

Atanarjuat: Inuit Cinema Fast and Furious in the EFL-classroom

Kerstin Knopf

Introduction

The Inuit feature film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* by Zacharias Kunuk is one of the most celebrated Canadian films of the past decade. It is the first Inuit dramatic film made in Inuktitut to receive nationwide and international attention. The film was screened at various film festivals and program theatres in the world and won six Genie Awards ('Canadian Oscars') including Best Picture, the *Caméra d'Or* for Best First Feature at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, and nineteen other international film awards. Critics throughout North America hailed this first Inuit epic, calling it a noteworthy and "must-see" picture. The film was made by the first independent Inuit-owned production company Igloolik Isuma Productions, founded in 1990 by the director and hunter Zacharias Kunuk, the late producer Paul Apak Angilirq, the elder and actor Paulossie Qulitalik, and the New York-born video artist Norman Cohn, the only non-Inuit member. The film was realized in an 'Inuit-style of community-based media production,' which, according to Isuma's mission, aspires "to produce independent community-based media [...]; to preserve and enhance Inuit culture and language; to create jobs and economic development in Igloolik and Nunavut; and to tell authentic Inuit stories to Inuit and non-Inuit audiences worldwide" (Isuma, online).

This film was shot on Indigenous land, here Nunavut, the first Indigenous-controlled territory in Canada. The all-Inuit cast consists entirely of Igloolik residents, both experienced actors and first time performers. The production also employed an almost exclusively Inuit crew, mixing expert filmmakers and film novices who trained hands-on on the set. A few southern professionals were involved in pre- and postproduction processes including music composition, foley effects, editing, and the training of Inuit film novices in make-up, sound recording, continuity, stunts, and special effects. The 1.9-million-Canadian-dollar production employed sixty Igloolik Inuit as cast, crew, and support staff, and transferred 1.5 million Canadian dollar into the local economy of the Igloolik community, which is, like other Arctic communities, isolated and marked by relative poverty and high unemployment and suicide rates (*Atanarjuat*, online). The film premiered in Igloolik, in a packed gymnasium (and not at a film festival), was screened there on three consecutive nights, and one thousand VHS copies were made to be circulated freely in other Nunavut communities (Krupat 2007: 615). Thus, the filmmakers

1 / 19

facilitated primary access to this filmed Inuit legend for the Inuit people. In Atanarjuat, the people behind and in front of the camera as well as people working on the set form a horizontally organized team, as opposed to vertically organized film teams as in most Western productions (Atanarjuat, online). The filmmakers open up this oral legend, an Inuit intellectual property, to a global market; but with their community approach to filmmaking, they also give something back: the film, national and international attention, jobs, money, and cultural pride. Financial means acquired for the film are returned to at least one Inuit community. The appropriation of this cultural knowledge for a market outside of Inuit culture is 'compensated' through finances that come from that outside market. The Inuit legend is processed by Inuit artists (the filmmaking team), and in this way it is turned into a modernized Inuit intellectual property. It may be accessed by the Western world, but even more so will be 'used' by the Inuit and returned as 'their intellectual property.'

Adjusting the process of filmmaking to extreme Arctic conditions meant to shoot on widescreen digital betacam and to transfer the material later to 35 mm film. In an interview, Kunuk explains that digital video is their choice because this technology transmits a sense of immediacy, because digital cameras, filming and projection equipment are much easier to handle, and because they can thus avoid the high costs of film material (Kunuk 2006). Furthermore, crew and cast lived in conditions and dwellings similar to those of their ancestors while filming on location in the Igloolik area, in order to reduce the notoriously high production costs of Arctic films ("Press Kit," Atanarjuat, online). Kunuk says that they hired hunters to provide food for crew and cast (Kunuk 2006).

The community approach also involves the remaking of traditional clothes, tools, hunting weapons, sleds, a kayak, caribou goggles, igloos, and seal skin tents. All of these items were re-created mostly by local artists and elders after traditional models, which either belong to cultural knowledge handed down orally from generation to generation or are based on the journals of William Edward Parry, leader of the British expedition to Igloolik in 1821-23, and on drawings made by Captain George Lyon, who took part in this expedition ("Press Kit," Atanarjuat, online; Angilirq et.al. 2002: 205-207). The kayak was rebuilt according to drawings made of an almost two hundred year-old kayak in the British Museum, taken there by this expedition. The filmmakers relied on knowledge that has been made part of the Western anthropological print and museum discourse. Thus, they restored Inuit cultural knowledge partly by detouring into colonial Western discourses. In the case of the kayak and other props, Inuit traditional knowledge was indispensable to knowing how these objects are made and how to acquire the materials. Thus,



the re-appropriated anthropological knowledge about Inuit is only valid in combination with Inuit oral cultural knowledge. By reconstructing a pre-contact Inuit way of life and reviving the traditional making of costumes, tools, weapons, and means of transportation, the film production makes an active contribution toward preserving these traditions and supporting Inuit cultural knowledge. In an interview Paul Apak Angilirq explains that the research for the movie revealed many traditional activities that were no longer practiced. He points out that the remaking of traditional items and revival of ancient cultural activities helps promote traditional Inuit culture in contemporary Arctic communities. Similarly, actors were transforming into their characters, growing their hair long, learning rituals and rules of behaviour, and practicing Old Inuktitut. This transformation is not only a passive learning of cultural tradition and language through viewing a film, but an active revival and relearning of these (Atanarjuat, online; Angilirq et.al. 2002: 21-23.)

