuat* was recorded on), video is beginning to reach the broader audience of art-house and popular cinema. While this development certainly allowed Isuma to achieve wide recognition, the discourse around such technological progress too often falls into technological determinism. Much of the early discourse around video, which has recently been repeated with the widespread use of computers, digital technology, and the Internet, is a rhetoric of newness that assumes the technology offers radically new modes of communication and information exchange, opening up possibilities and access. Ron Burnett, however, argues that we need to see a continuity between past and current technologies and forms of communication, rather than seeing these technologies as offering something radically new and different: “we need to reconsider the approach we take to technological change and more closely examine continuities which are best expressed and can be most clearly understood by the pragmatic applications which people make of the technologies they are surrounded by” (Burnett, 155).

While Burnett connects the uses of video in Western culture to the practice of personal writing such as letters and diaries, those who have studied indigenous media suggest a relationship between electronic media and oral communication due to the widespread use of the medium within oral-based cultures. For example, Eric Michaels writes:

Media development could prove more successful in remote communities than have agricultural, industrial, or other material development projects, precisely because of the traditional Aboriginal interest and expertise in information management. My argument elsewhere (Michaels 1985) has been that the Aboriginal world is an information society, and as such offers something of particular value to the modern information age that can ultimately provide the basis for reciprocal exchange. (Michaels 1994, 36)

Before missionaries constructed a written form for aboriginal languages, for thousands of years indigenous peoples carried their history and knowledge in their minds and passed on this information orally through storytelling. Isuma explicitly continues this tradition through video. In this sense, their practice is not necessarily new but a continuation of a tradition using a different or “new” medium. As Steven Leuthold explains, indigenous aesthetic theory values continuity over innovation. He states that unlike Western aesthetic theory and practice, which values change rather than consistency in style, in indigenous art production “there is little social pressure toward innovation for its own sake; and art is understood in the context of religious, communal, and personal narratives, and through its utilitarian functions” (Leuthold, 49). Thus, while indigenous art may seem innovative to a Western viewer, it is not necessarily so radically new to a local audience. Meaning, therefore, depends on context. Because of their connection to traditional Inuit cultural practices, Isuma’s work privileges a local Inuit audience in terms of accessibility and in this sense their practice serves as a form of strategic political

resistance. Access has been important in the history of media production in the North with respect to control over the means of production and in Isuma's work is significant with respect to reception. Their work reflects and demonstrates that access – a term used often in relation to “new” technologies, including video, computers, and the Internet – is political.

This thesis concentrates on the early video work of Igloolik Isuma Productions (prior to *Atanarjuat*), considering the videos less as a collection of isolated texts than as an ongoing political and cultural practice. While Isuma has been extremely productive in the last decade, initiating a number of associated production companies and organizations as well as producing documentaries, videos, and a feature, my study is limited to the videos that blend documentary and fiction through improvised performances, camera work, and editing, as these constitute the bulk of their body of work and are most original in style. Insofar as there are similarities between *Atanarjuat* and the prior videos I make reference to the film, but the latter as a narrative feature is a significant departure from the larger body of work. Although I situate Isuma within the history of Northern communications, I have also limited my focus solely to Isuma's practice rather than other video work in Igloolik or other areas of the North because Isuma has established a particular political and vocal position in the context of Northern media history as well as world history as the first independent Inuit-owned production company. Their work is further distinguished from other videos produced in the North by their Southern and international exhibition.

Much of the Western discourse as well as exhibition context of Isuma's early work has been limited to a high art gallery domain of experimental video art. For example, the last exhibition (prior to *Atanarjuat*) that included their videos was *Magnetic North*, an exhibition of Canadian experimental video. Although they certainly belong in this history, Isuma is primarily concerned with continuing Inuit values and traditions; thus, their practice has a distinct history and context, and is less individualistic or auteur-centred than the majority of artists' video. My study therefore removes Isuma's work from this milieu and examines it as a collective practice of self-representation through community video that continues an oral tradition to preserve knowledge. My focus is not on the texts themselves but on the videos' production and reception since the political quality of the work emerges less in the content than in the relationship between content and context.

Since Isuma's practice is an extension of the Inuit oral tradition, the continuation and sharing of knowledge is central to their work and thus serves as the focal point of this thesis. My study examines how knowledge is preserved and produced through visual technology. I further consider both the production and reception of their videos as process-oriented, for the awards Isuma has received reflects Western values that are concerned with the quality of products, whereas Isuma places emphasis on their process, which is evident in both the content and context of their work. In my examination of their practice, I employ critical writings in anthropology as theoretical frameworks for each chapter. Although Isuma's work is not necessarily directly or intentionally in dialogue with the history and texts of ethnography, their video production serves as a definite

intervention into dominant anthropological discourses and popular assumptions on cultural progress and knowledge acquisition.

The first chapter examines the historical and political context from which Isuma's practice emerges. I trace the history of communication access and use in the North, focusing on the political battles and media projects which took place in the struggle for an independent Inuit owned and operated broadcasting system, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). IBC is where many Inuit producers began their careers, including all four members of Isuma. This outline demonstrates the political relationship between Northern and Southern Canada as it is played out with respect to communications technology. The chapter further concentrates on the issue of control, which has driven many of the initiatives in Inuit television and media while also serving as the foundation for Isuma's formation, practice, and political stance. Although the IBC has been celebrated as a major achievement, it is now under much criticism – mostly generated by Isuma. While the members left television broadcasting for community video, their criticism is not directed at the medium of television but the way in which broadcasting operates. The history of Isuma's members, the company's creation and work are also examined to provide an understanding of the nature and goals of their practice, revealed as completely intertwined with the location in which they are situated (Igloolik).

The second chapter examines Isuma's creation of an archive through the documentation and performance of history in order to preserve knowledge. Since the cultural preservation of non-Western cultures has also been the foundation of ethnography, I attempt to answer the following questions: If classical ethnography seeks to salvage the Other's past, what is Isuma doing by reconstructing their own past? What

is the meaning of the archive in their work as opposed to that of Western ethnography? How are loss and preservation conceptualized in these divergent contexts? I draw on the work of James Clifford and George E. Marcus to examine the assumptions salvage ethnography has simultaneously established and been based upon. I suggest that these projects (salvage ethnography and Isuma's documentation of Inuit traditions) not only have different goals and foundations but also express divergent conceptualizations of culture, history, and progress. Moreover, Isuma's mode of preservation does not only aim to archive by creating a record or collection of texts, but continues knowledge, history, and values through the performance of history and traditional activities. Thus, their recording of a past and mode of preservation is a cultural process that is future-oriented.

The third chapter shifts from the preservation to the production of knowledge, examining the spectatorship of Isuma's videos as an epistemological and social engagement. My intent here is not to determine the meaning in the videos but how knowledge is produced through them. This chapter primarily draws on David MacDougall's conceptualization of anthropological cinema (or visual anthropology) in which knowledge is produced through the material rather than provided by external interpretation. MacDougall's theorization of spectatorship as a perceptual, sensory, and visceral experience is particularly appropriate due to the observational style of Isuma's videos. Here, I consider both the camera and the spectator as perceptual subjects engaging in and with the world (in the case of the camera) and with the videos (in the case of the spectator). Through a phenomenological study of two videos I aim to demonstrate how knowledge is formed gradually through the processes of perception,

discovery, and familiarity. I further focus on the Western spectator's experience, to examine how one engages in a process of knowing with work that does not address them. Isuma's work does not attempt to translate or explain the images, cultural specificities and differences since the local Inuit population is the primary audience. As a secondary audience, the Western viewer has limited access. Although the spectator certainly gains knowledge, the work reveals the epistemological limitations of any perspective.

Igloolik Isuma Productions, its goals and aesthetic, all emerge from, respond to, and are shaped by two larger (at once personal and political) histories, which it aims to intertwine: the history of media production in Northern Canada on the one hand, and the Inuit oral tradition on the other. Examined within both contexts, Isuma is involved in an ongoing process of negotiation between a mode of production based on Inuit values and traditions and Southern funding and broadcasting systems, art-market, and technology. The use of video technology as a social, political, and epistemological tool involves multiple levels of negotiation from production to reception.

By continuing an oral history through video Isuma subverts the dominant paradigms of traditional ethnography in terms of both the preservation and production of knowledge, providing alternative forms that are process-oriented and grounded in the experience of performance and observation. Isuma's project is a profoundly meaningful cultural and political project that encourages an active engagement with history and knowledge.



## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **INUIT TELEVISION FROM OTTAWA TO IGLOOLIK**

#### *Introduction*

By the time Nunavut became an official self-governing territory on April 1, 1999, it had a full Inuit run Northern television network and broadcasting system, in contrast to 30 years prior when the Inuit population was poorly equipped with any kind of communication technology. The development of a complete and adequate communication policy and system that address the needs and priorities of the native population results from the collective action of Inuit communities and organizations. Ironically, the primary concern that drove the efforts to construct the broadcasting system, namely local control, is also at the heart of the current criticisms of the system. While the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation is often seen as the realization of Inuit-controlled television, Igloolik Isuma argues that the IBC has not gone far enough in achieving its goals. Thus, the four members of Isuma, after working for several years at the IBC, left the organization to form an independent company that presents a completely different type of production environment. The company is based in Igloolik, which has a unique history with respect to Northern communications. While the town's residents had no interest in television when it was first introduced in the North, currently the

community has a vibrant media culture with a substantial portion of the population familiar with video production, largely due to the efforts of Isuma. Igloolik and Isuma Productions have inscribed a specific place for themselves in the history of television in Northern Canada, one that is highly controversial, productive, and politically charged.

In surveying the development of Inuit television and Igloolik Isuma Productions this chapter is organized into three sections. The first provides a chronological outline of the history of communications technology and policy in the North from the 1950s to the late 1990s, examining the opposing interests between the federal government and Inuit population in communication services. Government policy on Northern communications is examined along with the role Inuit organizations had in directing the course of television development in the North to assure it met the needs and priorities of the native population. Linguistic and cultural relevance emerges as the key issue that has driven Inuit intervention in the process. The second section focuses on the initiatives taken by Inuit organizations and communities to gain control over television programming and production, concentrating on the Inukshuk project that led to the creation of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. The third, and final, section focuses on the particular development of television and video in Igloolik and the history of Igloolik Isuma Productions, both of which are bound up with each other and cannot be examined in isolation. The company's work and goals are completely anchored to its place of origin, prioritizing local management and production in opposition to the centralized model of mass media.

### *A History of Communication Access*

In Canada the development of communication technology has been a top priority. Due to the country's large land mass and disparate population, technology has been put in the service of national unity, connecting the population both physically and ideologically from the transCanada railroad in the industrial age to satellites in the information age. Indeed, Canada has been a leading nation in the development of satellite systems, "thrust into the vanguard of the information revolution with the launch of the telecommunications satellite, Alouette I in 1972, and the completion of the world's first domestic telecommunications system based upon geo-stationary satellites a decade later" (Tuer, 111). Delivering images of a homogenous national identity and culture from centre to periphery as a public service to all Canadians, the federal government failed to acknowledge the differences among regions. "The government," states Nancy Shaw, "had...envision[ed] 'culture' as a means to mediate the effect of technical progress – employing it to integrate the country in the name of access and democracy, and to deflect any real analysis of competing social, political, and economic interests" (Shaw, 30). Thus, communication services in the North initially delivered images from the South, which catered to an urban and English-speaking population, into Arctic homes. The federal government only provided funding for services in English or French -- the two "official" languages in Canada -- that had no cultural or linguistic relevance to the Inuit. However, the native population expressed an interest in the technology and recognized how it could serve their particular needs. Thus, Inuit communities formed communication groups and lobbying organizations that battled with government bodies to form a communications policy and system that was relevant to their lives and culture, that

would give Inuit control over programming to express their perspectives in their native language. Due to such efforts by native organizations not just in the North but also throughout Canada, “[c]ommunication is one area of human services where policies do allow Canadians of Native ancestry to have effective control over both content and delivery of services” (Minore and Hill, 164). Inuit organizations specifically have achieved a communication policy for the North that recognizes the need to preserve native languages and cultures, an Inuit-owned broadcasting system, and most recently a national network for aboriginal programming.

Although television appeared in the North as early as the 1950s, at this time the communication services in native communities were extremely poor. Most Inuit homes were not equipped with adequate and well functioning telephone or radio services while the RCMP stationed in the North had been regularly employing these technologies for decades. Such services were desired and required by the Inuit as settlements are large distances apart and people regularly go on hunting expeditions, thereby needing reliable ways to communicate with each other. The government, however, had no interest in providing communication or other basic services to the Inuit until after the Second World War. Due to pressure from the United States, during the Cold War the North became an area of interest for the federal government. Because of its location, directly between Russia and the U.S., the Canadian Arctic became a crucial area in which to secure Western hegemony. However, the climate and large distances between settlements made the provisioning of communication services, particularly television along landlines, rather costly. Due to the expense, services were only provided to communities where the government had economic interest and which had a high population of non-natives who

expressed a need for contact with the South (Roth 1982, 31). In settlements where mining and oil industries were developing, companies wanted to keep in touch with their headquarters down South and stay informed of events in the urban centres. Although it was important to capture the minds of the Inuit ideologically, providing quality communication services was a low priority. It was not until 1965 to 1966 that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) introduced the Frontier Coverage Plan to service a few native communities in the North. However, there was no consultation with the Inuit people to which these services were directed and all the programming was in English (Roth 1982, 33). Initially then, communication services – telephone, radio, and television – were only addressed to non-natives with no concern expressed by the government with respect to Inuit needs and interests in the technologies.

This changed significantly during the 1970s, which saw a rapid development in the provisioning of communication services in the North with immense interest expressed by both government bodies and Inuit groups in communications development. “Native people,” states Gail Valaskakis, “began establishing aboriginal organizations across Canada on a regional and national bases in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when the federal government’s interest in communications extended to issues of northern development and native acculturation” (Valaskakis 1992, 68). Throughout the nation and in the North, communities and tribal councils formed communication groups to assess the potential effects and benefits of television as well as determine their own priorities with respect to the technology. With the growth of an organized native voice, lobbying groups expressed demands for a system that served the particular needs of native communities. Both such groups as well as the government formed various task forces to evaluate

communication services in the North in relation to Inuit needs. A number of factors contributed to the formation of an adequate communication policy and service for the North, including the politicization of Native groups, the National Film Board's interest in community development through film and video, and the federal government's own concerns with maintaining cultural autonomy from the onslaught of American television (to name a few). Although the government and Inuit had opposing interests with respect to communication in a Northern context, the growth of Inuit political lobbying and communication projects as well as Southern support in these initiatives facilitated greater communication and negotiation between the parties.

That the federal government was beginning to take a serious look to the North with respect to communication technology was first indicated in 1969, with the paper *Northern Vision for the 1970's* presented by Eric Kierans, Minister of Communications, in the House of Commons (ibid., 48). While the report set out a plan for the wide provisioning of television and telephone services across the North, it neglected to address native needs or consider consultation with Inuit communities before providing these services. The following year, however, marked a major turning point with the organization of the Yellowknife Conference by the Department of Communications and Department of Indian Affairs, which included a discussion of Inuit needs and priorities:

The Yellowknife Communications Conference held in 1970 as part of the Federal Department of Communications Telecommission Studies, left no doubt as to where Northerners stood in terms of their communications needs. They wanted, as a first priority, improved telephone and telex service. They wanted trail radios to allow hunters and trappers to communicate with their home settlements. Native language radio was desirable for local and regional information exchange. But television was a very low priority and then only if it had native and northern content. (Greyson and Steele, 58)

A year later the government formed a task force that published the *Man in the North* report. The emphasis of the report was on native participation in communication endeavors as well as the provisioning of relevant programming (Roth 1982, 60). For many Inuit, the television programs that were being provided had no relevance, as they were all in English, only expressed Southern viewpoints, and addressed an urban population. For the older, monolingual Inuit the material was meaningless. Recognizing its seductive quality for the youth, many also worried about the use of television as a tool of assimilation detrimental to the continuation of Inuit language and culture. The *Man in the North* report therefore further proposed regional television and radio stations using satellite technology for communication between natives and the production of Inuit cultural material, to be supported by the federal government and the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) (ibid.). Thus, within three years a marked shift occurred in the political discourse around Northern communications, from the mere extension of a public service to the consideration of the relevance of Southern television for the Inuit and the potential of local production. Already in the early 1970s, Inuit needs, which were in opposition to the services being provided, were addressed and noted. However, in practice, the television services provided to the North did not actually attend to these needs for another decade.

The federal government continued to push its own agenda – of national unity – with the creation of a new satellite system, Anik A (meaning brother in Inuktitut) launched in 1972 and dedicated to the North. As a relatively inexpensive technology compared to landline television, the satellite could offer more remote communities access to the services already being provided to the rest of Canada. Indeed, Anik A equipped

seventeen settlements with the new communication technologies of television, FM radio, and telephone (Evans 1999, 41). Hence, communications development in the North was far from gradual, providing these services simultaneously in one large sweep (Roth 1982, 3). Moreover, the satellite was used primarily as a distribution system, delivering English-language programming in a one-way flow from South to North, making “possible the integration of the North into the larger communication network of the South, East, and West” (ibid., 39).

