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Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner: Culture, History, and Politics in Inuit Media

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The 2001 release of Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner marked a watershed in the history of North American popular cinema. Because it is the first Inuit-produced feature and the only wide-release film in a Native language, Atanarjuat quickly drew widespread critical attention. Reviewer’s interpretations, however, have for the most part been problematical. Citing the narrative elements of love, jealousy, revenge, and struggles for power, many critics have described the mythic nature and appeal of Atanarjuat as universal, likening it to such fictional literary and film classics as Macbeth, the Odyssey, and Lawrence of Arabia. Other commentators, by contrast, have focused on Atanarjuat’s careful attention to cultural details and practices, remarking on its documentary objectivity and frequently comparing it to Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North. Despite their different emphases, these interpretations render Atanarjuat meaningful solely in relation to European narrative conventions or by explaining its purpose as translating Inuit culture for outsiders. These reviews raise the question of the extent to which mainstream audiences’ interpretations of Atanarjuat are circumscribed by familiar Western forms and, in particular, by the long history of representations of Native peoples in popular and ethnographic films. However, when placed in the context of Inuit culture, history, and contemporary politics in the Canadian Arctic, Atanarjuat takes on an entirely different set of meanings. While the release of the film marks a departure from the content and conventions of Western cinema, Atanarjuat is part of a growing body of work by Inuit mediamakers that, since

the 1970s, has self-consciously engaged in the interrelated projects of political activism (especially campaigns for sovereignty), nation building, and the reconceptualization of cultural identities in response to dramatic social changes. Read in this context, the film illuminates the integral relationship between Inuit media and politics and, more broadly, the complex role of culture in the processes of colonization and resistance in the Canadian Arctic.

Inuit media emerged out of two related histories: the social changes precipitated by colonialism and the consequent development of activism focused on land claims settlements, the revival of traditions, and the return of political control to indigenous communities. Because of the remoteness of the eastern and central Arctic, the Inuit, unlike other Native peoples, remained relatively independent from the colonizing society through the close of the 19th century. By the early decades of the 20th century, however, the fur trade had transformed Inuit life; because traders rewarded those who met their demands, many Inuit altered their hunting practices and became reliant on European goods. But the most profound changes followed the collapse of the fur markets after World War II, when the Inuit resettled in central villages and grew increasingly dependent economically on the Canadian government, which afforded them no means of influencing the policies that shaped their lives. Moreover, during this period, the government intensified its efforts to sever Native peoples from their traditions and to undermine further their social autonomy through missionization, boarding schools, and extensive bureaucratic regulation of subsistence practices (Hicks and White 2000:45–50; Jull 2000:121–122). The 1970s, however, became a turning point in this history because a series of legal and political events redefined the place of indigenous peoples in Canadian society. In 1973, the Calder Supreme Court decision set the stage for Native campaigns for land and political sovereignty by establishing the “long-time occupation, possession, and use” of traditional lands as a legal basis for aboriginal title. In the Arctic regions, Inuit land claims resulted in the 1999 founding of Nunavut (the Inuktitut term for our land), the largest settlement in Canadian history. Signed in 1991, the agreement to establish Nunavut transformed 350,000 square kilometers of the eastern and central Arctic into a new territory controlled by the Inuit, who comprise the overwhelming majority of its population.

Since the 1970s, Inuit campaigns for self-determination extended to culture, and the revitalization and perpetuation of traditional languages and practices ultimately became an explicit goal of the Nunavut settlement. Not only did the revival of traditions provide a critical part of the anticolonial project, Inuit people contended that they should have the authority to interpret their society and its history on their own terms. Media has played a crucial role in this project, in part by constituting what Faye Ginsburg (1995) has described in another context as a “rhetoric of self-determination.” In the 1970s, Native groups in Canada began producing their own cultural programming, and in the North, these efforts culminated in the 1982 founding of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC), the first Native-controlled television network to be distributed by satellite in North America. IBC produces programming in Inuktitut, and its goals include perpetuating Inuit language and culture, integrating geographically distant communities, and providing employment to increase economic self-sufficiency. Shortly after the founding of IBC, Zacharias Kunuk, director of Atanarjuat, began his own work as an independent mediamaker, producing his first video, From Inuk Point of View, in 1985. Five years later, along with screenwriter Paul Apak Argilinq, actor Paul Quillalik, and cinematographer Norman Cohn, he co-founded Igloolik Isuma Productions, the first Inuit independent production company (Kaufman 2001).