Translating Oral Tradition into Film

The film *Atanarjuat* can be understood as electronic mythtelling, with the filmmakers taking a story from the oral tradition and retelling it with electronic means, here digital video/film technology. Translating this legend into video/film is a modified continuation of the storytelling tradition, likewise preserving this oral knowledge for future generations. In interviews both filmmakers, Angilirq and Kunuk, express their view that filming traditional oral knowledge is a way of collecting these old stories and retaining them for the future; this film, says Kunuk is "one way of bringing back lost traditions" (Interview with Angilirq on *Atanarjuat*, online; Gavez 2002: 12). One of the reasons why the filmmakers chose to translate a legend into film and chose drama was that there is no footage that cinematically depicts the stories and legends that elders tell when they are recorded on camera. The story of *Atanarjuat* was first published in English by Franz Boas in 1901, and the first Inuktitut version printed in syllabics was 'authored' by Jimmi Ettuk (Krupat 2007: 613). However, Kunuk and his team have rendered this legend with as much fidelity as possible to its model in Inuit oral tradition. They recorded eight Igloodik elders telling their versions of the legend and combined these into one final version. The only thing they changed is the ending: whereas in the oral and printed versions *Atanarjuat* slays his rivals, the filmmakers felt they needed an ending that stops the violence and revenge. When asked if the changed ending would be alright, the elders replied: "'We are storytellers'" (qtd. in Krupat 2007: 614). Elders were also consulted for cultural and linguistic accuracy during the various stages of the scriptwriting process. There are increasingly fewer

among the younger Inuit generation who are capable of speaking their traditional language; by choosing to film in Inuktitut, the filmmakers foster pride in, and the survival of, this language (Interview with Angilirq on Atanarjuat, online).

At no point does the film allow the viewers to draw any conclusion about the time period in which the story takes place, reinforcing the fact that this is a timeless myth. The story is narrated by Panikpak, wife of the community leader/shaman Kumaglak who is killed in a spiritual contest at the beginning. That she is the narrator is not obvious. Panikpak only has one small part of voice-over narration fairly at the beginning: "We never knew what he was or why it happened. Evil came to us like Death. It just happened and we had to live with it." But at this moment, her narrative role is asserted beside her role as character. Throughout the film, her role as narrator is supported by cinematic means, her face being framed repeatedly in close-up, the camera trying to explore her thoughts and conveying her view of the events occurring. Often, sequences end with such a shot, focusing on her even though she has no part in the immediate action. At the end of the film, she is the one who bans Puja, Oki, his friends and their families from the community. During her speech she is first photographed from a low angle, then from a slight low angle, and finally from a straight angle in close-up, these shots being intercut with shots of the community members. At this point, the story and cinematography lend more importance to her character than to others. Thus, of the characters who do not belong to the inner circle of characters around whom the main conflict revolves (Atanarjuat, Oki, Atuat) Panikpak is the one who is most highlighted. Because her role in the legend does not qualify her to be given any greater emphasis than, for example, Qullitalik, Sauri, or Tulimaq, we must conclude that in addition to Panikpak's brief voice-over this filmic emphasis designates her as the storyteller and confirms her narrative role.

The film *Atanarjuat* takes the non-Inuit viewer into a cultural and contextual limbo which it is difficult to relate to. Nor will such a viewer be familiar with the legend. For the non-Inuit viewer, this mythic space is constructed in a threefold way. First, the viewer is aware that this is an Inuit legend translated into film, where a DVD-player, VCR, or computer is the storyteller. The film is viewed from within cultural contexts that differ from the one being represented, and it is understood that the myth is taking place in a non-Western, almost non-rational space in which it assumes greater credibility. Secondly, the film contextualizes shamanic activities and displays items that have shamanic power (e.g., the polar bear and walrus necklaces of the two shamans). Here, Western viewers are confronted with activities and items that in their cultures are usually exoticized and most often defined as belonging to the sphere of myth. Thirdly, much of the story's action is

motivated by prophecies and shamanic powers which are again understood as supernatural. Atanarjuat's escape from Oki's gang, running naked and barefoot for an incredibly long distance, is also made possible by good spirits and superhuman strength, unreal in a Western context.

Prophecies have the function of foretelling what is going to happen, which usually becomes 'true' within the realm of myth. In Atanarjuat, Qulitalik prophesies twice, after the visit of the evil shaman and Kumaglak's death, that "Tulimaq is the one they'll go after now," meaning that Tulimaq and his family will be the ones who will suffer from the influence of bad spirits. Upon leaving the community and saying good-bye to his sister after the fatal night, Qulitalik and Panikpak prophesy that there will be times when Qulitalik's spiritual help is necessary and that he will be able to help: "Qulitalik: Sister, if you ever need me Panikpak: Yes, I know you'll come when I call for help in my heart. Take my husband's rabbit's foot. You'll need it someday." This prophecy comes true: Panikpak calls her brother for help when Atuat, out of the need to provide for Panikpak and Kumaglak, resolves tearfully to offer herself to Oki and when Qulitalik changes Oki's personality with a rabbit spirit. Also fulfilled are Panikpak's and Tulimaq's prophecies that one day Tulimaq's sons will end Tulimaq's constant ridicule and will help the community.