Since the 1950s the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was the primary licensed provider of programming to the North, first with radio and then television through its CBC Northern Service. While the radio services included some Inuktitut-language programming, CBC received no funding for such endeavors in television, demonstrating government concern with maintaining the Inuit population as receivers in the interest of national integration. For instance, through the Anik A satellite CBC launched an Accelerated Coverage Plan to provide communication services to 25 remote communities in a short time period (Roth 1982, 82). On this plan, CBC opened 10 minutes a day for Inuktitut programming within 16 hours of English (ibid., 64).

This opening of space was due to a growing pressure on the CBC and federal government by Inuit organizations that were beginning to lobby for relevant services and television programming made by and for Inuit. The Inuit population recognized the potential harm and benefits of the technology within the North: “[t]hey see the power of television as both an educational tool and social influence; they want to use it for themselves” (Greyson and Steele, 59). The two most influential groups to lobby for Inuit control of the medium in the North were the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), which was



established in 1971 and is now the new government of Nunavut, and the Northern Quebec Inuit Association (NQIA). Both separately and together, these groups were extremely influential in the development of an adequate policy and broadcasting system for the North:

Early Northern communication policy was synonymous with technological extension policy until 1974 when the indigenous population of the North organized themselves into lobby groups and resolved to make an uncompromising effort to transform the structure of Northern communications to assure regional and cultural promotion. (Roth 1982, 15)

The primary area of concern for the lobby groups and Inuit generally, with respect to early television services in the North, rested on linguistic and cultural relevance of programming. At this time, Canada as a multicultural and multilingual nation was under discussion in Parliament as the government was forming its policies on multiculturalism and ethnic broadcasting along with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. According to Roth, “Pierre Elliott Trudeau supported multiculturalism, but was a strong believer in bilingualism, as an official policy... [and argued for] a multicultural policy within a bilingual framework” (Roth 1998, 490). As a result, “the policy principles, emergent institutional structures, and media practices assume anglophone and francophone cultures to be dominant reference points” (ibid., 500). Thus, in providing television services to the North, CBC only considered and debated programming in either French or English. The older Inuit understood neither of the two official languages and therefore did not watch much television, but were concerned about how the onslaught of Southern programs would effect the continuation of their language and culture among the younger generations. As Hugh Brody points out, “language is inseparable from the identity and well-being of any people” (Brody, 8). Thus, language replacement can facilitate the

maintenance of imperialist power and the process of assimilation. For example, the residential schools in the North, which all Inuit children were forced to attend, only taught classes in English.<sup>1</sup> The preservation of indigenous languages and cultures has since been a crucial political and social issue for native populations. Thus, while the Inuit expressed a desire for communication technologies, they demanded systems and programming that was in accordance with their particular needs and relevant to their culture: “The basic preoccupation was not whether the satellite was necessary, but rather the uses to which the satellite would be put and its potential social impact on the native population” (Roth 1982, 56).

Both ITC and NQIA therefore strongly lobbied for native language programming. In 1973 ITC demanded eighty percent of CBC programming to be in Inuktitut (ibid., 75). At this time, the NQIA met with the CBC to discuss the latter’s communications plan for the North. When it was obvious that CBC would (or could) only provide English or French language television, NQIA quit negotiations. Shortly thereafter, the group published *The Northerners* (1974), which was

the first formal Inuit assessment of Northern communications and, as such, represented an important step in the consciousness-raising process of both the Inuit in remote settlements across the North and federal government communication authorities. It was the first profile of Inuit community views on the inadequacy of Northern communication services to be published and widely circulated...[marking] the beginning of a series of Inuit interruptions into what the federal government has hoped would be a smooth-flowing ‘extension of service’ policy (ibid, 78-80).

The report requested native language programming and required that CBC ask a community before providing any service. Although CBC complied, the choice offered

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<sup>1</sup> Brody notes that North America particularly enforced a monolingual culture while other imperialist enterprises did not necessarily seek the complete elimination of indigenous languages (Brody, 186-7).

was Southern television or no television (ibid., 80). A few years later, ITC published a *Special Communication Report* (1976) that consisted of the Inuit public's responses to the television services available to them. Both these reports were important in generating dialogue and awareness among the Inuit population regarding television in the North.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, there was also growing support and interest by Southern institutions (including the CRTC) in Northern communications, particularly Inuit production and programming. A number of National Film Board (NFB) departments got involved in communication developments by setting up training projects and production centres in communities for both film and video. Following a successful project that trained Inuit in film animation, the Challenge for Change group became involved. Launched in 1967, Challenge for Change deployed new video technology to encourage communication and community development by giving voice to marginalized communities (Marchessault, 13). In 1975 Challenge for Change along with Media Research (also from the NFB) organized the Conference on Northern Communications, which demonstrated strong Southern support for Inuit media production and local programming (Roth 1982, 117). By 1980, Challenge for Change set up a centre in the North and the NFB launched the Northern Support Project to foster and promote native production and distribution (ibid., 159).

The NFB was only one of a number of groups and organizations that initiated projects for the creation of Inuit produced television in order to provide training and experience. Throughout the 1970s a number of experimental communication projects took place, launched by both government bodies and independent Inuit groups or communities. Besides the NFB endeavors and one by the Department of

Communications, Inuit communities initiated numerous undertakings employing interactive and community television. These projects taught many about the technology, how television could serve their own needs, and how to produce programs. They also lead to the ambitious Inukshuk project (1979-1980), on the new satellite Anik B, for experimentation with two-way communication between several settlements. The project was well-funded, received much support, and lead to the realization of a full-fledged Inuit broadcasting system.

Following these projects, the CRTC formed the Therrien Committee in 1980 to once again assess Northern communications and Inuit needs. This was the first committee to include an Inuk as one of its nine members. In July they issued a report: *The 1980's: A Decade of Diversity – Broadcasting, Satellites, and Pay-TV*. According to Roth, the report was “the first formal document to outline a framework for a Northern communication policy” (Roth 1982, 161). It stated a number of recommendations to the federal government, CRTC, and CBC regarding funding, programming, and provisioning of services that would meet Inuit priorities, including supporting local production centres. Recognizing Inuit concerns over language and culture, one of the recommendations addressed the need and creation of an Inuit broadcasting system.

Based on one of the recommendations outlined by the Therrien Report, the CRTC called for license applications in October of 1980. CBC once again applied but this time was in competition with an application put forth by ITC, proposing an Inuit broadcasting system. While CBC included in their application a commitment to native language programming, ITC protested their proposal based on a long history of CBC failing to provide adequate services that met Inuit needs and desires. Following the hearings at

which these proposals were presented and debated, the CRTC issued a formal license to ITC and Taqramiut Nipingat Inc. (TNI– the Northern Quebec Communications Society) for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC). The IBC, however, would share a channel with the CBC on the Anik D satellite dedicated to Northern only service.

By sharing a channel with CBC, IBC had to fit their programming into the schedule set out by the Southern organization, often broadcasting during the late-night to reduce expenses (Evans 1999, 43). As Michael Evans notes,

The system was awkward, though – it required the IBC to ship videotapes to Toronto for broadcast – and it put the native programmers at the mercy of the CBC's priorities. One time, the IBC programming was pre-empted when President Ronald Reagan visited Canada, and on another occasion the IBC was pre-empted for a hockey game. So in 1982 the IBC joined with several other native-programming organizations to form Television Northern Canada (TVNC), which serves as the broadcasting mechanism for its member organizations. The members of TVNC work out a schedule that allows them to share a satellites' air time; beginning in 1991, viewers in ninety-six communities across the North could watch the IBC and the other native Northern programmers on TVNC throughout the day on their local cable networks. (ibid.)

With material from IBC and its other members as well as independent producers, TVNC provided 100 hours per week of native language programming and served 100, 000 people in the North (Meadows, 205). As a Northern only service, after several years of success, TVNC decided to expand by providing its programming down South. Between 1997 and 1999 the organization worked to create an aboriginal network that would serve all of Canada and include native voices across the nation. After convincing the CRTC of the need for such a network they were issued a license; thus, TVNC became the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), formally launched on September 1, 1999. Against opposition by other networks, the CRTC further stipulated that APTN had

to be part of the basic cable package for all Canadians, currently providing programming in English, French, and 120 hours per week in seventeen native languages.

It was not until 1983 that an actual formal policy for Northern communications was formed, with a revised version issued in 1990. In fact, “[b]y the time the government finally introduced its Northern Broadcasting Policy, there were already 18 channels from the Canadian south and 45 American channels being beamed into the North” (Minore and Hill, 170). The policy, however, addresses the linguistic and cultural concerns of Inuit and expresses support for local production of programming. In the two decade long battle for an adequate policy and relevant television, in which language and culture were at stake, the primary objective was media control. To make this powerful medium work for rather than against them, the Inuit demanded access to the means of production and transmission. While Inuit communities, as well as other native groups, certainly expressed a strong interest in the technology, service from the South was unacceptable. Rather, they wanted to adapt the technology to their own priorities – to preserve native languages and cultures. “Of course they want to be modern,” states Brody, “but on their own terms” (Brody, 147). With the results of a Northern policy, television network, and broadcasting system, Canada is again a leading and progressive nation within communication initiatives. By the mid-1980s, the federal government was spending over 10 million dollars annually for indigenous television in comparison to Australia where no consultation, funding, or policy has been provided for aboriginal media (Michaels 1986, 117; 128). The Northern broadcasting policy’s recognition of the Inuit need to maintain their language and culture may be due in part to Canada’s own struggle in the 1970s with the dominance of American programming on television. However, Inuit organizations

had to fight Southern television for many years, and ultimately the current system is a product of their own committed efforts and initiatives. As Valaskakis states, “Inuit television is the result of northern native peoples’ resolve to participate in the social transformation of their world” (Valaskakis 1992, 72).

*Inuit Initiatives: The Inukshuk Project and IBC*

“Since 1971,” Roth writes, “the North has been the locus of a series of federally – and privately – sponsored native media projects” (1982, 91). Throughout the decade, experiments took place in various communities, for regional and community production of film, video, radio, and television. These projects educated large numbers of people in production, programming, and use of communication technologies, as well as helped them to determine the value of the technology for life in the North. The independent Inuit initiated projects tended to focus on community television. One of the more well-known of these that continues to this day is PIC-TV (Pond Inlet Community Television), which further emphasized “enabling Northern audiences to think more critically about what they view on television” (ibid., 127). By the end of the decade (and by the time the opportunity for the Inukshuk project came) there was a solid foundation of knowledge and experience using various communication technologies. Moreover, in her study of these experiments, Roth maintains that they were highly influential in government decision making and policy creation:

[M]edia projects in the North provided an empirical basis to substantiate Inuit insistence on participation in the communication policy-making process. Federal government consideration of Inuit participation in policy-making was a result of its perception of Inuit media projects as credible undertakings, capable of being transformed into permanent communication structures within the North. (ibid., 92)

When the government launched a new satellite Anik B in 1977, specifically for communications experimentation, ITC saw an opportunity to use the satellite for the largest Inuit project up to that point. Launched in 1978, the Inukshuk project was given 1.9 million dollars in funding by the federal government for a period of three years (ibid., 135). The project linked six communities in a two-way network with the main station located in Forbisher Bay. Each of the other towns - Pond Inlet, Igloolik, Eskimo Point, Bakerlake, and Cambridge Bay - were equipped with production and transmission facilities, with the ability to produce programming in Inuktitut for either local or regional transmission. The focus of the project, however, was in experimenting with various ways of using two-way video and audio communication, particularly for education, meetings, and information exchange between settlements (Greyson and Steele, 61).

Two-way video technology is perhaps the most valuable and appropriate form of communication for Northern conditions. This was already expressed in 1971 within the *Man in the North Report* through its recommendation for “the establishment of lateral channels of communication (inter-community communication)” (Roth 1982, 59). Numerous projects throughout the North as well as Quebec experimented with interactive technologies, which became highly popular within the communities involved (Minore and Hill, 175). In the North settlements are small and long distances apart, often without connecting roads and hospitals located in areas with the highest population. Many Inuit also continue to hunt for long periods of time throughout the year. Reliable forms of communication between towns and people are therefore necessary and more advantageous than the unidirectional flow of information through television. Indeed, since the early projects, interactive technologies continue to be utilized for numerous



social and education purposes. “Video conferencing,” for instance, “is now being used in the Arctic for long-distance, interactive medical treatment and management training” (Marks, 17). The government, however, has not demonstrated a commitment (through support and funding) in the broad development of an interactive communication network, despite the immense success of the Inukshuk project.

The project, nonetheless, had a number of positive results. Following its termination after the three-year period all the equipment and facilities were left in the communities allowing for the continuation of local television production. It further provided many with training and experience in the production and transmission of television programs. Since all the programming was in Inuktitut, the project also “redefined television and the role it played for unilingual Inuit, who had never before had an opportunity to comprehend programs with any degree of regularity during prime time broadcasting hours” (Roth 1982, 138). Most importantly, however, the Inukshuk project convinced the government of the need and feasibility of Inuit produced television and thus served as the predecessor to the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation.

As the end result of all the projects and lobbying throughout the 1970s, the IBC is an independent Inuit controlled broadcasting system that produces Inuktitut language programming. The CRTC issued a license for the system in July of 1981, and IBC began broadcasting in January of 1982 (Roth 1982, 166). While the production of programming is divided among production stations located in 5 communities throughout the North, with the main station in Iqaluit (the capital of Nunavut), the organization is managed out of its headquarters in Ottawa. A substantial portion of IBC’s funding during its early years came from the Northern Native Broadcasting Access Program (NNBAP). Created

under the Northern Broadcasting Policy in 1983, the NNBAP is a funding body that “facilitates the production of regional radio and television shows by Native communications societies in northern areas” (Hill and Minore, 162). The organization was subsidizing many aboriginal media outlets though its own funds have significantly decreased in recent years causing IBC and others to search elsewhere for necessary funding (Valaskakis 1992, 74).

Despite financial strain, IBC has continued to provide approximately five hours per week of Inuktitut language programming consisting of educational, cultural, and information based material. Current programs include a call-in show, an educational show for children and one for youth, a program that teaches traditional skills, and a current events journal (Evans 1999, 47). Recently IBC has substantially altered the format of these programs:

Instead of having each center produce and package its own half-hour shows, most shows became magazine-type programs that included short segments from as many as three different centers... The *Qimaivvik* cultural program, for example, is packaged in Baker Lake, and the Executive Producer there oversees their combination into a half-hour show. The show features a host whose task it is to introduce the segments and tie the themes together. (ibid., 48)

The short-segment format necessarily reduces the quality of work being produced by not allowing room for an artist’s demonstration or development of their skills. Instead of producing a solid, formally cohesive half-hour work, each program is now a collection of loosely connected fragments. Furthermore, producers not only work with a tight time restriction but also a tight budget as IBC’s funding has significantly decreased since its creation, causing a reduction in staff and equipment. Working with poor quality, outdated, and/or lack of equipment has created strenuous working conditions as well as low morale among staff and a high turnover. Since IBC began operations, it has

undergone a severe snowball effect in losses from funding to staff and quality of equipment along with the initial optimism expressed during its creation.

When IBC was first actualized it represented Inuit taking control of Northern television services to fight assimilation and dependence on the South. Viewed as opening possibilities and opportunities in communications, it was certainly a major victory for the Native population. However, two decades later, the organization is receiving criticism for not appropriately fulfilling its original goals to “not only fight assimilation but actively create and develop a vital Inuit culture that is as connected to its own contemporary concerns as it is to the rich heritage of the North” (Greyson and Steele, 62). The IBC has been an important training ground for artists such as Zacharius Kunuk and Barney Pattunguyak (who produced the popular show *Super Shamou* featuring an animated Inuit superhero) but these artists along with many others have left the broadcaster in recent years (Hannon, B10). Although in its early days IBC received awards for its programming, the loss of artists and staff, budget cuts, as well as the shift in format, has resulted in lower quality products. Current criticism also points to the change in IBC’s audience and the organizations’ subsequent lack of awareness, such that Gerrald Hannon questions,

whether the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, and its current five-and-a-half hours of Inuktitut programming per week, is relevant, useful or even watchable in the part of the world that it serves at the moment, which has Internet access and satellite or cable connections to the worlds of MuchMusic, *The X-Files*, and *The Simpsons*. (ibid.)

The most vocal criticism of the IBC has been generated by Igloolik Isuma Productions, whose four members (Zacharius Kunuk, Norman Cohn, Paul Apak, and Pauloosie Qlitalik) had all worked for the organization.

