CHAPTER 7

Co-producing First Nations’ Narratives: *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*

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The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) licenses media productions from a variety of Aboriginal sources. Increasingly, these programs include interactive features and multi-platform applications. Isuma Productions in Igloolik, Nunavut, for example, uses the Internet to engage viewers in the feature film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* through on-line diaries, blogs and historical maps (http://www.isuma.ca/thejournals/en/). New media therefore allow Aboriginal filmmakers to educate the wider community about indigenous history, culture and rights. This chapter explores the roles new media and co-production play in indigenous filmmaking, with a particular focus on community-based media from an Inuit point of view.

Digital Media Production and Storytelling

*Experience, which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.*

Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’

Digital media provide an accessible alternative to traditional, analog television production. APTN’s web site features promotional and educational materials, as well as live web casts and video archives. For example, the historical series about the Anishinaabe/Ojibwe of the Great Lakes region, titled Waasa-Inaabidaa ("We look In All Directions"), is linked to an elaborate and interactive site that provides educational
materials about the history and culture of this nation. Digital media are also used in feature film production such as the film *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*, which combined digital technology with traditional storytelling to recreate an Inuit legend. The accessibility of digital video, due to reasonable production costs and ease of technology, allowed the filmmakers Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn to produce a feature from an Inuit point of view:

...video [is] a different way of representing reality. It’s a different form of narrative story telling. All this video experience has been invisible except in the art world and in remote regions where it’s been an empowering tool for self-representation by getting inside-out points of view instead of the kind of authoritarian outside-in points of view. So this whole concept is a marriage of what was really a very experimental art form, video, with the richness of Inuit oral tradition.\(^5\)

Igloolik Isuma Productions is Canada’s first independent film and video production company to present stories from an Inuit perspective. Their latest film, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* is a narrative about transition and change in the history of the Igloolik community. The film traces the fifth Thule expedition by the Danish explorers Knud Rasmussen, Peter Freuchen and Therkel Mathiassen, who between 1921 and 1922 undertook an expedition to northern Baffin Island, including the Igloolik region. At the center of the film lies a spiritual tale about the shaman Avva (played by Pakak Innuksuk) and his headstrong daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik) who experience the dramatic impact of colonization on their nomadic way of life. Kunuk and Cohn present the story from an Inuit point of view; hence, reclaiming this narrative about the encounter with the explorers, who as Cohn describes, were the proverbial “accidental tourists” of their time.\(^6\) The script is based on journals from explorers and missionaries, museum collections, government documents and, most importantly, oral history accounts
from Inuit Elders. This combination of historical documents and eyewitness accounts offers a new perspective on the events that shaped the region and its people in the early 20th century. Kunuk wanted to make this film for a long time in order to “recreate the misunderstanding and go after true stories”.

Kunuk began experimenting with media production in 1981 and created his first independent video in 1985 called *From Inuk Point of View*. In the 1980s, he managed the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation production centre in Igloolik. Then in 1990, he co-founded Igloolik Isuma Productions with screenwriter Paul Apak Angilirq, cinematographer Norman Cohn and actor Paul Qulitalik. Their goal was to produce independent community-based film, video and Internet sites in order to enhance local culture and language traditions. In addition, the company provides economic opportunities in the region: both films employed predominantly local talent from the area, including actors, set builders and costume designers. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* also featured actors and producers from Denmark and Greenland because it was co-produced with Barok Film in Copenhagen.

The key to Isuma’s philosophy is to create films and television programs, which accurately reflect Inuit history and daily life. Kunuk states that the Inuit point of view in filmmaking is based on the authentic representation of Arctic settings, peoples and their environment:

In Igloolik we’re working with families and documenting them. We could tell them what we want to do and they create their own lines. We’ve been working with these people for a long time and we’ve been training them so they are professional actors. In the Inuit way you learn by watching. The bottom line is that we’re trying to show our culture the way it was, since it’s been misunderstood a lot.
For *Atanarjuat*, Kunuk and Cohn used oral history accounts and museum exhibits to explore traditional ways of life. The filmmakers involved the entire community in every aspect of the production process. From costume making, set construction and make-up, to actors, scriptwriters and technicians, over 100 Igloolik residents took part in the film.\(^{11}\)

Paul Apak wrote the script, which Norman Cohn translated into English. Like *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, *Atanarjuat* received funding from government agencies such as Telefilm Canada. Its international success resulted in the recognition of Inuit filmmaking—including its unique aesthetic form of representation.\(^{12}\) It also made it easier for Isuma to develop *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*.