Doubtlessly, the presentation of Inuit shamanism (cf. d'Anglure in Angilirq et.al. 2002: 209-15) posed a major challenge for the filmmakers. According to the legend, an evil shaman lays a curse on a community, and the film likewise starts with the evil shaman visiting and entering into a spiritual contest with Kumaglak. In such a contest, the hands and feet of both shamans would be tied, they would fall into a *sakanig* (shaman's trance), and their spirits would have to fight. Such a spiritual contest is hard to present in a film; and here the viewers see only the two shamans being tied, sitting face to face, falling into a trance and making the sounds of their helping animal spirits (polar bear and walrus) until Kumaglak falls down motionlessly because his spirit has not returned to his body. The filmmakers clearly avoid a kitschy and special effects presentation of spirits; the viewer has to rely on facial close-ups that show the people's reactions in order to know that spirits are present. For a Western viewer it is almost impossible to understand why and how Kumaglak is killed, because visual access to the two shamans is partly blocked and viewers cannot quite see what is going on and because there is no 'clear' explanation of this event. Also, killing somebody in Western cultures usually involves using chemicals or physical force and the notion of being able to kill with spiritual force is well nigh incomprehensible to a rationalistic Western mind.

Later, Kumaglak's spirit helps Atanarjuat win the Inuit boxing match and distracts the murderers' attention so that Atanarjuat can escape after his brother is killed. Qulitalik's spirit appears to help Atanarjuat find his way to his camp during this escape. These and other spirits are usually photographed as 'real' people, sometimes rendered with the help of dissolves, superimposition, strange sounds, and alienated voices that seem to come from far away. But the viewer mostly has to deduce from the context when a spirit appears. In the case of the evil shaman's spirit, help is afforded by the accompanying idiosyncratic giggle. Neither the evoking of the spirits of remote or dead relatives is not realized with special effects but with shots of the seal oil lamps and of the faces of the caller and the spirit being called, supported by the alienated sound of the voices. Atanarjuat's superhuman jump across the crack in the pack ice and Qulitalik's rounding a stone cairn to change Oki's personality with a rabbit spirit are rendered in slow motion, also an indication that supernatural events are occurring. At the end, the evil spirit in the sod house simply vanishes by means of a dissolve. In consequence, the appearance of spirits as human beings, the limited use of the post-production effects of alienating sounds, dissolves, superimposition, and slow motion, and the avoidance of special-effects magical occurrences present these shamanic and spiritual activities as 'ordinary' and rooted in Inuit philosophy and as anchored in the everyday life of the people in this timeless myth. The shamanic and spiritual activities are nothing special and absolutely believable within the realm of the filmic world. Thus, the film re-introduces traditional shamanic heritage into contemporary Inuit cultural knowledge and counters the colonial erasure of this heritage.

Cinematic Dialogue with Colonial Cinema

As Indigenous filmmaking is in constant dialogue with colonial film discourse that has objectified and stereotyped colonized cultures and established them as the 'inferior other,' an Arctic film must necessarily be in dialogue with colonial films about Inuit, specifically Robert Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North* of 1922 and its colonial 'ethnographic' constructions of Inuit culture that most notoriously influenced the Western image of Inuit.

Flaherty was infatuated with the universal theme of man fighting against natural forces, of people living and surviving in harsh environments. While he correctly underscores the harsh Inuit reality with the daily struggle for food and, consequently, survival, he seems to overdo it here and there in order to have his hero Nanook appear even more heroic – almost like a superhero. His film *Nanook*

6 / 19

Disclaimer: This text was commissioned by the Embassy of Canada for the info terminals of the Marshall McLuhan Salon, the multimedia information centre of the Embassy of Canada in Berlin, or it was put at the Salon's disposal by the author. This text is protected by copyright and neither it nor its contents may be published elsewhere. Reproductions of this text are solely allowed for instructional purposes in an educational establishment and are not permitted for commercial use. <http://www.mcluhan-salon.de/important-information/?lang=en>

invokes the documentary format, pretending to record Inuit life by following Nanook and his family during their hunting trips and everyday activities. In reality, Flaherty instructed the Inuit participants to re-enact a traditional, pre-contact, primitive way of life without Western influence.

As in Western ethnographic films, he presents everyday cultural activities such as hunting and eating, the making of a kayak and omiak (a bigger boat made of seal and walrus skin), the making of an igloo, glazing the runners of a sled with water, how moss is used as fuel for the hearthstone, while explaining what is done with intertitle cards. His approach entailed staging the events, adding dramatic effects, and erasing the identities of his characters. The actors were only allowed to wear traditional fur clothes and to use traditional tools and hunting weapons, as if to lend the film anthropological authenticity and to preserve a 'pure' culture that would soon vanish. Flaherty managed to film a walrus hunt as it was done in pre-contact times without the use of guns. Likewise, Nanook arrives at the trading post with a large bundle of polar fox and polar bear furs in order to trade for knives (which we do not see him use), beads and bright coloured candy – no other metal tools and guns.