### *Igloolik and Isuma Productions*

Isuma is based in Igloolik, a small community on Baffin Island with a population of approximately 1200. Although it is a government-constructed permanent settlement, the area has a long history stretching back thousands of years. When television began being offered to native communities Igloolik rejected it twice, once when CBC was offering the Accelerated Coverage Plan on Anik A. Igloolik held a referendum in March of 1975 and was the only community to refuse the service (of the 75 settlements chosen) (Roth 1982, 84). Roth outlines three reasons for this rejection. First, Igloolik residents feared the effect English-only television might have on the use and continuation of the Inuktitut language. Secondly, they worried the schedule of programming may conflict with and reduce attendance at community events. Indeed, Eric Michaels addresses scheduling as one of the areas creating a negative impact when a mass media conforming to a mainstream (Euro-American) work schedule is introduced into a traditional aboriginal context. “Introduced media,” he writes, “alter the schedule and rhythm of community life by imposing urban time schemes and diverting people from traditional activities and responsibilities” (Michaels 1986, 126). Thirdly, the elders were concerned with the impact television would have on the youth, particularly in terms of school attendance. Igloolik residents were cautious and did not want to accept a technology over which they had no control and that had no relevance to their lives. They would eventually accept television and communication media but on their own terms.

When Igloolik finally accepted television in 1983 – once IBC was fully established and could provide Inuktitut programming – it was the last community in the

North to do so. By that time, however, a number of residents had experience and familiarity with interactive video technology, as Igloolik was one of the communities that participated in the Inukshuk project since 1979. Although not involved in the project, Zacharius Kunuk – an experienced artist in carving and photography – became interested in working with the medium. In 1981, he flew to Montreal to sell his carvings and purchase a Sony video camera on the same day. He experimented with the tool by recording his family and essentially trained himself in the technology. Since television had not arrived in Igloolik yet, Kunuk drew on the films he watched as a child more than video or television as a model (Evans 1999, 70).

When IBC set up a production station in Igloolik in 1983, Kunuk immediately joined as an employee. He worked under Paul Apak, who gained training and familiarity in television production through his involvement in the Inukshuk project. He was also the first Igloolik resident to work for IBC and quickly became a senior worker (Gale 2002, 16-17). He further initiated a number of his own independent personal projects, including an ambitious document of a hunting expedition in the Russian Arctic. Both Kunuk and Apak's work tend to be admired as the best and most original videos in IBC's collection, perhaps because both had training elsewhere and produced work with a unique and personal style. The two men would eventually join as collaborators in and founding members of Igloolik Isuma Productions.

Interested in developing his work in a different direction from standard television, Kunuk attended a workshop organized by IBC on alternative video production. Norman Cohn who had been working as a video artist for many years in New York and Montreal presented the workshop. By that time, Cohn had viewed some of Kunuk's work in

Montreal and found the videos resembled his own, which consisted of cinema-verite style video portraits of people (children and the elderly) whose regular environment is a medical institution. Cohn preferred to work with marginalized groups or individuals, and originally moved to Canada because he was attracted to NFB's Challenge for Change project (Gale 2002, 7; 9). He states that at the time of meeting Kunuk he was "looking for a more serious context to work than the exclusively self-referential world of contemporary video art. I found partners with similar vision and shared goals despite wide cultural differences. I stayed to live and co-found Igloolik Isuma Productions" (Cohn, 12).

Cohn joined Kunuk at IBC, but both left the organization in 1991 after a series of frustrations. Besides IBC's continuous refusal to provide necessary equipment, Kunuk states his reason for leaving as the lack of control he had over his own work: "when he produced something (on the job) of which he was particularly proud, he had no control over its distribution, its future, its audience. IBC work was not 'his' work, it was in effect 'government work'" (Gale 2002, 16). As a move to gain control over their work, Peggy Gale draws a parallel between the creation of Igloolik Isuma Productions and that of the Coop Montreal, a video artists' group that Cohn was very familiar with. She writes:

[T]he Coop Montreal (Cooperative de Production Videoscopique de Montreal) might also have been an inspiration for the organizing of Isuma; for the Montreal coop, several artists in various disciplines agreed to buy their own video production and editing equipment and work together so that they might maintain greater control over their work and express themselves more freely. Isuma operations are not unlike those of the Coop's early days. (ibid., 15)

Not only do they maintain restrictions over the exhibition of their videos, Isuma has been highly circumspect and conscientious in negotiating contracts over distribution.

Freedom and control have served as the impetus for the formation of Isuma and continue to govern the management of their work and company.

As the first Inuit independent production company Igloolik Isuma Productions was officially incorporated in 1990, consisting of four members, Kunuk, Apak, Cohn, and Pauloosie Qlitalik, who work as a cohesive team. Each member owns twenty-five percent of the company with Kunuk as president, Apak as vice-president, Cohn as secretary-treasurer, and Qlitalik as chairman. With these members the company combines different generations and each brings with him different skills, experience, and history to the projects. Qlitalik is an elder whose knowledge of traditional Inuit culture is essential to the team. He therefore serves as a consultant, providing much of the research for the videos to assure historical accuracy, while acting in all the productions as well. As the only non-Inuk, Cohn's administrative duties consist of public relations, sending the videos for exhibition in the South and internationally, and securing funding through grant applications. Gale has noted that the amount of written material Isuma has had to produce due to their distance and need for funding has helped the company develop a clear purpose to their practice (ibid, 21). As their website explains, "Isuma's mission is to produce independent community-based media – video, audio, television., and now Internet -- to preserve and enhance Inuit culture and language, and to create jobs and needed economic development in Igloolik and Nunavut." (Igloolik Isuma Productions 2002, 3).

Isuma not only utilizes various types of media to achieve their goals, but has also expanded by creating related organizations and community projects for video production. The first of these was the Tariagsuk Video Centre, incorporated in 1991 as a non-profit

training and equipment centre created with funding from the Canada Council (ibid.). The centre was formed in order to train and involve people in the community in video production. Currently it sponsors two groups, the Inousiq Youth Drama Workshop and Arnaiit Ikkajurtigiit (Women's Video Workshop). Marie Helene Cousineau, who has been involved with the Tariagsuk Video Centre and women's workshop for many years, explains the difference between these groups and Isuma as the former using non-professional equipment and producing work without the intent of broad exhibition either on television or outside the North:

It [is] just a matter of showing [the videos] to the community, the people in town... A lot of Isuma's work is for the people here as well, but they also have a vision of people from outside being added to their public, their audience. The activities of the whole video centre have really been centred around this [Igloolik] audience, or northern audience... Making videos for themselves is what makes the projects different and the products different in their final form. (Fleming 1996, 17)

The videos produced through the centre range in style and form, from animation and drama, to storytelling, interviews, documentary, and the recording of group discussions. The work aims to share and preserve knowledge, while promoting individual creativity as well as collective expression. The most recent outgrowth of Isuma has been the creation of a local television station and channel, which only broadcasts to the community and is jointly owned and operated by Isuma and Teriagsuk (Evans 1999, 165). As the companies have significantly grown in the last decade, they include more artists and staff on an on-going basis. Isuma and its affiliated organizations are continually active in media production and encourage wide community participation in their projects.

Isuma is continually growing more ambitious with each subsequent project not only by expanding their company but also the scope of their productions. Their first few



videos include *Qaggiq (Gathering Place)* (1989) (which is perhaps their most famous and widely distributed work), *Nunaqpa (Going Inland)* (1991), and *Saputi (Fish Traps)* (1993). Each of these is either a one-hour (*Qaggiq* and *Nunaqpa*) or half-hour (*Saputi*) long drama, documenting performances of an Inuit way of life from the recent past. Following these, Isuma produced a thirteen part series for television entitled *Nunavut (Our Land)* in 1995. Each video demonstrates a typical traditional activity (such as a caribou hunt or the building of a stone house) that would be performed in a particular month in the year 1945. Their collection also includes a number of documentaries. Each video is produced with funding gathered from a number of sources both private and public, including grants from various governmental bodies such as the ITC, Canada Council, the Secretary of State Canada, and Telefilm. All the videos are in Inuktitut with English subtitles and have been shown on TVNC. Although the work has rarely appeared on other Canadian television networks, most of it has been exhibited internationally in galleries, museums, festivals, and on television.

Most recently Isuma had completed their first feature-length production, *Atanarjuat* (2000), which is also the world's first Inuit produced, Inuktitut-language feature film. Since the four artists have over twenty years experience working solely in video, they initially recorded and edited on digital video then transferred the final product to 35-mm film. As a fictional narrative feature lasting three hours the work is a marked departure from their earlier videos and took seven years to make, including writing the script. Paul Apak, who continued to fluctuate between Isuma and IBC after Kunuk and Cohn left, eventually left the broadcaster in 1994, joined the Isuma team permanently, and immediately began working on the script for *Atanarjuat* (though he passed away

before the filming was completed). The script had to go through several revisions to satisfy funding bodies and production took longer than expected, as they had to cease production for a year due to the loss of funding.

Securing funding for the project was a long and arduous struggle.<sup>2</sup> This is primarily due to what Cohn calls Canada's discriminatory funding system, which does not allow for large and expensive projects to be made by aboriginal producers. In fact, Isuma originally pitched the script as a made-for-TV-movie since they believed no one would take the project seriously as a feature film. Nonetheless, no one funding body was willing to provide a significant amount of the two million dollars necessary for the production. To even be eligible for a Telefilm grant Isuma needed to secure fifteen percent of their total budget from a broadcaster. Since CBC gave them a similar restriction the company was caught in a catch twenty-two situation. Isuma eventually received some funding from sources in the North, such as TVNC (which gave them money to license the film) and a number of small grants. However, even after a commitment from both TVNC and Vision TV, Telefilm still dismissed the project because it was too large for the small amount of funds reserved for aboriginal productions. The main obstacle was that of the two hundred million dollars per year of public funding available for Canadian film productions sixty-five percent is provided for English-language films, thirty-five percent for French, and less than one percent for work in an aboriginal language. Eventually, Cohn pitched the film to the NFB in Montreal, which was undergoing a restructuring of the centre towards exclusively documentary production and was therefore hesitant to take on the project. Cohn, however, argued that

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<sup>2</sup> The following tale outlining the process of obtaining funding for *Atanarjuat* has been paraphrased from a talk given by Norman Cohn at York University on February 7, 2002.

within the Inuit storytelling tradition (as with other oral cultures) the Inuit make no distinction between documentary and fiction; since the story is based on a legend, it is believed to be true and factual. The NFB ended up co-producing the film.

Some of the difficulties encountered in this funding process are not unlike the problems Cohn attributes to the IBC, namely the artists' work not being valued or taken seriously as well as a lack of support and encouragement. Kunuk and Cohn left not only because artists had no control over their work but also because producers had no serious and effective decision-making power. Evans explains that, "the clash between Isuma and the IBC...centers on the question of ultimate authority" (Evans 1999, 180). Isuma maintains that at the IBC control remains firmly in Southern hands. One of the main problems for many critics is the location of IBC headquarters in Ottawa – far from both its audience and producers – which suggests that their priorities are not focused on the North (ibid., 181). While IBC's central management (the majority of which is non-Inuit) determines programming, format, and the distribution of funds, their distance prevents awareness of the specific needs and conditions of producers who lack sufficient equipment (often being refused) and thereby work with the most minimal resources possible. Moreover, the distance of management prevents those working in local production centres from achieving high-level positions with administrative power. Thus, producers are given no opportunity for professional development, whether creative or administrative.

Location is central to both their criticism of IBC as well as to Isuma's own practice. The company's first commitment and priority is to the community in which they are situated. As a community based media production company Isuma employs

local residents as actors, technicians, assistants, and so on. Even for as large a production as *Atanarjuat*, the company hired Southern professionals to train local residents in such jobs as make-up application. That their primary interest is in the development of the community, both in terms of skills and economy, is obvious from the media network they have constructed in Igloolik. Furthermore, all their videos, including the feature, are set in the area of Igloolik. Thus, they identify themselves not broadly as Inuit videomakers but as Igloolik videomakers, representing the history of their specific locale and people. As Marie Helene Cousineau states of Arnait Productions, “[i]t would be more precise to say ‘Igloolik Women’s Video’ because it was from the women of Igloolik, not Inuit women from other places” (Fleming 1996, 19). She further explains, with reference to *Nunavut (Our Land)*:

In the North they recognize the localism of the production, the way it represents a culture more alive around the Baffin region than the Central Arctic for example. They don’t think it represents all of the Inuit culture. They are more likely to identify the programs as stories from Igloolik... Inuit produce television, their television. They don’t sit around trying to figure how to produce Inuit television... [I]t is also interesting to look at Isuma as an organization. I have seen board meetings, I have videotaped production meetings. They all took place in Igloolik, they all took place in Inuktitut. They often involved local elders or consultants. Every decision is taken in Igloolik. Before Zach quit his job at IBC he was often frustrated because they had no decisional power in Igloolik. The decision came from the office in Ottawa, from the board etc. The local producers were just executing... IBC is built on a southern bureaucratic government model... Isuma has borrowed from another model of production, more like other small independent and original companies. They are inventing their own ‘corporate culture,’ and they are grounded in their location. (Cousineau and McGough, 33)

As a community-oriented video production company Isuma places itself in opposition to the centralized format of broadcast television. However, at the same time, Isuma utilizes the medium by having their own local channel and preferring to exhibit their work on television in order to receive a wider audience than is possible in a gallery.

Thus, they harness television's possibilities as a distribution network but see a need for an alternative infrastructure. In this sense, they emerge out of the video culture from the 1960s that aimed to revolutionize and democratize television with the newly created video portapak. Since that time, video artists have engaged with the medium of television in a variety of ways:

Artists' video is hardly a form of commercial television, but there is no doubt that the TV screen, a familiar icon in every home, proposes by its simple appearance a relationship between the two. The interplay between video and TV – commentary, emulation, critique – has vacillated widely over the quarter century of artists' use of the medium. (Gale 1995, 23)

This is certainly seen in the work of Igloolik Isuma Productions. For example, Gale has mentioned the soap-opera quality of Kunuk's work, who himself has expressed a love of Southern soap operas (*ibid.*, 143). Kunuk, like many Canadian video artists, draws on television formats but uses them in an unconventional and critical way in order to raise questions about and open new possibilities within the medium.

### *Conclusion*

The issue of control has dominated the history of Northern communications for over thirty years as the driving force of the various initiatives taken by Inuit groups, including political lobbying, media projects, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, and Igloolik Isuma Productions. The creation of IBC was certainly a crucial development, representing a committed collective struggle for self-determination through access to the means of production. However, the struggle against southern control has not ended. Rather, it has been redefined. A decade after IBC began broadcasting, Isuma has shifted the discourse around Inuit control from a focus on mere access to an examination of how

the organization operates. Isuma is not alone in its criticism that IBC has lost sight of its original objectives and not progressed beyond its initial formation. Thus, Cohn claims Isuma is continuing the struggle. Their aim is for aboriginal artists to receive the same opportunities and be considered at the same level as other Canadian media producers. Isuma's history with the IBC and Canada's funding system illustrates how "artists like Kunuk are necessarily enmeshed in power struggles between local nodes of production and centralized funding and distribution structures" (Marks, 17). However, a power struggle necessarily involves negotiation and Isuma must still, to an extent, work with these structures in order to produce and exhibit their work.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **TRADITION AND TECHNOLOGY**

#### *Introduction*

Unlike Western cultures that construct archives through written texts stored in libraries, the oral culture of the Inuit carry history and memory through oral storytelling. It has been assumed that oral-based societies, since they do not create texts, have no archive, history, or culture. Early ethnographic discourse has therefore constructed archives of indigenous cultures in order to, through writing, rescue these traditional life-worlds as they appear to disappear as a result of Westernization. Such thinking denies indigenous peoples any social, political, or cultural agency. Igloolik Isuma also creates an archive of Inuit traditions for cultural preservation, but with a divergent meaning and function from ethnography. The work extends oral history using video. Although they produce texts, it is the creation process and not the products themselves that constitute the archive and enact preservation. Through both the video texts and production process, Isuma subverts dominant assumptions, enacting a radical resistance to and intervention into Western systems of thought.

*Ethnographic Preservation and the Construction of the Primitive*

Recent self-reflective theory produced within the field of anthropology has directed a critical gaze upon the way in which ethnography has traditionally represented other cultures and how, through these representations, it has understood and justified its own project. Focusing primarily on ethnographic writing, theorists such as George E. Marcus and James Clifford have revealed and interrogated the problematic assumptions and conventions that have governed the practice of ethnography since its establishment as a scientific field of knowledge. Marcus notes that early in the development of anthropology as a discipline, ethnography (as a method) had to be distinguished from similar modes of writing and justified as a scientific endeavor:

Ethnographies as a genre had similarities with traveler and explorer accounts, in which the main narrative motif was the romantic discovery by the writer of people and places unknown to the reader. While ethnography encompassed some of this sense of romance and discovery, it also attempted in its scientific aims to distance itself from the traveler's account and the amateur ethnographer. To do this, the main motif that ethnography as a science developed was that of salvaging cultural diversity, threatened with global Westernization, especially during the age of colonialism. The ethnographer would capture in writing the authenticity of changing cultures, so they could be entered into the record for the great comparative project of anthropology, which was to support the Western goal of social and economic progress. (Marcus and Fischer, 24)

The salvage of what were perceived as dying cultures through the production of a written archive had thus become ethnography's *raison d'être*.