The script for *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* includes stories from the entire Igloolik community. Collective storytelling practices are an essential cultural base for Inuit peoples, who, without a written language, have passed on their life’s experience and histories in the form of stories for many generations. According to Kunuk:

> The Inuit style of filmmaking takes lots of teamwork. We work horizontally while the usual Hollywood film people work in a military style. Our entire team would talk about how to shoot a particular scene, from art directors to the sound man. We put the whole community to work. Costumes, props – we had a two-million-dollar budget [for *Atanarjuat*], and one million stayed with the people of Igloolik. The people learned to practice their own cultures, and language, although of course we had no Igloolik style of igloos. Everything was authentic, handmade. Inuit people are storytellers. Four thousand years we have been passing stories to our youth. We saw other films being made about the north where you could see a woman's seal oil lamp turned the wrong way around and the production people didn’t care or know better. It is important we tell our stories from our Inuit point of view.\(^{13}\)

Human beings create narratives to organize their experiences and to understand the world around them as well as the ‘inner world’ of memory and emotions. As stated by Bruner:

> “A story must construct two landscapes simultaneously: the outer landscape of action and the inner of thought and intention”.\(^{14}\) In *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* the shaman
Avva maps his personal experiences through stories and songs. Stories thus become cultural markers of time and space because they encapsulate memories of historical events. When missionaries introduced Christian hymns to the region and forbade traditional songs, the result was the loss of identity tied to these aural markers of time and space: thus, shifting the locus of control to the colonizers.

The events described in The Journals of Knud Rasmussen attain greater significance when they are placed in the historical context of colonial aggression. In the early part of the twentieth century, photographic and filmic images constituted an important strategy for mapping the Canadian nation. They allowed for the documentation and archival preservation of the North while linking it to the authorities of the state, church and corporation.\footnote{15}

**Colonial traces in the Arctic**

*It was strange to us to meet with police in these regions; and we were at once impressed by the energy with which Canada seeks to maintain law and order in the northern lands. The mounted police, a service popular throughout the country, has here to relinquish its splendid horses and travel by dog sledge, making regular visits of inspection over a wide extent of territory.*

From the journals of Knud Rasmussen\footnote{16}

Rasmussen’s journals are filled with recollections and photographs about Canada’s North. Visual documentation of the Arctic began as early as 1853 and 1854 in the form of calotype portraits and daguerreotyping\footnote{17}, which served to document, map and demarcate the region as a means to establish territorial and cultural sovereignty for the Canadian state, church and corporate interests. Hudson Bay employees, for example, used wet-plate technology\footnote{18} to document and journal their experiences; thus, leaving traces of early economic activity. By the turn of the century, Canadian sovereignty gained
Notes

6. Norman Cohn (cinematographer, writer and director, Igloolik Isuma Productions), in discussion with the author February 27, 2006.
9. The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) evolved out of broadcasting initiatives in the Canadian Arctic that date back to the late 1970s, when satellite transmissions provided health and educational programming to Inuit communities. A few years later, the implementation of successful projects such as “Inukshuk” in the Northwest Territories and “Naalakvik”, an Inuit Association in Northern Quebec, laid the foundations for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation in 1981.
10. Kunuk, interview by I. Reid.
17. Calotype portraits: a method invented by F. Talbot in which paper, sensitized with common salt and silver nitrate, created a negative from which positives could be rendered. Daguerreotyping: photographic method developed by L.J. Mandé Daguerre.

18. Wetplate technology required that the glass plates were coated with light sensitive chemicals just prior to exposure. The photographs had to be developed right afterwards in contrast to dry-plate photography, which allowed for delayed processing.