Almost every sign of Western contact that had already influenced Inuit cultural and economic activities was banned from his film, although the Quebec Inuit in the 1920s were part of the fur trade system and its cash economy, were using guns for hunting, wore Western clothes, and certainly were acquainted with Western diseases (Tobing Rony 1996: 109). This essentializing attempt to preserve 'authentic' pre-contact Indigenous cultures on celluloid only reflects the maker's constructed, clichéd, and ethnocentric image of 'the Inuit'; Fatimah Tobing Rony thus calls Flaherty's film practice "romantic preservationism" (102). Also two of his other films, *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926) and *Man of Aran* (1934), are nostalgic re-enactments of an exoticized, 'pure' past of the Samoan and Irish cultures. The paradox is that Flaherty was aware of the devastating influences of Western contact and that he as explorer and filmmaker was part of the colonizing process. Like anthropologists, he resolved "to capture on film the nature of rapidly vanishing cultures," a practice that became known as "salvage ethnography" (Barnouw 1993: 45).

As in Flaherty's *Nanook*, Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* also exhibits ethnographic traits, since he presents pre-contact Inuit culture, remade traditional props, dwellings, means of transport, and traditional women's facial tattoos. He takes his time to show everyday cultural activities in the camp, such as eating raw meat, skinning animals, preparing the runners of a sled, and building ceremonial igloos. Further,

7 / 19

he contextualizes traditional competitions and entertainment games such as women's throat singing, a singing contest, Inuit boxing, and others. Kunuk does not, however, present traditional weddings, initiation rituals, burial ceremonies or the like, which are generally essential elements of Western ethnographic films (not Nanook though), and which would have been legitimized by the film's plot as one generation grows up, Atanarjuat and Amaqjuaq marry and Kumaglak, Amaqjuaq, and Sauri die. Thus we can conclude that Kunuk is not interested in providing a complete ethnographic picture of his Inuit culture. In contrast to Flaherty's film that gives the impression of a documentary but is largely staged, Kunuk embeds these 'ethnographic facts' in a dramatic story that is set in pre-contact times, thereby necessarily involving the staging of pre-contact life-style. In accordance with the character and dramatic potential of the legend, he emphasizes the tension between the characters but he does not, as Flaherty does, enhance dramatic tension during hunts. Kunuk shows aspects of traditional Inuit life from an inside perspective, uncommented, and non-obtrusively. These aspects support a narrative instead of being the sole purpose of a film that looks at an 'other,' 'exotic' culture from the outside perspective. Thus, he weaves traditional cultural knowledge into the mythic narrative and acquaints non-Inuit viewers en passant with fundamental cultural aspects.

Flaherty felt that Inuit are only good at showing their external activities; Kunuk felt the opposite, and made a film about spiritual conflicts and human relations set in a melodramatic plot about love, hate, murder, and revenge. In doing so, he very often works with close-ups on faces in order to suggest thoughts and feelings. Unlike Flaherty, Kunuk also manages to convey the humouristic side of Inuit social life. There are many bodily jokes and sexual references in conversations and songs, as when Oki and Atanarjuat ridicule each other's sex life. Kunuk also includes sex scenes and a quite humorous scene in which men are seen, from behind, urinating. Here Atanarjuat resonates with the straightforward treatment of sexuality and bodily functions that is characteristic of most Indigenous cultures. Hence, Kunuk undercuts Flaherty's immaculate Inuit superhero and the notion of the noble savage without bodily needs.

In his references to Flaherty's film Nanook, Kunuk uses the strategy of subversive quotation. In one scene, he quotes directly from Nanook's arrival at a shoreline, when Atanarjuat returns from a hunting/fishing trip and paddles ashore. Whereas in Flaherty's film, this scene prompts laughter and borders on mockery of the Itivimiuts as Nanook's whole family (wife, baby, second wife) and a puppy one after the other emerge from the one-man canoe (the son Allegoo was perched on the bow), Kunuk neutralizes this scene by creating a rather idyllic and romantic



picture of the man returning home to his family. The two most notorious scenes of Flaherty's film are Nanook, at the trading post, pretending that he has never seen a gramophone before, wondering at it, and actually biting into the record, as if to test it or see whether or not it is food. The other is a staged seal hunt, where Nanook pretends he cannot pull a harpooned seal from the breathing hole and needs his whole family to help him – the whole scene has slapstick comedy character. In both scenes, the Western filmmaker ridicules individuals of the 'other' culture and presents them as deficient, animalistic, childlike, and unable to engage in cultural activities, clearly constructing his own culture as superior and the studied one as inferior. Kunuk merely hints at a seal hunt by showing his characters waiting patiently at various breathing holes, again neutralizing with solemn pictures Flaherty's mocking presentation of a seal hunt. Kunuk, too, uses polar bear pants, but instead of having everybody wear them and creating a pan-Inuit mash (cf. Lutz 2002: 53), he has only the evil shaman wear such pants in order to distinguish him as a shaman and to stress that he is a stranger from other parts.

In stark contrast to Flaherty's Nanook that centers on hunting activities, in Atanarjuat we often see men bringing home the catch on sleds, but we do not see an animal being killed. This is not a case of cinematic political correctness in the sense of 'No animals were harmed during or in connection with the production of this film,' because the animals 'props' in the film are the game that was shot by commissioned hunters to provide food for crew and cast. As Kunuk says in an interview, the acts of hunting as such were not crucial elements of the legend, supporting the thesis that the presentation of ethnographic details was not the objective of the film. What, however, are indeed crucial narrative elements are the many close-ups of various kinds of raw meat and fish being prepared and eaten, as well as other everyday activities. In the same interview, Kunuk explains that they wanted to show how the Inuit lived (Kunuk 2006). By emphasizing some cultural elements and ignoring others, Kunuk frustrates an objectifying, ethnographic colonial gaze (inherent in Flaherty's and Western ethnographic films) by creating an autonomous gaze at his own culture, choosing not to give a complete picture.