Within the written record of the culture under observation, ethnographers consistently failed to account for the effect their presence may have on the object of study or any signs of impact by larger political and economic systems. The written account included only those aspects of the culture considered traditional and, therefore, authentic.



Ethnographic texts and museum exhibits have tended to avoid any indication of contact between the West and non-West cultures due to the assumption that through growing cultural interaction the latter suffers a certain loss with respect to the purity and authenticity of their traditional ways of life (Clifford, 5). Contact with or appropriation of Western (or modern) technology and ideas destroys the purity of the Other, eventually resulting in the extinction of that culture.

Clifford provides an example of such limited representations in his description of an exhibit in the Hall of Pacific Peoples - dedicated to Margaret Mead - at the Museum of Natural History. He writes:

We are offered treasures saved from a destructive history, relics of a vanishing world. Visitors to the installation (and especially members of present Pacific cultures) may find a 'world that is no more' more appropriately evoked in two charming display cases just outside the hall... [A]rtifacts suggesting change and syncretism are set apart in a small display entitled 'Culture Contact.' It is noted that Western influence and indigenous response have been active in the Pacific since the eighteenth century. Yet few signs of this involvement appear anywhere else in the large hall, despite the fact that many of the objects were made in the past 150 years in situations of contact, and despite the fact that the museum's ethnographic explanations reflect quite recent research on the cultures of the Pacific. The historical contacts and impurities that are part of ethnographic work – and that may signal the life, not the death, of societies – are systematically excluded. (Clifford, 201)

Through both the writing of ethnographic texts and collecting of artifacts, ethnography has been concerned with salvaging what were perceived as “disappearing life-worlds”. Texts and museums have thus preserved other cultures as observable totalities and complete objects of knowledge. By consistently avoiding any indication of operating relations of cultural exchange, such representations simultaneously conceal, enact, and perpetuate power relations. These practices treat indigenous cultures as apolitical,

ahistorical, and isolated societies, within an imaginary realm of innocence and purity existing outside concrete politico-economic systems of inequality.

Similar aims and assumptions can be found in the practice of early ethnographic filmmaking. In her analysis of some of the more well-known examples of ethnographic cinema, such as Edward Curtis' *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914) and Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Fatimah Tobing Rony identifies the desire to capture and preserve on film the authenticity of vanishing cultures (Rony, 78). However, rather than observing and recording only the activities identified as traditional and therefore "authentic," Curtis and Flaherty recreated the authentic. Both produced highly picturesque and romantic images of traditional worlds. While Flaherty represented the encounter between the Inuit and Western culture in a scene of a trading post where Nanook is introduced to a phonograph, the scene depicts the Inuk as completely ignorant of modern technology and childlike as he tries to bite the record. As Rony explains, "[the indigenous person's] naivete – they do not understand this technology – is another sign of authenticity. This conceit, of course, obscures the Inuit's own appropriation of the new technology, their participation in the production of the film" (Rony, 112). To represent Nanook as completely competent in the use of the technology would certainly threaten the image of the Inuit as more primitive than the film's primary audience. Although there has been a large amount of criticism produced on early ethnographic cinema and *Nanook* in particular, the work continues to have authority and status as scientific documentation, educational tool, and great art.

According to Rony, these films are founded on and reproduce a dichotomy between cultures identified as *ethnographiable* and those that are *historifiable* – terms

coined by Claude-Levi Strauss. A classification attributed to all indigenous peoples, *ethnographiable* cultures are perceived as “people without history, without writing, without civilization, without technology, without archives... as opposed to people classified as ‘*historifiable*’ the posited audience of the ethnographic film, those considered to have written archives and thus a history proper.” (Rony, 7). The *ethnographic* cultures belong to an early stage in human history, without a distinct history of their own. This further distinguishes between the West as active agents of history and producers of knowledge and non-West passive objects of knowledge - there are those who *make* history and those who *are* history, respectively.

Whether through writing, film, or museum collections early ethnography’s mode of salvage has been based on the notion that the traditional (or primitive) and the modern are two distinct and discrete periods on the scale of human progress. This distinction situates non-Western cultures not only at a spatial distance but also temporal distance from the contemporary West. Indigenous peoples, defined as “primitive,” are seen as belonging to an earlier period on the evolutionary trajectory of Man, with Europe representing the highest level of civilization and development. This narrative of a universal humanity effaces particular histories, contexts, differences, and power relations. Moreover, the notion that through the encounter with the modern West the Other disappears suggests that indigenous cultures can only exist in the past. “Evolutionary anthropology,” states Marian Bredin, “thus allowed anthropologists and colonial administrators to regard subject peoples as remnants of the past, and so avoid having to deal with them as historical and political equals” (Bredin, 300). As modernization is equated with losing or surrendering one’s indigenous cultural identity, non-West cultures

are seen as lacking a modern identity of their own: "Swept up in a destiny dominated by the capitalist West and by various technologically advanced socialisms, these suddenly 'backward' peoples no longer invent local futures. What is different about them remains tied to traditional pasts, inherited structures that either resist or yield to the new but cannot produce it" (Clifford, 5). Such an understanding results in the erasure of a distinct past, present or future existence for indigenous cultures.

Ethnography's discourse of salvage and preservation is founded on an understanding of human existence as separated into groups that are either stronger or weaker according to supposedly natural spatial and temporal divisions. Cultural differences are reduced to essences and cultural identity is outside one's domain of control. These narratives define culture as a fixed and static entity that can be possessed or replaced but cannot change.

### *Contemporary Perspective*

The idea of any "pure" "primitive" cultures existing today, as isolated societies untouched by Western cultural and economic imperialism, would be difficult to support. Although the impact of the West on remote communities is not a recent phenomenon, with the growth of travel and technology there is greater global interaction and exchange between people than ever before. Moreover, the encounter is becoming impossible to deny, as those who have traditionally been the objects of ethnography are now asserting themselves as subjects and producing their own texts with appropriated technologies. Using video and television media, indigenous peoples are asserting their presence in the contemporary world.

The growth of indigenous media over the past twenty years, due to cheaper equipment and greater access, has to some extent reduced the hegemonic status of traditional ethnographic discourses. As Faye Ginsburg states, “this work demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging multiple points of view in the creation, distribution, and reception of screen representations of culture” (Ginsburg 1999, 158). As a result, ethnography has become one voice and point of view among many. The rise of oppositional voices has demanded and generated a rethinking of dominant ethnographic paradigms and practices of representation. However, indigenous media for the most part receives limited, if any, exposure outside the local center of production. With respect to Inuit communications in Canada, “despite the North/South-dialogue rhetoric used in the planning and implementation of stages of these structures and technologies, the flow of information continues to be south to north, and TVNC [Television Northern Canada network] remains unavailable to viewers in the South” (Fleming 1996, 29). The dominant images of aboriginal cultures remain those provided by museums, traditional ethnographies, and southern broadcast news sources that maintain authority as scientific and objective discourses.

Thus, old paradigms persist within various dominant discourses, from the popular to academic, as well as legal and political. The relationship or difference between the West and non-West cultures continues to be defined in terms of a universal linear progression:

The residue of evolutionary models still adheres to social and political thought. While evolutionism was explicitly rejected in anthropology after the turn of the century, it crept into political science, sociology, economics, and administration in such categories as ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped,’ ‘traditional’ and ‘modern.’ Certainly these categories are still in active use in communication studies and need some thorough reexamination.” (Bredin, 300)

Such categories further emerge in court cases dealing with land claims, whereby aboriginal communities must prove their authenticity and natural (as opposed to chosen) affiliation.<sup>3</sup> In such cases, one's degree of indigenous identity becomes quantifiable based on levels of traditionalism, which in turn – according to a European legal system – determines rights to land. The driving of cars or skidoos, using microwaves and computers, is still seen as less authentic than the collection of “traditional” artifacts encased in museums. The myth that aboriginal people are dying off remains, if not as a result of assimilation, then due to addiction, violence, poverty and suicide.

#### *Technology: Loss and Preservation*

To say that the Inuit have not undergone severe changes with damaging impact due to Southern colonialism, however, would be a disservice. Life in Northern Canada has altered dramatically since the first contact with Europeans, and particularly in the last century. The loss of certain values, knowledge, and language has been a real experience and fear, particularly with respect to the introduction of broadcast media. Television was first introduced in the North in 1972. Igloolik, along with a few other settlements, however, did not accept the technology until the early 1980s – once programming in Inuktitut was secured (Fleming 1996, 28). The concerns expressed by Igloolik residents regarding the effects of television were ones widely shared by indigenous peoples living in remote areas in Canada and Australia (Meadows; Ginsburg 1992). As the majority of programming is imported from the dominant English speaking culture, this constitutes a serious threat (if not assault) on indigenous languages and cultures. According to Michael

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<sup>3</sup> See Clifford's discussion of a 1976 trial involving the Mashpee Tribal Council, Inc. (Clifford, 277).

Meadows, “the perception that television threatens language and cultural maintenance more so than other alien technologies remains a central focus for many” (Meadows, 199).

Television is only the more recent in a long line of elements introduced in the North that has significantly threatened and altered social structure and dynamics. Gail Valaskakis (1992) identifies the shifts as intimately linked with technology and communication, which were used to secure the power and interests of colonizing forces. Through the provisioning of various goods and technologies, foreign institutions in the North, such as Christianity, traders, and the RCMP along with other Canadian governmental institutions, established their authority through a relationship of economic and political dependence. These institutions established Inuit “bosses” or go-betweens who could communicate in English and therefore mediate between the newcomers and the natives (Valaskakis 1992, 65). Those who chose to exchange with the Southerners and who had greater access to new technologies were at an advantage over others: “As Inuit with wooden boats decided where and when to travel and Inuit with guns provided more food for their extended families, leadership began a rudimentary shift toward people with access to nonnative technology and authority” (ibid.). These conditions created a hierarchy with non-native institutions at the top, then the Inuit “bosses”, other Inuit with access, and the rest without. The structure of leadership in Inuit communities was significantly transformed, and therefore social structure effectively weakened, as newly appointed leaders such as the go-betweens and youth (who could more easily learn English) undermined the traditional leadership of shamans and elders.

Similarly, one of the more destructive effects of television is the growing generation gap between the youth and elders. As the younger generation quickly absorbs

the values, culture, and language from the South, they see this new knowledge as undermining that of the elders, which has traditionally been highly respected in aboriginal cultures. Furthermore, the specific knowledge necessary for living off the land, which all Inuit possessed prior to the Canadian government's creation of settlements, is no longer needed by the younger generation who, unlike the elders, are not dependent on that knowledge for their physical survival. Thus, this knowledge is in some danger of being lost, or forgotten, through non-use.

Igloodik Isuma Productions is committed to bridging the gap between the youth and elders by specifically preserving the knowledge of the elders using video. Their work represents traditional ways of life of the Inuit, portraying what it was like to live off the land prior to being forced onto settlements. In a thirteen part series titled *Nunavut (Our Land)* (1995), for example, each half-hour video depicts typical activities performed at different times of the year in 1945 within the Igloodik area. The title of each video refers to its focus, such as *Qamaq (Stone House)*, *Qulangisi (Seal Pups)*, or *Aiviaq (Walrus Hunt)*. The everyday activities performed include building snow or stone houses, attaching a porch to an igloo, and various hunting expeditions (for seal pups, walrus, caribou, char, and so on).

A number of the videos include short plot elements that involve some degree of acting. In the video *Qaggiq (Gathering Place)* (1989), for example, the son of one family wishes to marry the daughter from another family. The parents of the girl, however, disagree and argue over whether she is of age to be married. Set in the 1930s, the video presents a historically accurate depiction of home life, family and social dynamics. Other videos, however, generally do not include a specific plot or any acting. Both the camera



work and performances are completely improvised. Working without a detailed script, the camera follows a group as they perform various activities. The “performers” actually go hunting, wearing clothes and using methods from the particular time period, while the camera records their activities. The “story” is constructed in the process, as it is contingent upon weather changes and other factors. Thus, the work is difficult to classify according to Southern categories of image production. It is not quite documentary and not quite narrative fiction. These categories however are only relevant in Western culture. According to Zacharias Kunuk, the videos present truth because they depict the elders’ knowledge (Hendrick, 26).

In a sense, Isuma produces a video catalogue of traditional activities. By recreating a recent past on video in order to preserve knowledge, the texts constitute an archive similar to that of ethnography. However, Michael Evans defines the relationship between these two forms of representation as a battle fought through images, “with each side attempting to package the past to suit its own viewpoint.” (Evans 1999, 216) He further adds, “the objections to [Southern representations of the Inuit] lie less with the accuracy and more with their authorship” (ibid., 219). Thus, Kunuk defines his work as showing Inuit culture and history from his own perspective; hence the title of his first independent video *From Inuk Point of View* (1985). These representations, looking at Inuit culture from within, have a radically different purpose, meaning, and relationship to both subjects and viewers. As such, Isuma’s work challenges the myths and assumptions that ethnography was founded on and has sustained.

Prior to the use of video, the elders’ knowledge and history was preserved through oral storytelling. It is only in the last century that the Inuit were displaced onto

settlements by the Canadian government and began a written language (devised by missionaries). For 4000 years prior, the Inuit lived off the land, hunting and building homes where necessary. The vast history, rich culture, and the knowledge necessary for survival on the land were not recorded in books but carried in people's minds and passed down from one generation to the next through oral storytelling. In a speech introducing their feature *Atanarjuat* (2000) at the Toronto International Film Festival, Norman Cohn stated that when the West first encountered the Inuit they assumed that people without libraries were people without culture. Isuma aims to show otherwise by documenting a rich history and body of knowledge. Since the practice of oral storytelling has decreased since the 1920s and even more so since television, Isuma's project aims to continue the tradition by constructing a video archive to record, preserve, and give value to the elders' knowledge.

### *Representing History: From Past to Future*

The attention to and value given to the knowledge of traditional ways of life is evident in the way the camera concentrates on details and presents the full process of an activity. Often, the camera will follow an individual or action through an entire motion until it is complete with a single take. At the beginning of *Qaggiq* (1989) a dog sled is seen in extreme long shot. The camera remains on the sled as it approaches until it is framed in medium close-up. Later in the video a lot of time is devoted to the communal building of a large snow house (the qaggiq, or "gathering place"). The cutting and shaping of snow blocks is continuously repeated as slowly, layer after layer, the house takes shape. As the camera concentrates on the gestures of the hands and the precise

placement of the snow blocks, the viewer is made to attend to the process and the labour involved. With the activity constituting approximately fifteen to twenty minutes of the one-hour tape, the slow pace of the video, minimal editing, and its focus on repetitive action emphasizes the skill involved, communicating a sense of ritual, tradition, and history.

Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* also focuses on the processes of daily life and hunting. The film, however, centres on dramatic moments of struggle between hunter and animal. Describing the famous scene where Nanook captures a seal, Rony writes:

This scene, so beloved by Bazin for its use of real time and the stark drama of the solitary struggling Nanook against a bleak landscape, was actually staged: the line at which Nanook pulls strenuously apparently in a fierce struggle with a seal that has been harpooned beneath the surface of the ice, in fact did not lead to a seal at all but to a group of men, off camera, who would periodically tug at the line, creating the impression of a great struggle. (Rony, 114)

*Nanook* clearly employs Western conventions of fictional narrative and constructs moments of dramatic action for an exciting story. Although the film may be read as pure fictional entertainment, it has been perhaps the primary representation of Inuit culture in recent history for a Euro-American public.<sup>4</sup> Yet it depicts Nanook and Inuit culture within a framework of Western social and cultural norms and narrative conventions as it follows one man's individual battle against natural forces in order to survive and provide sustenance for his nuclear family. Western narrative is based on conflict. This is certainly seen within the narrative of Western history, often told as a linear advancement through a series of dramatic events, usually struggles between monumental social forces.

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<sup>4</sup> This has certainly changed since the immense success of Isuma's film *Atanarjuat*, which has received wide international distribution and media attention.