Last but not least, the endings of the films differ greatly. Flaherty has the family seeking refuge from a blizzard in an abandoned igloo and go to sleep as they were "[a]lmost perishing from the icy blasts and unable to reach their own snowhouse." The last images show the sleeping family, the raging storm, and the sled dogs in the cold with the "mournful wolf howls of Nanook's master dog" that "typify the melancholy spirit of the North." He thus caters to the trope of the

vanishing Indian and announces the end of traditional Inuit life that he, with his film, tried to preserve. Kunuk ends his film with the family having assembled in a sod house and driving the evil spirits away. The ending suggests that Atanarjuat's son Kumaglak will be the future leader in the spirit of old Kumaglak as young Kumaglak enters the sod house in the moment in which Panikpak calls for the old Kumaglak. While Flaherty metaphorically indicates death, Kunuk indicates continuation of life.

Arctic Colours, Movement, and Other Mise-en-Scene Motifs

The film contains different motifs that connect the sequences and help to create a cinematic whole. The most obvious is the visual motif of the various different colour nuances in Arctic ice and snow. The film opens with a striking extreme long shot (49 sec.) of a bluish snowy landscape in the Arctic twilight, where the sky and the ground merge at the horizon and a pale sun hovers above the scene. We see a male Inuit figure walking with a few sled dogs, accompanied by the eerie sound of the blowing wind and the howling dogs. This scene works very nicely to set the stage for mythic events occurring in a timeless suspended world. Also throughout the film, the camera highlights the sometimes whitish, bluish, greyish, and golden refractions of snow and ice in the unique Arctic light. In sequences set on sunny days, the snow assumes a blindingly bright white, set off from the blue sky and the bluish shadows of little snow mounds and snow drifts. During the two sequences in the qaggiq (big ceremonial igloo), the sun renders the igloo walls translucent with the bright Arctic light entering the interior space. When the qaggiq is built, a wonderful low angle shot shows a man from below inserting the last snow blocks to finish off the dome-shaped roof. Again, the sun makes the snow blocks look like glass. In other interior scenes, the bluish Arctic twilight sometimes shines through the igloo walls. During daylight sequences without sun, the snow becomes an indefinite shapeless white. In contre-jour shots during summer sequences the snow assumes a white-to-golden quality set off against brownish stripes of exposed earth. During summer sequences realized with natural backlight, the quality of the snow varies between a shapeless white and a white-bluish colour that draw the contours of the surface. After Tulimaq's return from his hunt toward the end of the day, sky and snow become a milky light-blue. Arctic whiteness in its numerous shades is balanced against subdued brownish and greyish colours of earth and washed out rocks in summer camps, sea grass, and the also often dark interior of igloos and sod houses. Thus, the filmmakers very carefully depict the various qualities of Arctic colours and Arctic light and highlight the beauty of their interplay.

Although the Arctic generally might suggest that people are in a state of frozen mobility, the film counters such an impression. It contextualizes the frequent hunting trips and implies, through the various locations, the current movements of people between winter, summer, and hunting camps according to the availability and migratory patterns of Arctic animals. Thus, movement becomes another unifying motif in *Atanarjuat*. Though the film does not feature people's movements between the camps, it strongly emphasizes the hunting activities. In six sequences, men either return from or leave for a hunt. These scenes are sometimes realized in the way that the hunters are photographed from various angles and with different shot lengths, intercut with shots of the people at the camp awaiting them. Usually these sequences reveal the harshness of Arctic life (except when *Atanarjuat* returns from fishing, 1.48 min.). When *Atanarjuat* and *Puja* move to the summer caribou hunting ground, they are shown walking along a shoreline, having to carry the tent, provisions, and the hunting gear on their backs. When *Tulimaq* returns from a hunt (2.30 min.), his empty sled stands in stark contrast to the rich catch that the other hunters unload. Also, disappointment and sadness on the faces of *Pittaluk* and *Tulimaq* because he did not bring home any game are polarized to the happiness about the good hunt on the faces of the other people.

Later in the film the situation is revised. When *Oki* and *Atanarjuat* return from a hunt (27 and 32 sec.), *Oki* hardly conceals his frustration about his bad luck and his slow dogs, whereas *Atanarjuat* and his parents are very happy about *Atanarjuat*'s rich catch and *Tulimaq* announces that he will host a feast for everyone. In such sequences, the film underlines the fact that hunting is the prime subsistence activity, that continual good hunts are necessary for survival, and that bad luck in hunting can result in starvation if there is no community to share their meat resources. The film also stresses movement when *Qulitalik* and *Nirinuniq* leave the community, when *Atanarjuat* flees across the Arctic plain and ice (4.23 min.), when he returns home to *Igloodik* (2.29 min.), and when *Oki*'s gang arrives at *Qulitalik*'s camp (37 sec.). As part of the movement motif, the framing of people arriving and leaving with dog teams becomes a major visual element as well. The stress on movement and the screen time of people's movements suggest that the filmmakers were concerned to emphasize people's movement, particularly in the centrally important activity of hunting.