As in the oral tradition, within Isuma's videos history is expressed through knowledge. The imagery demonstrates the patience and knowledge, rather than power, required in hunting. Here, the videos also focus on the process, the waiting as well as the communal planning and decision making involved. As hunting is generally a communal activity, in Isuma's work, "Cooperation is the story, rather than conflict" (Igloolik Isuma 1996, 67). In their representations of hunting nothing happens in terms of what Western viewers understand as dramatic action. The kill is brief. Instead, the camera concentrates on the skinning process, presenting the precise cuts made (first along the torso, then legs, and so on), until the meat and skin are formed into bundles and carried back to the camp, where the women are shown preparing the skin for clothing, tents, and other purposes. This concentration on the knowledge necessary for living off the land subverts common stereotypes of Inuit, and hunter-gatherers generally, as "simple" people.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the videos demonstrate the vast knowledge required for land management, which involves complex decision-making:

To make these decisions, hunters need knowledge. They must bear in mind all the facts that inform the choice. The patterns of other years. The difference between this year and the norm. The ways in which weather has been changing, over a period of months and in the past few days. The patterns of animal movements, the cycles of animal populations, the relationship between animals and the places they may or may not be feeding. Hunters and gatherers must draw on knowledge that they have accumulated over many years. (Brody, 260)

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<sup>5</sup> With the notion that indigenous cultures constitute an early period in human history comes the assumption that their traditional ways of life lack the complexity of more "advanced" industrialized civilizations. As Hugh Brody states, "The idea of hunting as innocent and idyllic, as well as backward, was part of the European notion of evolution at least as early as the Enlightenment...Far from being simple or primitive, the economic and cultural techniques of hunter-gatherers were hard to see and difficult to assess precisely because they were meeting needs of mobility, decision making and resource harvesting that were both varied and subtle." (Brody, 122)

The videos demonstrate this knowledge as well as the complexity of traditional life ways, and, in so doing, challenge the negative connotations and notion of “primitive” attached to the past.

Unlike ethnographic archives, which contain indigenous cultures within a past, the work of Isuma shows history as having a *presence* within a contemporary culture. As the videos recreate a past, the traditional activities are performed in the present. The performers actually build igloos, hunt seals, and skin caribou, without any simulation, manipulation, or special effects. Isuma also takes care in maintaining historical accuracy to the period represented rather than creating an illusion. The clothing and materials used in the videos are specifically made and utilized as they were in the past. With *Atanarjuat*, for example, which takes place prior to contact, all the knives and pots were made of bone and the clothing and tents from animal skins. As these items had to be constructed for the videos (as opposed to using collected “authentic” artifacts) and the activities performed accurately, the knowledge depicted still exists, reflecting what Peggy Gale has referred to as a “living history.”

This notion of the presence of history is further demonstrated in the Inuit conception of time as cyclical and continuous, which is based in various traditions and felt in the environment itself. As Cohn has remarked, the land up North remains largely unchanged. When looking out at the vast area onto the horizon, one sees the same view another saw thousands of years ago. The land, therefore, is seen not as a vast empty space of struggle but as full of history and meaning. In the videos this is demonstrated through the way in which the hunters must read the land to choose the best routes for finding food. They are often camouflaged against their surroundings as if completely part of the

environment. The videos further contain numerous long shots both during the day and sunset to convey the beauty, richness, and stillness of the landscape.

The sense of continuity and cyclical time is also reflected in oral history in that stories are repeated and passed down from one generation to the next, with history being carried through time. This is further exhibited in the way children are given names.

Hugh Brody gives an example in a story of one particular newborn girl, as he writes, “she is the baby that carries the *atiq*, the spirit and name, of her late grandmother. She is the adored baby; she is also her mother’s mother, her grandfather’s wife. Her grandmother is alive again in this baby.” (Brody, 12). The newborn child is given the name of a deceased relative, with the understanding that the spirit of the latter is alive in the child. The present is not seen as a discrete domain in-between two other separate stages in a linear progression, but rather the past and future are embodied in the present, just as the child embodies both the memory of the past and the possibility of the future. Thus the past is brought into the present, and lives on to continue into the future.

This cyclical movement through past, present, and future is central to Isuma’s practice of cultural preservation. In this context preservation should be understood not as a sort of containment but as continuation, construction, and invention – a project that is dynamic and forward-driven. As such, their work resembles Michael Fischer’s description of autobiographies that “take ethnicity as a focal puzzle” (Fischer, 195). He writes:

What [these] works bring home forcefully is... the paradoxical sense that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned, it is something dynamic... The search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a (re-)invention and discovery

of a vision, both ethical and future-oriented. Whereas the search for coherence is grounded in a connection to the past, the meaning abstracted from that past, an important criterion of coherence, is an ethic workable for the future. (ibid.)

For Fischer identity is not something fixed or given but actively and consciously made and remade. With his emphasis on discovery and re-invention, history here serves as grounds for identity construction and a guide for action that is at once personal, political, and social (or interpersonal). The act of remembering involves an active choice that is mediated by and addresses the present. This is also seen in Inuit oral storytelling, which involves repetition but also incorporates change as stories, while passed down, are reinterpreted by each teller. Knowledge thus reemerges in a form that suits the present moment. Hence, while Isuma continues the oral tradition it does so through a new medium in order to speak to and reflect contemporary conditions.

Isuma's video production is also a response to the destructive effects Southern intervention has had in the North on psychology, economy, and social structure. Indeed, a significant impetus for their work is the immense rate of unemployment and youth suicide in Igloolik.<sup>6</sup> Through the videos, Kunuk aims to show an alternative way of life and value system, as he states, "Of course, we have to adapt to the world. I have no argument with that. My argument is that there is another way of living, and that way is Inuit" (Hendrick, 26). By representing history Kunuk is not advocating the (impossible) return to the past, but rather uses the past as a source of knowledge and values to deal with life in the present. The videos, for instance, tend to focus on the way in which Inuit hunters and communities went about the process of problem solving and decision making. Both their videos and feature, *Atanarjuat*, like all Inuit stories, impart traditional

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<sup>6</sup> According to Isuma's website, Igloolik has a 60% unemployment rate and ten times the national rate of suicide (Igloolik Isuma 2002).

values. As a narrative about the ruinous consequences of placing personal desires above the community's needs, *Atanarjuat* places greater value on the collective over the individual. Isuma's work thus advocates cooperation, respect for elders and the value of knowledge. Here, looking to history is less a project of nostalgia, a desire to return to an idealized past, but a source of meaning, direction, and creativity for a future.

### *Traditional/Modern*

Isuma's work, in both practice and content, reflects a history of Inuit appropriation and utilization of Southern tools and technology for their own needs. In the videos, for instance, the hunters use new technology such as guns or metal knives and pots alongside more traditional Inuit technology such as the *qulliq*, or *ulu*.<sup>7</sup> As Isuma recreates a rather recent past they include signifiers of contact and trade with Europeans. Although the videos represent the Inuit as they lived off the land, they show the culture as neither completely isolated from nor ignorant of the world around them. Rather, the characters demonstrate knowledge of current affairs and world politics, as in one video a group discusses Hitler and World War Two. The historical fact of encounter is further evident in a couple tapes in the *Nunavut* series that have Cohn performing as a priest, juxtaposed with earlier videos that make reference to more traditional spiritual elements. A certain trajectory is evident in the series whereby the later videos reveal greater contact and southern influence, as the final piece in the series depicts an Inuit community celebrating Christmas.<sup>8</sup> The combining of technologies, religions, and Isuma's use of

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<sup>7</sup> A *qulliq* is a lamp that burns blubber with a wick made of moss. An *ulu* is a rounded knife used by women.

<sup>8</sup> For Kunuk, Christianity has been the most destructive force in the North by colonizing people's minds. (Gale 2002)



video to continue an oral history reveals a mixed culture, whereby the elements introduced through contact with Western culture do not completely replace Inuit traditions but both coexist in the same space and time. Thus, Peter Kulchyski refers to contemporary Inuit culture as Paleolithic-Postmodern, whose art, culture, and economy combine elements of hunter-gatherer ways of life with those imported from the South. “The use of [Western] technology in northern Native cultural and economic strategies,” states Kulchyski, “has not necessarily contributed to an erosion of the ‘traditional’ Inuit way of life. On the contrary, advanced technology has been used by Inuits to strengthen their culture and economy” (Kulchyski, 50).<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the imagery in Isuma’s videos strongly emphasizes the performance of history. For example, in one video (set in the 1940s) a hunter is seen wearing a wristwatch. In another, as a hunter drinks tea with friends he lifts his cup for a sip to reveal a bar code stuck to the bottom. These images are intentionally included to indicate that the video is a self-conscious recreation. This is further seen in *Atanarjuat* (a story based prior to contact with the Europeans) during the final credits sequence, which includes clips of the production process to demonstrate how the video was made. Such insertions resist a reading of the work as nostalgia for and salvage of a pure past. Instead, history and memory are identified as mediated and constructed. Both the images and the practice indicate a self-conscious play with the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern. Isuma’s work reveals the instability of these categories, indicating that they are

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<sup>9</sup> One must be wary of too optimistic a view, particularly with respect to economic conditions in the North which Kulchyski focuses on, since the rate of unemployment, poverty, and homelessness in numerous Nunavut settlements, including Igloolik and Iqaluit, are the highest in all of Canada. In Iqaluit, for example, 1 in 6 people are homeless (due to astronomical costs for basic goods and services) and face severe overcrowding in shelters. (Laird, 20-25)

neither fixed (in time or space) nor mutually exclusive.

### *Reconceptualizing Culture*

Both in and through the videos Isuma's work presents a more complex understanding of culture and cultural identity than the one offered by traditional ethnography, one that resembles Clifford's radical reconceptualization of the terms. Clifford argues for an understanding of "collective identity as a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process" (Clifford, 10). Culture is here not tied to a geographic area, nor is it natural and organic. Cultural identity is not something one has or possesses but is artificially produced, involving a constant remaking of oneself in the present. As dynamic and fluid, a culture does not cease to exist but is continually re-invented. This notion emphasizes creativity and action, whereby the choices made by aboriginal people as they interact with capitalist and technological forces can be "[s]een from a standpoint not of finality (survival or assimilation) but of emergence" (ibid., 342). Such processes do not signify loss or extinction but reflect adaptation and invention.

Although many current aspects of daily life in the North have been forced upon the Inuit by the Canadian government (such as the creation of settlements and English schooling), this is not an indication of complete loss or death. The Inuit are not merely a passive object effected by changes, but active subjects that adapt to them. There is some degree of control and choice as to how to incorporate changes and use them in different and creative ways. That is not to say that choices are unlimited, for powerful political and economic forces certainly determine the domain of action. Nonetheless, there is an active response within those limits that combines acceptance and resistance. Thus, when

speaking of Isuma's work, preservation refers to not maintaining a traditional culture in its pure state but accounts for change and entails a re-invention of oneself, involving a negotiation between that which is established and that which is introduced.

Thus, as Marcus states, "Westernization is much too simple a notion of contemporary cultural change" (Marcus and Fischer, 24). The concept fails to account for the active choices people make. Individuals and cultures interact and negotiate, rather than surrender to political, economic, technological and cultural systems. There is no loss in the sense of a sweeping replacement of one way of life by another. Rather, cultural exchange produces complexly mixed cultural identities. Isuma reflects such a hybrid culture and asserts difference, an alternative within what is perceived as an increasingly homogenized world. For Marcus, this should precisely be the goal of contemporary ethnography:

It must continue to provide a convincing access to diversity in the world at a time when the perception, if not the reality, of this diversity is threatened by modern consciousness... Difference in the world is no longer discovered, as in the age of exploration, or salvaged, as in the age of colonialism and high capitalism, but rather must be redeemed, or recovered as valid and significant, in an age of apparent homogenization and suspicion of authenticity, which, while recognizing cultural diversity, ignores its practical implications. (ibid., 167)

### *Process over Product*

With respect to indigenous media, the question of Western hegemony is not located within the mere use of the technology but in the conditions of production and reception. In his discussion of aboriginal media in Australia, Eric Michaels identifies context as central in determining what constitutes aboriginal content:

[T]he problematic of Aboriginal content expands in a number of interesting directions that allow us to consider not just the media text, in its narrow sense, but

the production of contexts and institutional practices that ultimately reach into the much broader social and cultural facts of the ascription and inscription of Aboriginality in Australia. (Michaels 1994, 21)

As an example, Michaels discusses the early CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) radio station. Although the material consisted of reggae and country-western music, “the organization of the workplace and the relations of production, which emerged on air mostly as format, announcing style, and call-in cheerios...gave the station its authority and resonance for its Aboriginal audience” (ibid., 27). He contrasts this with CAAMA’s “Video Magazine,” which adopted Western conventions and means of production. With a largely European and non-traditional staff, the organization produced work that aimed to meet the standards of Western production. As a result, the videos do not speak to a remote aboriginal audience. While Michaels looks at production values, narrative, format, as well as style, he redirects attention from content in product to content as context. While aboriginal media makers may employ forms and materials from other cultures to produce hybrid products, this does not make the work any less aboriginal. Also, what is more significant is how the process is situated politically and institutionally.

This is central in the relationship between Igloolik Isuma and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. While IBC is also dedicated to the preservation of Inuit culture it is driven by a different focus:

[IBC’s] goals reflect an appreciation of video as product, as a means to capture something of culture and show it to others. But video also is a process, a means of going about the activity of making a program. It is in this area that the hegemony of southern video crept in. Southern ways of going about the creation of videos became the norm as southern trainers showed new producers how to do their jobs. (Evans 2000, 15)

Since IBC is a governmental institution, its structure is modeled after Southern broadcasting methods and continues to be run out of Ottawa. The members of Isuma left IBC primarily due to this control, an issue that impacts highly on the work and method. Unlike IBC, Isuma places great emphasis on process – though this emerges both from Inuit culture as well as the history of video production in Canada. According to Isuma, they combine Inuit skills of cooperative work with Southern ideas of community videomaking to produce a completely new model of production – a “new way” (Cohn, 13). They work without a hierarchical structure and division of labour among participants, but focus on consensus and cooperation. Isuma has a radically different method than standard film in the South and this is reflected in their videos, a method that should not be reduced to essentialist notions of “Inuitness” but understood as situated within a political and historical context.

As an independent company, Isuma differentiates itself from institutionalized modes of (television) production through their process. As already mentioned, Isuma does not follow a detailed script. While they begin with a brief and general outline for each project, both acting and camera work are completely improvised. The final result is unknown beforehand since much of the action depends on factors beyond the makers’ control. What occurs during shooting is contingent upon weather conditions and whether the animal(s) being hunted appears or not. Such environmental factors cannot be anticipated, fit into a plan and scheduled to meet deadlines. The videos are thus constructed organically, within the process. Moreover, the product is the result of a large collective effort, involving many residents (both youth and elders) in Igloolik.<sup>10</sup> While

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<sup>10</sup> According to Kathleen Fleming, “[o]f the 1,100 people living in Igloolik, over 30 have now had direct professional experience shooting and editing video, preparing story lines and scripts, and fundraising. In

the elders contribute their knowledge and guide activities to assure accuracy, others construct costumes or necessary materials, act or help with technical aspects of production. The final product is therefore a creation of a large collaborative effort (of “non-professionals”) that cannot be fully attributed to a single author.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when speaking of first joining Isuma Cohn remarks, “[a]s the only non-Inuk on the Isuma team, I had to learn a new way of thinking and working: one that embraces consensual collaboration (an Inuit value) rather than individual self-expression (a southern value)” (Fleming 1996, 32). Isuma is itself made up of four members without a precise division of labour. Thus, Isuma’s practice does not conform to the way art is marketed and valued in the South, which define works as creations of a single author, nor to standardized formats of broadcasting, which place greater emphasis on the script, schedule, and product.

For Isuma the process is equally if not more important than the product. Thus, I understand their construction of an archive in these terms, whereby preservation is seen more as a practice rather than a collection of texts. Cohn provides two different meanings of the preservation when he states, “the lab [the Igloolik Research Centre] archives knowledge – it doesn’t perpetuate it. If Rachael [an elder in Igloolik] makes a tent and her three daughters learn how by watching her, then the knowledge is not archived. It is active and perpetuated” (Evans 1999, 103). Isuma’s work accomplishes the latter. By recreating a historical period and maintaining authenticity to the period represented, Isuma activates knowledge no longer in regular use. For production,

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turn, many others have now had experience acting, interviewing, narrating, and story telling for the camera, and making ‘sets’ and ‘costumes’....” (Fleming, 27).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the issue of southern reception and assigning authorship to Inuit work see “Inuit Auteurs and Arctic Airwaves: Questions of Southern Reception” by Laura Marks (see bibliography).

costumes and props are made using traditional methods and materials, while within the videos the performers actually construct igloos or sod houses and hunt. By recording traditional activities and employing methods and tools no longer in use, Isuma perpetuates that knowledge. Through the production and performance of traditional activities history is remembered while knowledge is expressed and passed on. Moreover, as the imagery of the videos concentrates on the process of traditional activities they, in a sense, have an instructional quality without being didactic. The camera's attention to the detail of how the activities are performed is a way of passing that knowledge on to viewers, much like Rachael's granddaughters' observing her construction of a tent.

The political quality of Isuma's work is located less in the content than in the practice itself. Although the work is both political and documentary, Ginsburg notes that indigenous media differs from a Western understanding of political documentary production:

Rather than expecting documentary to motivate political action from its viewers who are in fact interested in learning from the films they watch, it is more fruitful to turn our attention to those who find media production to be part of a project of cultural resistance and transformation. This understanding builds on the insights of indigenous producers who clearly recognize their media work as a form of social action when they become the authors of representations about themselves. (Ginsburg 1999, 166)

Ginsburg suggests that rather than trying to incite social action through the texts, indigenous media is itself a form of social action through its production. Thus, with respect to Isuma's practice, history, knowledge, and politics are not contained within the texts, but expressed and preserved through production and performance.

### *Atanarjuat*

Due to the size of the project, with their feature *Atanarjuat*, Isuma had to adjust its approach with respect to production, distribution, and exhibition. In order to produce their work, the company still depends on a funding system based in the South. With their early videos, which ran from half an hour to one hour, Isuma received funding from various governmental bodies that allocate a small percentage for aboriginal language productions. These videos were made on a relatively small budget. In order to receive the two million dollars needed to produce *Atanarjuat*, Isuma had to pitch a fully developed feature length script and production schedule (Igloolik Isuma 2002). For purposes of both funding and marketing, the film also had a specifically defined crew as well as a division of labour among the Isuma team: with Kunuk as director, Cohn as producer and camera operator, and Apak as the screenwriter. Furthermore, professionals from the South were hired to teach local Igloolik residents how to do make-up, sound recording, continuity, stunts and special effects (ibid.). The size of the project and desired production values posed demands far beyond the earlier work.

Nonetheless, throughout the project Isuma created what they call an Inuit “culture of production” that maintains the same method and organization as their smaller videos, which stresses cooperation and consensus rather than control (ibid.). Moreover, the film’s cast and crew consisted of 60 Inuit, with 1.5 million dollars going into the local economy (ibid.). In terms of reception, although the film has done very well in the South (winning numerous awards at Cannes, The Toronto International Film Festival, and the Genies), Isuma insists that their primary audience is Inuit, for whom the film is – to use Cohn’s words – perfectly accessible. In order for their videos to be made, Isuma must



make practical and strategic decisions as they negotiate, and at times struggle, with a Southern funding system and art market. Their work, however, ultimately aims to benefit the Igloolik community and Inuit culture.

### *Conclusion*

The narrative of Western progress depends on a definite distinction between the traditional and the modern within a linear movement across distinct realms of past, present and future. In Igloolik Isuma's videos these lines are not clearly drawn, but rather the categories blend and coexist. Isuma shows the Inuit as neither completely traditional nor Westernized, by using modern technology to maintain and continue the oral tradition. Both the texts and practice pass on knowledge. Here, tradition is not something static but is re-made and serves as a source of knowledge and values to guide one in the creation of one's future.

Preservation is here not an innocent activity, but highly politically charged; it is a necessary and ongoing process that struggles against Southern hegemonic practices. Isuma's work expresses cultural difference within what is perceived as an increasingly homogenized world, by presenting an alternative mode of cultural production. The videos exhibit a different point-of-view, from within the culture, to assert the Inuit as subjects rather than objects of knowledge, not just to learn about but also to learn from.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### OBSERVING SUBJECTS OF KNOWLEDGE

#### *Introduction*

Historically, ethnographic film and writing served as the dominant source from which the Western public was exposed to and learned about other cultures. In the past few decades, the growth of indigenous self-representation using modern technology (particularly video) has questioned the authority of such texts and presents us with a radically different (though no less mediated) perspective. The primary audience for these productions, however, is the local population. Isuma's practice, for instance, aims to preserve and pass on traditional and culturally specific knowledge and thus address an Inuit audience. Their videos have nonetheless received wide exhibition internationally in museums and on television, reaching a secondary audience in the South. This audience has even expanded with the immense success of *Atanarjuat* (2000) in North America and Europe. The foreign spectator certainly gains knowledge of Inuit past and culture and thus engages in an epistemological experience, but how with work that does not directly address them? In this chapter, through a close examination and phenomenological study of two pieces, I will explore not the meaning in Isuma's videos but what kind of knowledge production takes place through them.

In my analysis of Isuma's work, I will be drawing on the theoretical writings of Vivian Sobchack and David MacDougall, who explore the ontology of cinema and the spectator's experience. MacDougall, in particular, addresses how knowledge is acquired through visual material, proposing a rethinking and expansion of our understanding of spectatorship as an epistemological engagement with respect to anthropological filmmaking. Like Sobchack, he suggests that films are not just texts but an encounter between subjects in the world. Using both theorists to frame my analysis, I argue that with Isuma's observational and phenomenological mode of video-making knowledge is produced by the spectator through processes of perception, discovery, and familiarity. This knowledge is neither exact in a positivist sense nor complete, for understanding develops from being and being with as opposed to explanation. As a result, while the Southern spectator certainly gains knowledge they are (perhaps more so) confronted with the partiality of their own perspective.

"Implicit in a camera style," claims MacDougall, "is a theory of knowledge" (MacDougall, 202). As explained in the previous chapter, Isuma's work aims to preserve and pass on knowledge not by merely keeping a record in an archive but through the actual performance of activity. Recalling Rachel's tent construction, knowledge is continued through production as well as imparted through demonstration. In his discussion of a documentary on traditional mask-making by Alaskan Yup'ik, Steven Leuthold identifies observation (rather than explanation) as the bases of learning in Arctic cultures:

*Eyes of the Spirit* documents the technical process of making a mask, traditionally passed directly from master carver to apprentice. The videographers explain the traditional Eskimo learning process based on careful observation, 'the Eskimo

way of watching,' and its difference from Western educational methods. (Leuthold, 145).

Isuma demonstrates this process in the images (as the youth learn from their superiors – further expressing the value of elders and the knowledge that comes with experience) as well as through them. The videos never attempt to fully explain the activities, classify them or make explicit connections between pieces of information, but only show activities being performed, often within long sequences (of preparation for hunting or the cutting of meat) and an intimate look at the process and materials. Their observational style draws on oral storytelling, which passes knowledge from elders to the young and therefore values the knowledge gained through experience:

Cultural knowing takes place on the spiritual plane. This is not the rational knowledge of static facts and linear information. The narrative mode honors the knowledge gained by just being born, cared for, being in a group. Storytelling comes from being in the world, from experiencing life rather than measuring or controlling it. (Beaucage, 215)

Just as stories are often repeated with slight variation to continue and preserve knowledge, similar activities are repeatedly depicted in all of Isuma's videos, such as meat and skin preparation. Through the videos' observational and repetitive form, the spectator gains familiarity and knowledge gradually through time.

### *Phenomenology of Isuma*

While the videos blend documentary and fiction, Isuma does not employ either the analytical drive often found in documentary or the narrative structure in fiction films but solely record the improvised performance of traditional daily activities of an Inuit community. Since Isuma works without a script to guide either the performance or the camera the videos are given a trajectory and structure in post-production. As a result, the

videos do not present a narrative or series of events or information to follow but constitute a visual examination of the process of various activities.<sup>12</sup> As such, when speaking of Isuma's work, Vivian Sobchack's theorization of film as a perceiving consciousness is particularly useful. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's existential philosophy, Sobchack argues that the film is not just an object but also a subject of vision. A film has an existence beyond objecthood because it performs an act of vision: "[w]e must see a film for it to be seen and a film must constitute an act of seeing for us to be able to see it. Therefore, it is the act of viewing that links the spectator of a film and the film as a spectator" (Sobchack, 129). A film is not just a collection of static images but is a dynamic construct, appearing as one continuous perception of events taking place in time. Sobchack demonstrates that the act of perception constituting the film (the film's vision) is of the same ontological structure as human perception, which is what makes films meaningful for us. Although film vision has different qualities due to the variety of lenses, slow or fast motion, and the possibility of seeing multiple locations simultaneously, the basic structure mirrors our own. Sobchack identifies perception as an active rather than passive activity, as an act of consciousness performing an intention toward the world by marking out a field of attention and interest. Perception by both films and us is finite and situated, directed from a point of view. Here, "the mathematical term *point of view* must be broadened and grounded – literally and empirically incorporated and lived as a 'situation of being' available to both the sighted and the blind who are enworlded and embodied, perceptive and expressive" (ibid, 81). However, while

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<sup>12</sup> Similarities can be drawn between Isuma's style and such experimental cinema as the films of Chantal Akerman.

no one can see what I see, with a film the private is made public for another can view the film's perception:

[T]he film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression. It entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically. The film experience not only *represents* and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker by means of the modes and structures of direct and reflective perceptual experience, but also *presents* the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence as the film. In its presence and activity of perception and expression, the film transcends the filmmaker to constitute and locate its own address, its own perceptual and expressive experience of being and becoming. (ibid., 9)

For Sobchack the moving image is not just a text to be read with a specific meaning to be deciphered but simultaneously a perceptive and expressive act perceived by the spectator. In terms of Isuma's work, the videos can be understood as a phenomenological cinema that is more about observation than signification, whereby both the camera (as subject) and the spectator observe the gestures of daily life.

I have chosen two of Isuma's videos for close examination, Episode 5: *Angirag (Home)* and Episode 11: *Tuktuliaq (Caribou Hunt)* of the *Nunavut (Our Land)* (1995) series. These particular videos were selected in part because I was moved by them due to the form, aesthetics, events, and so on, but also because they provide many examples of the characteristics that are found throughout Isuma's work and that are significant to the current discussion. I have limited my concentration to these two in order to offer a separate and detailed description such that the parts referred to later in the analysis can be understood in the context and trajectory of the entire piece. As Isuma's work is less about reading or following a story line (narrative) than about experiencing, watching, and observing the gestures of daily life in real time through another's (the Other's) gaze, my

analysis emerges from a phenomenological study, resulting in lengthy passages detailing images chronologically.

Aesthetically, Isuma's videos do not employ the conventions established in the West. While he certainly drew on films watched as a child, Kunuk learned how to operate a camera and produce videos on his own. By drawing on traditional Inuit art forms more than Western, the style of his work may be jarring for a Western spectator. Without conforming to the 180° rule or continuity editing, framing action such that the heads are cut off, and the raw quality of the imagery the work may initially appear "amateur." Such an impression is indicative of the difference in theory and history of art between the West and indigenous cultures. According to Leuthold, indigenous aesthetics maintain a connection with land, religion, and the past rather than valuing innovation and art for art's sake. Because indigenous art should be functional it is often not taken seriously and identified as "craft" within Western aesthetic theory. As Leuthold states, "frameworks of knowledge, whether artistic or academic, are Euro-American derived. The European tradition acts as the big picture, the normative expression of intellect, while the thoughts and experiences of other cultures are seen as appendages, as areas of esoteric specialization," (Leuthold, 185). Through their work, Isuma aims to dispel this notion, for as the spectator continues to watch beyond the first impression they will eventually realize that the work is completely professional as well as skillfully filmed and constructed.

Isuma's *Nunavut (Our Land)* series consists of thirteen half-hour videos that demonstrate the typical activities performed during different months of the year in 1945 by a community in the Igloolik region. A recurring theme throughout the series is the

infringement and adoption of Christianity in the North. The issue is a topic of discussion in one video while in several Norman Cohn acts a priest (Father Forehead), and the final episode presents a celebration of Christmas by the community. Referring to this last video, Peggy Gale states,

On first viewing, the scene seemed merely innocent, a bit hokey. But viewing the works again...the completeness of the change is devastating, all the more because it is not apparently noticed by the families on screen...It is Kunuk's belief that it was the Church that destroyed Inuit culture...The Church has won over the Inuit souls, and much of the 13-part *Nunavut* series is a tracing of that winning. (Gale 2002, 25-6)

The videos depict different degrees of Western contact and trade while focusing on traditional activities of people still living off the land only sixty years ago. On the surface the episodes appear quite similar, as they all blend documentary and fiction, contain improvised action, and repeatedly depict hunting and domestic activities. However, upon closer examination each video experiments with a slightly different form, structure, and aesthetic. Some employ slight special effects, the final episode is rendered in black and white, and they all differ in pacing. However, as Gerald Hannon points out, all the videos are "beautiful to look at, humorous, sometimes odd, sometimes gross, almost always engaging" (Hannon, B11).

#### *Episode 5: Angirag (Home)*

In *Angirag*, a great deal of attention is placed on material and social space and relations. The video begins in the early morning inside the angirag or home (a large one-room structure with a dome-shaped ceiling and a window made of ice above a low wooden door) where a family lies sleeping. With brief shots cut together, the camera takes stock of items within the environment – knives, metal objects, newspapers lining all



the walls, a qulliq (a half-moon structure that burns seal blubber, used as a lamp, heater, or for boiling water). These still-life snapshots reveal a mixture of Western and traditional Inuit materials within the home. This continues as we further see a hand pouring water from a metal kettle into a cup then fueling the flame of the qulliq. The camera then reveals that the hand belongs to an elder woman wearing a wool sweater and sitting among animal skins.

Through a sequence where each member of the family gradually awakens from their slumber the video not only establishes the characters but even more so the environment and living conditions of a large group sleeping together in one space. Such long periods of people sleeping and waking presents the daily life of an Inuit community as more banal than exotic. Moreover, these daily activities are at once culturally particular and general. Everyone drinks tea and engages in a mundane “morning” conversation of how tired they are or slept in too late. As the women attend to the qulliqs, the men begin predicting the weather and planning the day of hunting.

Before the hunters depart for the day, the video includes another long sequence of short images depicting preparation for the expedition as the men gather and organize the dog teams and necessary materials. The women are also outside, dressed in cotton skirts along with the traditional amauti (a woman’s parka with a large hood in which to carry infants). Here again, we see the blending of Inuit and Western elements in the women’s clothing as well as the materials prepared for hunting, which include a rope, knives, guns, and a metal gas burner.

The rest of the video continues a structure that intercuts between the interior of the home with women and exterior images of men on a hunt. Inside the domestic space,

younger women are busy sewing and attending to children while the elder women share stories and memories. (As one woman recounts her past, my eye is drawn the package of sugar on a shelf behind her partly because its white and blue colours stand out against the brown tones and partly because I recognize it from my local grocery store.) Since the videos are improvised, we can assume that these women's stories are of true events, which makes the work all the more compelling. As the elders tell their stories the younger women listen. Since all the women sit close to the ground the camera remains at a low level inside the house, using medium and close-up shots to provide a sense of intimacy and closeness, looking up at the women as they speak. These images are contrasted with the medium-long and long-shots of vistas and hunters out on the land. Such shots are often accompanied by the sound of wind blowing or crackling of snow beneath the hunters' feet, while the home is full of activity and many voices of women and children. By contrast, the group of hunters builds a small fire with the gas burner then sits around to enjoy tea with minimal and sparse dialogue.

Within both the interior and exterior imagery, however, the camera focuses on the details and process of the activities performed. Attention is particularly placed on the movement of hands, with many close-up shots of the women sewing, slowly with care and precision (and using thimbles) and the men lighting the burner. Although, overall, events are presented in a chronological order, the images do not form a smooth flow through the course of events but rather constitute a collection of pieces or moments of daily life. In the home, for instance, the video juxtaposes various activities and social interactions, such as two women simultaneously biting the same end of a leather strip in order to split it in half, then a woman wiping her daughter's face with the sleeve of her

sweatshirt, then an elder teaching an infant the names of animals corresponding to certain bones. In the exterior scenes, the images follow each other in an obvious trajectory but contain large elliptical gaps, as one scene shifts from the men lighting the burner to drinking tea to throwing spears (all in silence).

The video takes a slight shift in format, as the following shot displays designs carved into blocks of snow. The camera pans down to reveal that it is inside an igloo that serves as a storage space for meat and the carvings are on the ceiling. A young woman enters, cuts a couple pieces of meat with an ulu (a rounded knife used by women) and metal fork. The camera focuses on the meat while she hammers the pieces to soften them. As her hammering is rendered in real time, the video again places emphasis on the detail and process of the woman's action. Significance is given to both the process and materials used throughout the video, particularly the combining of Inuit and Western materials, such as the fork with the ulu. This further occurs in the following sequence, where two women are seen pouring seal oil from a leather bag onto a qulliq using a metal soup spoon.

At this point, evening descends and the sequence contrasts the interior and exterior environments through colour by juxtaposing a shot of the home lit by the warm and soft orange glow of the qulliq with a blue and white image of a hunter alone at a seal hole. Yet, formally, the two environments merge as the latter image is accompanied by sounds from inside of the home. The union is then actualized with the hunters' dog teams returning home with the day's catch. The video then ends as it began, emphasizing not only the material but also social environment of the family. The entire party is once again inside the angirag; a few men drag in the meat and cut small portions for all to feast

on. The hunters tell the tale of their hunt while smoking and drinking tea after the meal. When an argument breaks out between two boys then their mothers, an elder woman interjects, explaining how parents should not take sides of children since this leads to divisions within the family. Thus, the video concludes with an expression of social rules and values, stressing the importance of strength and cohesiveness within the family or community unit.