In connection with the motif of movement and hunting, recurring shots of raw meat make up a visual motif. Seven sequences contain close-up shots of meat either being cut up, prepared for consumption, being consumed, or the animal skin being cleaned. Six of these even begin with this close-up shot. Similarly, five other sequences begin with the preparation or making of something, most often

shown in close-up: Qulitalik glazes the runners of his sled with water, several men and later Atanarjuat build a qaggic, Atanarjuat and Amaqjuaq prepare their drum for the feast, while Uluriaq sews a shoe, and Nirinuniq also sews. Close-up and medium shots of meat being prepared and eaten and things being made or prepared, placed at the beginning of sequences, form a stylistic motif that recurs eleven times altogether. Clearly, the filmmakers wish to stress the most important food source for Arctic people and also the fact that it needs to be eaten raw – according to tradition and as is still done after hunts. These shots have two different effects: they anchor this eating habit in Arctic life without exoticizing it but presenting it as customary and necessary; and they work toward weakening the wide-spread disgust among non-Inuit viewers at this habit. The stereotyped colonialist discourse branding the Inuit as "animal-like, savage, and cannibalistic" (Tobing Rony 1996: 105) due to their diet of raw meat is thus undermined.

Other recurring visual motifs conditioned by the setting are the igloos, seal skin tents, and sod houses in various locations, women's facial tattoos and hair styles, and the perhaps unexpected variety of the clothing. Garments are made of such different materials as polar-bear skin, seal skin, caribou skin, and eider duck feathers, with often beautiful designs. Their greyish, brownish, and whitish colours complement the established space of whiteness. The soundtrack of the film contains, beside the spoken Inuktitut, a mix of traditional songs and a musical score that features a Jew's harp, flute, and percussions most prominently. Traditional songs and these instruments constitute a coherent and typifying sound motif.

An Arctic Filmmaking Style

The most apparent difference from the average Western narrative film is the very slow pace, reminiscent of long, slow processes of storytelling. It takes a long time for the narrative to unfold, the camera often remains still to convey cultural details, and the film contains long stretches with nobody speaking, allowing the viewer to take in the gorgeous landscape images. In fact, the slow pace is very pleasant and relaxing for viewers who are used to fast-cut movies with an overwhelming mass of information that needs to be processed quickly. The filmmakers avoid fast cuts, and most shots are realized as longer takes. More than half of the transitions between sequences in *Atanarjuat* are realized through dissolves, outnumbering the simple cut and contributing to the slow character of the film. The filmmakers let the camera linger on the *mise-en-scene* for a while at the beginning and at the

12 / 19

end of sequences to give the viewer time to grasp the setting and situation and to digest the events presented. One could speculate that the screen-time of 161 minutes is close to the time it would actually take to tell this legend. Thus, the length and slow pace help to position the film in the sphere of oral tradition.

The cinematography is largely conditioned by the Arctic setting. In many long shots and extreme long shots, the filmmakers reveal the vastness and beauty of the Arctic landscape that is photographed at different times, weather and lighting conditions, presenting a whole spectrum of sky and snow colors. The frame compositions of most outside sequences are similar, determined by the flatness of the terrain. They usually have a horizontal line dividing the screen, showing land/ice/snow and sky in varying proportions. Besides the many long shots, there is an unusually high number of close-ups of objects and faces, feet, and other body parts. Sometimes characters move so close to the camera that the viewer flinches, as in the sequence of the Inuit boxing match. This effect is only partly due to the fact that the team filmed in constricted interiors; it is, rather, a style feature.

Often in concert with the short camera distance, the filmmakers work extensively with POV shots, most of which are reserved for Atanarjuat – for example, when he and Oki box and Atanarjuat is almost knocked out, after he and Puja have just made love, when he is angry with Puja for having sex with his brother and he tries to attack her, when he collapses after his flight, and when he recovers consciousness to find the three heads of Qulitalik, Nirinuniq, and Kigutikaajuk looking down at him. During his final fight with Oki, there are POVs of him and Oki, showing the respective opponent. We also have Atuat's POV when she is raped by Oki and Qulitalik's when Oki attacks him. The POV shots are enlisted to underscore dramatic action when the characters fight and when they are more emotionally involved than in other scenes. They lend the actions more immediacy; the viewer is practically transported into the bodies of the characters, seeing an opponent as close as the characters do, and might feel like acting along with the character. Even more, the POV shots align the viewer more intimately with the vantage-point of the characters whose POV is being registered and for whom more empathy can thus develop. As we mostly have Atanarjuat's POV, this device, too, helps designate him as the main character. By switching between inside and outside views, the filmmakers on the metalevel make the viewer conscious of the divergent Inuit and non-Inuit perspectives as well as of the divergent contexts of production and reception. The switching can thus be understood as warning Western filmmakers not to tell Indigenous stories from their outside perspectives and as calling upon more Indigenous filmmakers to tell these stories themselves on film/video.

Throughout the film, the filmmakers largely employ a hand-held camera. When filming running or walking movements, the camera is tied to a sled or DOP Norman Cohn is positioned on a sled with the camera, rendering the mise-en-scene with mobile frames (tracks, pans, tilts). During competitions, fights, running movements, and dramatic unrest, the images often become shaky, which further helps to convey a sense of action and agitation. In dialogue sequences, the camera often pans back and forth between the dialogue partners instead of intercutting between them. The techniques of the hand-held camera and mobile framing also create a sense of closeness that helps bridge the cultural and spatial difference between filming and viewing contexts.