*Episode 11: Tuktuliaq (Caribou Hunt)*

While all of Isuma's videos focus on the process of daily activities and hunting practices, this is particularly pronounced in *Tuktuliaq* due to the episode's attention on the education of youth. From the beginning, the video examines the practice of caribou hunting by opening with a sequence of a lone hunter shooting a caribou. After he shoots, the hunter explains to the camera that he aimed too high. He nonetheless succeeded as the next shot reveals the caribou failing to walk. This is followed by a long sequence demonstrating the procedure in the skinning and collection of meat by the hunter and two young men. There is no dialogue between the men except when the older hunter, while pulling the skin, explains that it is good for bedding. With close-up and medium close-up shots the camera provides an intimate look at the course of action, from skinning to extracting the organs, cutting the meat into pieces, and forming bundles for easy transportation back to camp.

The video then makes a dramatic shift in time and space to a completely different environment, a large flat area of ice where a number of women and children sit at fishing holes. With an assortment of images of various lengths, angles, and distances, the scene

shows several children of different ages either catching fish, patiently waiting, or playing and sliding on the ice. By concentrating on the activities of children, the sequence has a playful tone. However, the daily task of gathering food is combined with both play and education, as the older generations instruct the younger ones. For example, after one young boy catches a fish he demonstrates to an infant how the fish must be cut, while an elder woman explains to a group of children who have also caught a fish how to distinguish between the male and female. Following a number of shots of children waiting for or catching fish, a silhouette of young kids sliding on the ice and women walking with children as they leave the site during sundown concludes the sequence.

The video then jumps back in time and place to a caribou hunt, this time with a large group of hunters. The scene begins with a number of long shots of the land, some with caribou and others with hunters – both animals and men (wearing caribou hide) are camouflaged against the white and brown landscape. Such imagery communicates the view of both people and animals as part of the land, living in an interconnected and symbiotic relationship built on care and respect. Here, living and hunting are one and the same.

As the group consists of both older and younger men, instruction is again an element in this sequence. The older hunters demonstrate the skinning process and pass on their knowledge to younger ones. For instance, at one point a young boy struggles while trying to skin a caribou, explaining that the ears are too difficult. An older hunter joins the boy, stating that the antlers must be broken first as he steps on the animal's head then proceeds to cut the skin with a small knife. Other than these moments of instruction, this long sequence of caribou hunting contains practically no dialogue.

As in *Angirag*, although the video shows the trajectory of the activities performed, the actions are rendered as a collection of captured moments that overlap and shift rather than a smooth flow through the course of events. As a result, the various images follow a sequence but contain gaps in information. The killing of caribou is brief, depicted by an image of a group of caribou accompanied by the sound of gunshots against the wind. A close-up shot depicts a caribou struggling then zooms out to reveal that the animal cannot stand on its front legs. This is followed by shots of hunters collecting a number of caribou carcasses – carrying the animals on their shoulders or pulling them along the ground, blended with various images of the skinning or cutting of meat, though in less detail than in the earlier part of the video. The scene contains a number of images of meat being collected, prepared, and organized: several boys carry chunks of meat; one young boy throws a rock onto another rock on the ground; and the entire crew bury large pieces of meat beneath mounds of small rocks. Throughout the scene, the men engage in minimal dialogue.

The closing sequence is a montage cross-cutting between the hunting and fishing activities, accompanied by traditional drumming and singing. The scene jumps in order with respect to time and place, ending with a long-shot silhouette of the hunters walking and carrying caribou meat during sundown.

### *Ways of Knowing*

In my analysis of the videos, I draw on MacDougall's theorization of the particular type of knowledge acquisition that takes place through the visual. In "Visual Anthropology and the Ways of Knowing" he argues that knowledge gained through film

and the moving image is fundamentally different from writing. Like Sobchack, MacDougall maintains that the film is not merely a text to be read but an engagement experienced through the senses. Since film communicates through a perceptual and temporal act knowledge can be produced through the process of observation rather than provided by explanation and interpretation.

Much like James Clifford and George E. Marcus (along with many other anthropologists involved in self-critique), MacDougall begins by interrogating the written text production that constitutes the practice of ethnography. He, however, does not attempt to develop new modes of writing but proposes a change in the medium rather than the method, calling for a turn to the visual as opposed to the written word. As an anthropologist and filmmaker, MacDougall has been entrenched in the debates around ethnographic filmmaking for the last few decades and has been working through the key issues in his practice. These debates have taken place in the discourse of cinema theory, particularly documentary, rather than anthropology – a discipline whose history reflects apprehension towards the visual image:

Anthropologists have remained perplexed about what to do with the visual, although they have nevertheless made recurrent, tentative uses of it, often in ways (record-making and teaching, for example) that have tended to contain rather than develop its challenge to the thinking of the discipline. (MacDougall, 64)

The minimal and limited use of the visual and moving image is attributed to the threat it contains of misinterpretation. As MacDougall further states,

A significant contrast between the written and the visual in anthropology may therefore not be in their very great ontological differences, nor even in their different ways of constructing meaning, but in their control of meaning. (ibid., 68)

Ontologically, the photographic or film image retains a connection to the world that language, as a system of abstract symbols, does not. When viewing a film one is not just

reading signs but actually watching events take place and hearing people speak. In other words, spectatorship is a sensory engagement and no two spectators attend to the same things or respond in exactly the same way. Although offering a constructed, framed and partial view, images of the world – particularly film - can retain the complexity of engagement in the world, and therefore remain open to interpretation. Thus, the film can be seen as a “site of meaning-potential rather than sets of meanings sent and received” (ibid., 76). This is precisely why anthropology has avoided utilizing film but also why, I believe, we as either spectators or theorists are so drawn to the cinema.

In the use of film by anthropologists beyond mere research, MacDougall distinguishes between two types of results: *films about anthropology* and *anthropological films*. Based on definitions by James Ruby, the former (constituting the majority of ethnographic cinema to date) adopts the conventions of anthropological writing, resulting in didactic and journalistic films that use the visual to simply illustrate already established anthropological knowledge. By contrast, in *anthropological films* the visual serves as the grounds for constructing knowledge. While anthropologists tend to transform the raw data gathered through fieldwork into written form through a process of interpretation and translation, a film actually uses the raw data as its material. Thus, *anthropological films* attempt to (re-)create (rather than explain post facto) an encounter with the object under study and build knowledge through the material. MacDougall here presents related but distinct modes of developing and acquiring knowledge; one based on explanation and the other on experience. However, these types should be seen less as a binary opposition than a matter of degree, as films providing varying levels of interpretation or explanation. The primary distinction between *films about anthropology*



and *anthropological films* is the place where knowledge originates. In the former the knowledge to be gained has already been established by anthropology prior to spectatorship or the film's production and is simply communicated through the medium, whereas with the latter knowledge is developed through the process of viewing by the spectator. Knowledge is therefore *produced by* rather than *given to* the viewer.

Slowly, more theoretical work in such disciplines as anthropology and film is shifting from an understanding of art or culture as a text of signs and codes with a readable meaning to a consideration of spectatorship as an embodied experience, whereby the senses contribute in the production of meaning. For MacDougall understanding or knowledge occurs at the direct level of sensory or bodily experience. He thus argues for a shift in strategies when producing visual anthropology by placing greater focus on the reader/spectator rather than the author as the producer of meaning. He does not deny that the author makes meaning but states that there are levels of meaning that cannot be controlled and that exist beyond codes and culture. Cinema, claims MacDougall, communicates on the level of bodily experience and not only the intellect. Film is not just a system of signs and coded information, but also a visceral experience, where meaning is *in* the affect. As he states, "meaning is not merely the outcome of reflection upon experience but necessarily *includes* the experience. In part, then, the experience *is* the knowledge. Such knowledge cannot survive the translation process: it is *relational* rather than an object in itself" (MacDougall, 79).

According to MacDougall, anthropological films harness "film's power to reach directly to bodily and emotional experience, circumventing intellectual understanding" (ibid, 77). However, it is questionable whether this Cartesian split between mind and

body can or should be applied to knowledge production, film spectatorship, or indeed any experience. Moreover, one should be careful not to assume that empirical knowledge is somehow more direct and pure. Every film or video, in particular, is a construction and does not present us with direct contact with reality or the world. Both the film and the profilmic are constructed – this is certainly seen in Isuma's work, which is a re-construction of the past. However, as a visual examination of actual activities, whereby knowledge is gained primarily through observation rather than explanation, the work resembles MacDougall's notion of anthropological films. Although a film does not provide the viewer with a direct experience of the world, as a construction it can still retain the complexity of such an experience, whereby knowledge is not simply *given to* but *produced by* the spectator through the bodily experience of perceiving the film's perception-as-expression:

Anthropological films present a genuine process of inquiry. They develop their understandings progressively, and reveal an evolving relationship between the filmmaker, subject, and audience. They do not provide a 'pictorial representation' of anthropological knowledge, but a form of knowledge that emerges through the very grain of the filmmaking. (ibid, 76)

The key point here is that rather than having established knowledge affirmed through its representation, the spectator builds knowledge through the *process* of a constructed encounter.

### *Knowledge as Process*

To begin, the form of Isuma's videos along with their focus on the concrete and particular prevent access to the "complete picture" or total knowledge of what is happening and why. In part this results from the quite fragmented quality of the work,

which does not employ the continuity editing conventions of Western cinema that assure a smooth flow through events and emotions. Rather, the videos contain sparse dialogue and montage-like sequences with many elliptical gaps that prevent an effortless and immediate understanding. At times, the work is even somewhat disorienting. In *Tuktuliaq*, for example, following the skinning of the caribou and the scene at the camp, the video quite suddenly switches locations to the fishing holes, and returns later to another caribou hunt. Furthermore, although we watch the meat piling up, we never learn exactly how many caribou were shot or why the meat must be buried beneath rocks. Neither the images of the hunters nor the women and children at fishing holes indicate how many people are involved. The video never gives us a whole and clear picture either visually or epistemologically. Rather, there is a sense of spontaneity, a grabbing of moments; while the video itself constitutes a formal whole the events do not form a totality that is fully graspable.

Indeed, much is left unexplained in the work and must be inferred by the spectator. At times, a character will explain certain aspects of the action they are performing and why they are performing it but often to another character rather than the audience. This is seen in *Tuktuliaq* when the older hunter explains to the young boy that the antlers need to be broken before the skin can be removed or earlier in the video when the hunter explains that he aimed too high while shooting a caribou. Such statements primarily demonstrate the hunters' knowledge rather than provide the spectator with information. Many of the activities, in fact, are performed with minimal dialogue and no explanation. The videos rarely provide immediate indication of motivation or reasoning behind the performers' actions. For instance, why a boy repeatedly drops one rock onto

another or why the meat is buried beneath rocks is never explicitly expressed. This lack of complete and explicit information is also found in Inuit oral storytelling, as Hugh Brody states, “stories are always a mystery, for they have much that cannot be understood, and much that comes from knowledge and experience beyond understanding” (Brody, 13). In Isuma’s videos activities are merely performed without explanation or justification, requiring the spectator to figure things out, draw connections and formulate conclusions on their own.

Rather than having explanation provided, the spectator gains knowledge progressively through the images. Isuma’s videos utilize what MacDougall calls the “principle of discovery” inherent in film and video (though often suppressed in ethnographic cinema) through movement in time (MacDougall, 70). While *Tuktuliaq* shifts somewhat suddenly and without explanation from caribou hunting to fishing and back again, both sequences end during sundown, indicating that the activities were performed simultaneously. Moreover, upon reflection this movement mirrors the structure of *Angirag* by intercutting between men and women’s activities. Discovery occurs as events unfold, and actions are explained or gain meaning after they are completed and brought to conclusion. This can occur in a single shot, as when two women are seen simultaneously biting the end of a leather string. For the unfamiliar viewer, what the women are doing is not immediately clear and the action seems rather odd. As they split the string in half, in the context of all the women sewing the action makes sense – they are making thread. The videos further enhance the process of discovery through camera movement and direction of the visual field, as when the camera pans down from the carvings to reveal the igloo and its function as a storage for meat.

(Of course, more information is not provided – is the storage used all year or only in the warmer months? Why are the carvings on the ceiling?) This movement from detail to context occurs again when a caribou seems to be struggling and the camera zooms out to reveal that its front legs have been injured. While the camera directs the viewers and assists them in making some of these realizations, ultimately it is the spectator who must discover relationships and draw connections between the material provided. “The exploratory faculty,” states MacDougall, “calls forth the imaginative faculty” (ibid., 71). Thus, there is a development of understanding, a building of knowledge that is *formed* by rather than *given* to the spectator.

Since no explicit explanation is provided, the imagery alone, through camera direction and attention, identifies what is significant within the particular context. Isuma’s videos concentrate not on the characters and their emotional or psychological lives but on the environment and the characters’ relation to it. The opening scene of *Angirag*, for example, includes shots of objects in the home and people waking, attending to the material and social environment. The imagery further emphasizes the connection between people and the land, particularly through long-shots during hunting scenes where the men seem small against but also part of the landscape. The land does not engulf them in an ominous way. As hunters who survive off it, they know the land (rather than fear it) and this knowledge comes from an intimacy with it. “In the Arctic,” states Peggy Gale, “human roots go deep into the land. Where for millennia there were no permanent habitations and the year was divided habitually into seasonal dwellings and hunting cycles, ‘here’ encompassed a vast territory as familiar as one’s own body, and as crucial to survival,” (Gale 2002, 12). The Inuit know the land not to control it but precisely

because they are part of it. Brody identifies this as a fundamental difference in ways of thinking and being between farming and hunter-gatherer societies:

Hunter-gatherers' knowledge is dependent on the most intimate possible connection with the world and with the creatures that live in it... The distinction between respect and control is of immense importance to an understanding of how agriculturists approach hunter-gatherers... Farmers carry with them systems of control as well as crucial seeds and livestock. These systems constitute ways of thinking as well as bodies of information. The thinking makes use of analytical categories that are independent of any particular geography, and not expressive of any given set of facts... Hunter-gatherers, on the other hand, rely on a relative absence of exact or abstract categories that transcend geography and specific facts. Their knowledge is compounded by specifics... Hunters have a relationship with their animals; and the basis of this relationship is that each depends on the other. Similar kinds of relationships exist between hunter-gatherers and the land itself. (Brody, 255-6)

In the videos respect for the land is indicated not only by the characters' actions but also by the direction of the camera's gaze. As a subject performing an intention towards the world through an act of perception, the direction of the camera's attention marks out what the subject finds valuable and meaningful. When viewing Isuma's work the spectator sees through the eye of an Inuit hunter. The viewer thus begins to learn what is valuable and significant within Inuit culture not through a mediating element but through the eye of the camera.

The videos further concentrate on daily activities, giving value to those activities, the people performing them and their knowledge. Just as hunting and domestic duties were a major part of life and essential to survival for the Inuit in 1945, so they occupy a majority of time in the videos. In all of their work, Isuma further depicts such mundane aspects of life as sleeping, eating, and children playing games. Although such activities are rather banal, the videos are interesting as historical representations, presenting traditional materials that are new and curious for today's viewer, such as the qulliq,

(which was an essential and regular part of life). For a Western viewer, how the characters sleep (communally) or eat (raw meat) may also seem intriguing or exotic because of the extreme difference from our own experience. Yet the videos certainly do not present the performers as such. By only observing, they communicate a sense of normalcy that emerges from the comfort of the characters and their often mundane or inconsequential conversation, as in *Saputi* (1993) when a woman states “my ear is itching.” In this way Isuma disrupts notions of the West as the norm by revealing normalcy as a relative concept that depends on context.

Isuma’s focus on the quotidian as well as the repetition of daily activities through the series creates a sense of normalcy and familiarity not only for the characters but also the spectator. The experience of viewing these images of daily life seems at once incredibly immediate and intimate. This intimacy, however, is spatial rather than psychological, which is also enhanced by the camera style, particularly the use of close-ups as well as a low leveled and angled camera inside the home. As the daily activities are depicted within every video in *Nunavut* the intimacy develops both spatially and temporally. As a thirteen-part series that follows the same group of people around in the span of one year, the work reflects a structure roughly resembling soap opera (Gale 1995, 143). As the year unfolds, after a number of videos, the spectator grows familiar with the characters, their personalities, and rituals. They begin to know what to expect as similar activities and actions are repeated. For example, almost every video demonstrates the hunting process, rendering the skinning of the animal and meat preparation in gruesome detail, followed by everyone feasting on the raw meat. At first this may seem gross and exotic, but the viewer cannot help becoming desensitized through the repetition.

Eventually, what initially seemed strange becomes familiar and expected. To be familiar with something is also to know it – an intimate knowledge that develops through time and experience. “In daily life,” states MacDougall, “it is our observation of people over time that causes us to transform undifferentiated strangers (or human types) into known individuals” (MacDougall, 219). Thus, such knowledge through familiarity is neither precise nor complete for it makes the world more rather than less complex by revealing the multidimensionality and autonomy of people. One learns less about “The Inuit” generally than about this particular group of individuals, their particular tasks and experiences.