Close-ups of feet walking and running and long walking and running sequences align the film with early Navajo films and Victor Masayesva's (Hopi) *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (1984). Examples here are the sequences of Tulimaq returning from a hunt (3.51 min.) and of Atanarjuat escaping across the Arctic plain and ice (4.23 min.). In both sequences, movement is given relatively much screen time and is thus underscored, as suggested earlier. Closer analysis of these two sequences reveals that in the first shot of Tulimaq's return sequence alone the camera is trained on his walking feet for 43 seconds. In Atanarjuat's escape sequence, the camera shows Atanarjuat's running and, later, bloody feet for 26 seconds altogether over several shots, not least to underline the pain he must feel when, with each step, the harsh snow cuts his flesh anew. In accord with these shots, close-ups of his increasingly exhausted and desperate face throughout the escape sequence show that he is running for life. In the same vein, the screen-time of this run, beside its dramatic potential, helps establish this sequence as the climax sequence.

The close-ups on Tulimaq's and Atanarjuat's feet are taken from low camera angles, as are some shots featuring Tulimaq's face or body and two shots of his sled dogs in close-up, for 19 seconds altogether. Other low-angle shots follow in Atanarjuat's escape sequence; the camera is positioned on the ground in two shots, showing Atanarjuat and later Oki and his friends one after the other running through a water hole from the water level, then Atanarjuat and his pursuers as tiny little figures moving within the vast Arctic landscape. These latter low-angle shots, together with a still camera, allow frame compositions with two thirds of ground (snow and water) and one third of sky that beautifully render a doubled sky as it is reflected in the water. By positioning the camera on the ground, the filmmakers can focus neatly on the water and can even take in the part of the ground that is immediately before the camera and which would have been cut off if filmed from a straight angle. In the second of the three shots rendering Atanarjuat's superhuman jump across the crack in the pack ice, the camera points vertically

upward to show his leaping body in slow motion from below. Low-angle shots also feature prominently in other sequences. As mentioned earlier, the camera is pointed upward, in several shots featuring a man from below completing the roof of the qaggiq, against the background of the translucent qaggiq roof. After the men's fight, Amaqjuaq, Oki, and several bystanders are photographed from a low angle, roughly from the spot where they have just fought.

The lighting in *Atanarjuat* is more reminiscent of Dogma films than of conventional narrative films. Since the bright Arctic light is of sufficient quality for filming day scenes, there is no artificial light used and most exteriors are rendered in high-key lighting. Quite a few contre-jour shots, which are considered flaws in classical filmmaking or would be employed only for a special reason, enhance this sense of natural lighting. In sequences taking place inside igloos at night or sod houses, the filmmakers used seal-oil lamps as diegetic light-sources and a 200-watt flicker master hooked to a dimmer to match the light from the lamps (Kunuk 2006). These sequences are usually rendered in low-key lighting. It is obvious that the filmmakers have deviated from the classical three-point lighting system, which is partly due to the Arctic conditions but which is also a stylistic choice.

Because of the hand-held camera and extreme mobile framing, very often the framing is not exact and the camera fails to keep track of the moving characters – for example, the head of Tulimaq often moves in and out of the frame. Sometimes characters move into a still frame from off-screen, as Atuat does in a camp sequence. Also the fact that the filmmakers employed many non-professional actors shows at various points. All these 'flaws' in a Western understanding of filmmaking are not necessarily so; rather, they indicate conscious creative insouciance toward established artifices of conventional filmmaking – and perhaps even some of the kind of deliberately imposed rigor and 'natural' restrictions typical of the Dogma school. These salient stylistic techniques are not unique to Indigenous filmmaking and might also be found in Western narrative films, but their distinct combination creates a unique Inuit film style that is conditioned by the Arctic. The mythic story embedded in an Inuit cultural context and realized with these individual stylistic techniques and an Inuit community-based approach to filmmaking render a hybrid film code, which exists at the interface between Inuit cultural activities and oral knowledge, Arctic conditions, Western filmmaking conventions, and colonial influences. The self-controlled presentation of Inuit culture from an inside perspective helps to de-exoticize the filmed material and its cultural context. In consequence, the film belongs to a decolonized Indigenous film discourse that consciously merges Indigenous and Western cultures (for a more comprehensive analysis of the film cf. Knopf 2008).

Teaching Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner

Most teaching curricula in Germany focus on US American mainstream topics in terms of North America; Canada is seldom on the agenda; and most students have only a vague, probably stereotyped idea of Inuit. Thus teaching Atanarjuat offers a glimpse into Inuit and Arctic culture that students were hardly exposed to and can counter romantic, wrong, or misguided notions about Inuit (the term 'Eskimo' itself is a colonial stereotypical construct that must be avoided in the classroom). Teaching this film, furthermore, gives students the chance to learn how to analyze a film and some of its technical aspects. It is important to make students aware of still prevailing notions of rigid and pure cultures and of heterogeneous cultural developments: all cultures are in flux, change according to historical, political, economic, and social conditions, and are influenced by cultural contacts and mobility.