The foreign viewer develops a certain familiarity and knowledge that never forms a complete understanding for in terms of access to knowledge and the world depicted Isuma’s work privileges a local audience. A Western spectator cannot fully grasp the nuances in social relations and is kept from understanding many of the actions, conversations, and jokes that are based on locally shared knowledge and experience. Because of this lack of access, as Eric Michaels has noted, watching indigenous tapes can be a difficult and alienating experience for an urban audience (Michaels 1994, 36). Speaking of Walpiri video productions (though this certainly applies to Isuma’s work), he states “Channel 4 at Yuendumu resists nostalgic sentiment and troubles our desire for a privileged glimpse of otherness. It is we who are rendered other, not its subject. Ultimately, it must be from this compromising position that such work is viewed” (ibid., 124). This sense of otherness is certainly experienced while viewing Isuma’s videos due to the lack of a mediating explanation or translation. Knowledge is shared among the group of performers - that the film is of real people and not simply characters makes this



all the more intimidating. They know what they are doing intimately, and they know what their next move is, why, and where this will lead, whereas we must discover it. Even when a performer explains his actions, as with the antlers, the speech is directed to another performer. And when directed at the camera, as the hunter who aimed too high, the comment presumes a certain level of understanding in the viewer. In these scenes the hunters demonstrate their knowledge and what knowledge they provide to the audience is only valuable to the viewer for whom hunting as a way of life (in the Arctic) is meaningful. If knowledge is power, the power lies with the characters and the local audience. In a published interview with Laura McGough, Marie-Helene Cousineau observes, “people in the North are the privileged audience because they can make sense of the work in a more immediate way,” to which McGough replies, “I like the idea of privilege being turned on its head!” (Cousineau 2002, 39).

### *Knowing Subjects*

According to MacDougall, anthropology has for too long concentrated on the difference of others – their “strangeness” – rather than finding connection on the grounds of a common human existence. As he states, “cultural difference is at best a fragile concept, often undone by perceptions that create sudden affinities between ourselves and others apparently so different from us” (MacDougall, 245). For MacDougall, it is the visual that easily evokes a shared humanity. When looking at a photo one recognizes the general human being before the specific cultural identity “Inuit” and one responds to the familiar (smile) or universal (mood) prior to the differences (ibid., 254). Isuma’s work mimics this process of consciousness through their camera work. For example, a shot

will display a pair of legs walking then cut to reveal who the boots belong to – an Inuit hunter in the North; or the camera will focus on a pair hands sewing then cut to the context of an Inuit home with a group women. Moreover, focusing on the particularities of daily life such as eating, sleeping, and childcare further evokes the general human condition. People, activities, and even specific objects can provide moments of recognition for the Western audience, yet they take on a different meaning and significance within the particular context:

Although language is culturally specific in the arbitrariness of its signs, most images of objects in the visible world are iconically or indexically expressive of a wide range of potential meanings and functions. Visible objects take on symbolic and metaphorical potency through their uses, and it is the different contextualizations of these uses that produce varied understandings. (ibid., 269)

In *Angirag* we recognize the sugar and the soup spoon. In the video, however, the soup spoon is used to pour seal oil. This extends the possible meanings and uses people assign to objects based on their needs. Furthermore, such recognizable objects also take on a social and political meaning, signifying Western contact and connecting colonialism to daily life. Thus, the videos make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Placing familiar objects within an unfamiliar context not only gives those objects multiple meanings but also provokes an oscillation between similarity and difference for the viewer.

MacDougall's argument is not one of a universal humanism ("we are all the same underneath") but recognition of a shared world and, therefore, the effect or affect we have on each other. Is it not the recognition of a shared human condition that opens the possibility of communication and comprehension? Indeed, Gale locates the desire for

understanding in Norman Cohn's early work (which can also be found in Isuma's videos) through communication at the level of humanity, body and consciousness:

As learning proceeds in the child by "repetition, recognition, and generalization," so the adult viewer comes to terms with the material of *nonverbal narrative*... The [work] is dense and intimate, both witness to the individuals and circumstances deployed before us on screen and challenge to our ill-informed assumptions and limited knowledge – of both self and other... His project is larger and more fundamental. It is a search for the roots of the human, the means of seeing oneself and others. (Gale 1995, 77-8; emphasis mine)

While humanity may be the common denominator it is also recognized as lived differently. This simultaneous sense of a shared humanity as well as difference is based on the recognition of the other as a subject like ourselves. As Sobchack explains, every individual consciousness is both a subject (consciousness) and an object (embodied) of vision. She writes:

The 'psyche' of the other is revealed only as a visibly 'absent' presence, as 'transcendent' rather than immanent in my experience. Yet it is a presence nonetheless, for although I can't see it, I can see its activity. The other's 'psyche' is inscribed in the visible conduct and behavior, in the postural schema or style, of the other's 'visual body.' As it intentionally inhabits and relates to a world, this body's visible behavior is understood as a possible (if not necessarily probable) intentional motor project that could be taken up by my own body, and it signifies the presence of the other as a subject-for-itself as well as an intentional object for me. (Sobchack, 136-7).

The means of identifying others as subjects, for Sobchack, is perception (which includes all the senses). Thus, for MacDougall, this recognition is more easily and immediately achieved through film rather than writing. Not that writing cannot alert us to the consciousness of the other – as Hugh Brody's work does very well – but the visual does this more immediately.

Isuma further emphasizes the subjecthood of its performers by concentrating on activities that demonstrate and value their knowledge. According to MacDougall, the internal life of a person is revealed when depicting them in situations of problem solving:

To show individuals coping with problems is one way of affirming their dignity and the rationality of their choices. Some assessments of the effects of ethnographic films upon students suggest that access to the intellectual life of individuals in other societies may be an essential step in recognizing their humanity. (MacDougall, 186)

Through their concentration on hunting, Isuma demonstrates an activity that demands solving problems, predicting the natural world, and determining a course of action rapidly in a continually changing climate. While the spectator has access to the intellectual life of the performers, as the hunters demonstrate their knowledge, we do not have complete access, power, or privilege. We do not know what they know. In fact, the spectator knows far less than the performers. Although we intimately view the performers, such as women in the home sewing, we are only observers and the knowledge the women carry inside them we as spectators only get a glimpse of in action, much like engagement with people in the world.

“The film,” then, according to MacDougall, “articulates particular qualities of engagement – an intellectual and social engagement” (MacDougall, 90). The key point here is that the engagement is *not only* intellectual *but also* social, and therefore ethical.<sup>13</sup> With film, the engagement exists in the very material of the medium. The final viewed film then is not merely a representation of people or a culture (which, as MacDougall points out, cannot be represented) but an engagement between subjects. In anthropological films and certainly in Isuma’s work knowledge is less about power (a

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Tyler writes, “the rhetoric of ethnography is neither scientific nor political, but is, as the prefix *ethno-* implies, ethical.” (Tyler, 122)

subject to object relation) than about respect and communication (a subject to subject relation).

While MacDougall discusses anthropological cinema, which constitutes an encounter between an anthropologist from one culture with subjects from another, Isuma's work is a form of self-representation and constitutes an engagement between people of the same culture. Faye Ginsburg argues that while indigenous media and ethnographic cinema are separate they are not that different. "Filming others and filming one's own group," claims Ginsburg, "are related but distinct parts of a larger project of reflecting upon the particulars of the human condition" (Ginsburg 1992, 367). In a later essay she defines the difference as grounded in point of view: "one might understand indigenous media as arising from a historically new positioning of the observer behind the camera so that the object – the cinematic representation of culture – appears to look different than it does from the observational perspective of ethnographic film" (Ginsburg 1999, 158). Isuma makes a similar suggestion when they say that their videos are made from the inside looking out rather than outside looking in. Recalling Sobchack's conceptualization of point of view as a situation of being, in indigenous media the film-subject and the filmed subject share a situation of being. Such a perspective presents a different quality of encounter between filmmaker and subjects than anthropological cinema and as such produces a fundamentally foreign perception for the Western spectator. The film as a subject expresses certain values, interests, and a particular way of thinking and perceiving the world through its intentions. Since the primary audience is the local indigenous audience, what is viewed is not framed in terms that are necessarily familiar to a Western audience. Rather, the work expresses a radically different way of

knowing and seeing the world. Such work presents a view onto the world in which both the world viewed and the view itself may be foreign for a Western spectator.

The spectator, while viewing the film, engages with the subjects through the film's gaze (perception) but remains independent of it. For MacDougall, "the act of making a film is a way of pointing out something to oneself and to others, an active shaping of experience... The spectator, coming upon the film as a second viewer, becomes entangled in my vision and my intention" (MacDougall, 29-30). When watching Isuma's tapes, the spectator views the events through the patient and respectful eye of Kunuk's camera. However, the spectator has a separate experience and can attend to items not intended by the filmmaker. Hence, Sobchack argues against notions of the victimized viewer abandoned to and passively lead by the camera's gaze:

What is often regarded too quickly as a rivalry of vision is really a yielding to the mutual and intersubjective seeing and sharing of a visible world. This concession does not inherently entail a subjection to the vision of an other. It is also not a mis-taking of the other's vision as my own in a false and alienating but necessary identification. Through acts of vision experienced as present to each other, communion or conflict may occur in the world, but one viewer does not, and finally cannot, 'usurp' the other viewer's situation, intentional and postural schema, and personal history. The purpose of visual communication is to share sight – to see as another sees, or to get another to see as I do. (Sobchack, 141).

In the process of spectatorship two acts of perception are occurring simultaneously but separately, overlapping and engaging with each other. For Sobchack, watching a film is perceiving another's act of perception and therefore engaging with another way of thinking and knowing that may be similar or radically different than that of the viewer. Thus, the patience and intimacy of Kunuk's camera eye may be familiar or uncomfortable. The spectator's level of comfort, understanding, their response, reaction,

connection to the people as well as the meaning gathered from the work all depend on the spectator's relationship to the material, their history and identity.

The way of looking by the film-subject emerges from a particular situation of being in the world that is different from my own. As the camera expresses an intention to the world through its perception, while watching the videos I *begin* to learn what is important, valuable, and meaningful for the subject (rather than learn "about" a culture). For the Western viewer this can be a difficult experience and a complex relationship since knowledge is incomplete and I am rendered other. In viewing a film, two subjects' perceptions are at work simultaneously though separately. At some points I may share those values and at others they may be at conflict. Hence, Leuthold asks if cross-cultural expression and reception may not, "involve negotiating very real value differences?" for he explains that indigenous aesthetics are connected to other systems – political, economic, and religious (Leuthold, 187). Not only is this relationship different from Western aesthetic theory and practice, but also the systems themselves may be radically foreign. This engagement and negotiation with another's value system and way of seeing the world reveals our limited and partial knowledge or perspective. Isuma's work certainly questions the "normative" quality of Western knowledge by giving value to and expressing a different way of thinking not only through the characters but also through the camera.

### *Conclusion*

In Isuma's practice, process is central to both the preservation of knowledge (production of the videos) as well as the production of knowledge (spectatorship). Both

involve similar modes of learning or conveying knowledge that is grounded in the concrete, in the experience of observation and performance of activities. Spectatorship is here an engagement between three subjects. Knowledge is built gradually through time in the process of observing the repetition of gestures in daily life. Since knowledge is produced in the spectator, its quality and quantity is contingent. While the work is most accessible to an Inuit audience, there is certainly a desire to share knowledge with the South. Recounting his experiences in the Arctic, Brody explains:

A corollary of the Arctic's isolation was the Inuit concern, in the 1970s as indeed thereafter, that those in the south who seemed to have so much power over the fortune of Inuit life and land should learn more about those lives and lands. Again and again, Inuit elders spoke to me of their wish that Qallunaat, the southerners, should know the facts. If southerners know the real truth, they would never again do anything that was against the interest of the Inuit. Injustice was blamed on ignorance. Anaviapik's wish to educate me had originated in this faith in knowledge. (Brody, 92)

The Inuit faith and value in knowledge is evident in Isuma's practice and work, from the videos to the feature. Although *Atanarjuat* is a fictional narrative, it also places much emphasis on the observation of daily life without explaining or translating for a Western audience. Relegating the Western viewer to a status of otherness serves as the grounds for an understanding of difference and recognition of subjecthood. Thus, the knowledge gained opens potential for forging social and political relationships based on respect rather than power.



## CONCLUSION

Within Igloolik Isuma's political and epistemological project of constructing a video archive, history, knowledge, and politics emerge through the process of production and reception rather than being contained in the texts as meaning to be read. Nor are knowledge and culture here treated as objects (or abstract concepts) but as dynamic and inventive processes fully grounded in the materiality of life. Thus, knowledge is preserved *through* performance and produced *through* observation. Both the production and reception of Isuma's videos are socio-political engagements involving negotiations between traditional Inuit and contemporary Western systems, technologies, and values.

Indigenous media practices assert the political and cultural presence of indigenous peoples and their traditions in the contemporary world. Such work demonstrates that aboriginal cultures are not vanishing but involved in processes of self-invention, expressing a social, cultural, and political agency through media production. From the history of communications in the North to *Atanarjuat*, Inuit media organizations and producers reveal the Inuit population as active agents of history and knowledge, fashioning their own future. This future, however, necessarily includes, indeed is based

upon, a continuation of the past. Hence, continuity served as the basis of the struggle for control of the means of television production in order to secure the maintenance and perpetuation of Inuit language and culture. Isuma's practice is therefore less an attempt to preserve a romanticized or idealized image of history than a fully future-oriented project of continuing tradition within contemporary conditions by combining a tradition and story that are thousands of years old with the most advanced media technology. Traditional values, aesthetics, and practices are not simply incorporated or represented in the videos but serve as the foundation of Isuma's entire practice, from business management to knowledge production.

Isuma's work certainly presents something new to a Western public by expressing an Inuit point of view. Unlike the scientific gaze of classical ethnography, the Inuit are here understood as subjects rather than objects of knowledge – considering both the performers as subjects and the film/video as a subject. The Western spectator is therefore confronted with a radically foreign perspective on the world than the one accustomed to in the South. Comments by viewers, however, while celebrating the film as “new” simultaneously refer to the universal quality and appeal of *Atanarjuat*. Certainly, anyone could identify with the characters (to a degree) and understand the story based on a recognition of human conditions, relations and emotions (fear, loss, grief, betrayal); yet, how these are expressed and understood is culturally or, more precisely, locally specific.<sup>14</sup> The story of *Atanarjuat*, for instance, ultimately imparts the value of placing

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<sup>14</sup> Some communities in Nunavut are more traditional than others.

community needs over individual desires, in sharp contrast to the individualistic ideology of the West.

Isuma's work is further distinct from television and cinema production in the South in terms of both mode of production and products. In a cynical North American climate where the majority of cultural production serves as advertising for other products and there is a significant lack of politically committed work on big screens, Isuma's practice is not only grounded in history, tradition, and values but is a form of political action. It reveals that politics is not only within products but also in the process of production. Isuma's practice presents an alternative to hegemonic Western paradigms, reverses the dominant relations of privilege through spectatorship, and explicitly utilizes video and television as political mediums while reaching a large audience.

Isuma has always aimed to disseminate their work broadly, first through television and now cinema. Their history reflects a continual expansion in scope from the videos to *Atanarjuat*. While the feature contains elements of their earlier work by focusing on daily life and continuing the oral tradition, it is also highly distinct in form, medium, and audience. In order to acquire funding for such a large project and as a fictional narrative, the process was much more controlled from the script to editing. Despite being more formally conventional, the film constitutes a significant event in recent history as the first feature in Inuktitut, the use of highly advanced moving image technology, and its long exhibition term.

It is worth asking how the mainstream success of *Atanarjuat* will impact on Isuma's practice and perception of their work as political? Is there a tension between the film's success and its politics? How will the success effect future projects? Cohn has

already suggested that their next film will be more commercial (Johnson, 49). Would this movement necessarily negate the politically oppositional quality of the work or is it a strategic choice to gain a large audience and potentially redefine Canadian cinema?

*Atanarjuat* is already far more accessible to a Western audience, in both medium and form, than Isuma's earlier work. As a result, some may argue that, by meeting the standards of quality established in the West and using a more conventional form, Isuma compromises their practice and politics. However, such an argument seems to not only judge the work based on the notion of authenticity but also equates indigenous aesthetics with specific formal and stylistic properties (often a production quality that appears "amateur," which further perpetuates the idea of indigenous art as craft). Such a reductive equation neglects to consider intention and context. It must be remembered that Isuma's primary objective is the benefit of the local community and their struggle against oppressive Western forces is a necessary byproduct of this commitment. Thus, what is significant and political about Isuma's work, which will doubtfully change in the future, is not only the material and medium but that their work is firmly grounded in place, privileging the local population in terms of management and economy, production and reception.

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