A guided discussion of the film will further help to make students aware of cultural differences, preconceived notions and stereotypes, and of their own possible thinking along these lines, and it will help to teach tolerance and cultural sensibility that are basic skills of cultural competence (cf. Antor 2007). For the discussion of Atanarjuat, an introduction into North American colonial history, politics toward Inuit people, and their present situation would be helpful. One can also show and discuss Nanook of the North as an example of a colonial film on the Inuit, and one of the initially introduced documentaries as an example of contemporary Inuit life. The film can be viewed in segments according to Jane Sherman's methods (2003: 18-20), but I suggest a complete viewing, after which the following aspects can be discussed in class. They could also be discussed in smaller groups or be given as presentation topics (one to three presenters per topic):

1. What do you know about Inuit culture, history, and contemporary issues? What are your sources?
2. Did the film answer to your expectations about Inuit? What kinds of stereotypes and prejudices about Inuit exist? How does the film deal with them? Do you think there are stereotypes and prejudices about Germans, or non-German cultures in Germany? What are they and how can we overcome them? (cf. Volkmann 2010: 84-98).
3. What did you learn about traditional Inuit culture and Inuit shamanism?
4. How can the film help preserve traditional Inuit cultural knowledge?

5. Did you find listening to Inuktitut and reading subtitles bothersome or enriching your knowledge about Inuit? Why did the filmmakers choose Inuktitut as the spoken language?
6. Give a summary of the story and draw a character constellation model (Who is family and friend? Who is rival?). Practice pronouncing the Inuit names (pronounce all letters). Such an effort manifests cultural respect and contributes to cultural competence.
7. What drives the single characters in their actions? What are didactic teachings of the story?
8. What was Indigenous oral traditional like before Western contact? How has it adapted to contemporary times? What was/is its importance for Indigenous cultures then and now? Do we Germans have an oral tradition?
9. In order to discuss narratological and technical aspects, the students will have to watch the film again, with a number of key aspects that they are supposed to pay attention to (trying to 'see' all film techniques that might not even be of importance will be too overpowering).
10. How does the film present the Inuit legend? What helps you to understand it as a legend?
11. How does the film narrate its story? Panikpak is non-diegetic narrator at the beginning; this role is then taken over by the direct presentation of the events and dialogues (also before she narrates). In general, film narrates through the images we see – mise-en-scene (setting/sets, actors/acting, costumes/make-up, lighting). Film narration includes temporal aspects (different temporal levels as well as flashbacks and images that illustrate someone's narration, thoughts, or dreams) and spatial aspects (different locations, sometimes intercut). Film also narrates through cinematography (camera work) and editing; here only a discussion of striking cinematographic and editing techniques is necessary.
12. What mise-en-scene and cinematographic motifs can you distinguish? Why are they employed/stressed?



Bibliography

Angilirq, Paul Apak, et.al. Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner. Toronto: Coach House Books and Isuma Publishing, 2002.

Antor, Heinz. "Inter-, multi- und transkulturelle Kompetenz: Bildungsfaktor im Zeitalter der Globalisierung." Fremde Kulturen verstehen – fremde Kulturen lehren: Theorie und Praxis der Vermittlung interkultureller Kompetenz. Hg. Heinz Antor. Heidelberg: Winter, 2007. 111-26.

Erik Barnouw, Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.

Gavez, Raúl. "Epic Inuit: In Conversation with Zacharias Kunuk." Montage. (Spring 2002): 10-14.

Knopf, Kerstin. "Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner." Kerstin Knopf. Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008, 314-47.

Krupat, Arnold. "Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner and its Audiences." Critical Inquiry. 33.3 (Spring 2007): 606-31.

Kunuk, Zacharias. Interview. Cond. Kerstin Knopf. 2006, unpublished.

Lutz, Hartmut. "'Indians' and Native Americans in the Movies: A History of Stereotypes, Distortions, and Displacements." Hartmut Lutz. Approaches: Essays in Native North American Studies and Literatures. Augsburg: Wissner, 2002. 48-61.

Tobing Rony, Fatimah. "Taxidermy and Romantic Ethnography: Robert Flaherty's Nanook of the North." Fatimah Tobing Rony. The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1996. 99-126.

Sherman, Jane. Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

Volkman, Laurenz. Fachdidaktik Englisch: Kultur und Sprache. Tübingen: narr Verlag, 2010.



Filmography

Flaherty, Robert, dir./writ. Nanook of the North. USA, 1922, 79 min.

---, dir./writ. Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age. USA, 1926, 77 min.

---, dir./writ. Man of Aran. USA, 1934, 76 min.

Kunuk, Zacharias, dir. Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner. Writ. Paul Apak Angilirq and Norman Cohn. Igloolik Isuma Productions. Canada, 2001, 172 min.

Masayesva, Victor, dir./prod./writ. Itam Hakim, Hopiit: In Recognition of the Hopi Tricentennial. IS Productions. Commissioned by ZDF. USA, 1984, 58 min.

Internet Sources

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner – Webpage, accessed 21 February 2011:
<http://www.isuma.tv/hi/en/atanarjuat/>

Isuma – Webpage, accessed frequently: <http://www.isuma.tv/hi/en/isuma-productions/about>; and <http://www.isuma.tv/hi/en>

Credits

Author: Kerstin Knopf
© Embassy of Canada