Like IBC’s programming, the work of Igloolik Isuma Productions is concerned with cultural and language preservation, and it also represents the history of the Arctic regions in a way that reflects on the contemporary political relationships between Natives and Euro-Canadians. Since its inception, Igloolik Isuma has produced 20 films, assembled as the 13-part television series Nunavut (Our Land), and a three-volume collection, Unikaaqtutit (Storytelling). These titles suggest the integral relationship between politics and culture in the group’s work. Filmed in Inuktitut and written, produced, directed, and acted by Inuit peoples, the works depict traditional lifestyles with an emphasis on subsistence practices, render a critique of European colonialism in the region, and represent the perspectives of elders on issues including education, missionization, and the Nunavut settlement. Straddling the boundary between fiction and documentary, some of the works also dramatize traditional social relations, marriage practices, and ceremonial rituals. A primary concern of both collections is to convey a sense of continuity between past and present Inuit life. In this context, the past serves not as a marker of irremediable loss incompatible with changes in Native societies. Rather, through the dialogue, narratives, and the layering of historical and contemporary images, the films convey the persistence of traditional values and practices and their continued usefulness; at the same time, they help to create this continuity between past and present by imparting traditional knowledge. The critique of colonialism offered by Nunavut and Unikaaqtutit shows the necessity of perpetuating such traditions. In Ajainaa! (Almost!), for example, elders describe the cultural losses, the erosion of autonomy, and the collective sense of shame that resulted from European control. This message easily translates into an argument for contemporary self-determination that becomes explicit in Nipi (Voice) when elders and political leaders insist on the necessity of their own forms of leadership and government. Finally, both series show the history of the Arctic regions as specifically Native, and, in this way, too, they support contemporary Inuit control of the region. Yet this focus on the past is not without contradictions. Because they rely on a Western medium, the films themselves are potentially at odds with
the project of cultural recovery and a notion of identity premised on tradition. Moreover, this is an issue that extends to other facets of Inuit social life, including the establishment of a centralized, representational (i.e., Western-style) government in Nunavut. In another sense, however, the films challenge the idea that tradition is incompatible with contemporary life, and they thus contest static conceptions of Native identity and cultural authenticity rooted in an unchanging past.

Atanarjuaq is the first feature film by Igloolik Isuma Productions, and because of its focus on Inuit traditions and its political implications, its story complements and extends the work of Nunavut and Unikaituatit. In an essay published shortly after the release of Atanarjuaq, Kunuk describes finding inspiration for the film in a legend told by his mother, and he connects the legend to traditional Inuit life in a way that sheds light on the cultural and political work of the film. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Kunuk's family spent winters in a sod house at Kapuivik, storytelling provided one of many ties to ancestors who had inhabited the Canadian Arctic for countless generations. “We were still living on the land,” he recalls, “traveling from place to place just like our ancestors did in this region for four thousand years... our mother would put us to sleep at night with all these stories about [them], how they lived, and what would happen to us if we were like this one or that one when we grew up” (Kunuk 2002:17). In the mid-1960s, Kunuk’s life changed dramatically when he and his brother were sent to a government school in Igloolik. Combined with the long-standing presence of priests and the assimilationist influence of Western media, the imposition of formal education contributed to what Kunuk labels the “death of [Inuit] history” and oral culture in Inuit communities (Kunuk 2002:18). As a filmmaker, Kunuk aims primarily to counter this process of cultural dispossession and erasure, in the case of Atanarjuaq by retelling a traditional legend with important implications for contemporary Inuit life. Media, in Kunuk’s words, provides a means of bringing storytelling into the new millennium, and Atanarjuaq in particular asserts the continued relevance of traditions and engages in the process of retaining them. The film also depicts the changing nature of Inuit identities and the history and contemporary effects of colonialism in the Arctic. If storytelling in Kunuk’s childhood was inextricably bound to the social fabric of Inuit life, so too is this cinematic reproduction part of the broader project of Native Canadian activism aimed at achieving self-determination including the realm of representation.

As a dramatization of a traditional legend, Atanarjuaq is set in an atemporal realm unaffected by the historical events that have transformed Inuit life over the last century. Yet its project is in some ways profoundly historical because it reflects on these events and carries critical lessons for a society forever changed by European colonialism. The film opens when, in the words of the narrator, “evil came to us like death” and an unknown shaman enters the community of Igloolik, casting a curse that shatters relationships between its residents for two generations. In the beginning scene, Sauri murders his father, the camp leader, in order to take his position and displace his chosen successor, Tulimaq. As the narrative unfolds, the conflict between them carries over to the next generation as Oki, Sauri’s son, vies with Amaqjuaq and Atanarjuaq, the sons of Tulimaq, over the loyalty of women as well as their relative status in the community. Their rivalry culminates in the murder of Amaqjuaq and the assassins’ subsequent pursuit of Atanarjuaq (the fast runner), who flees naked over miles of treacherous ice floes to avoid his own death. In the end, his miraculous escape precipitates a series of events that lead to the expulsion of Oki and his supporters from the community. The film, in Kunuk’s words, centers on the “lessons we kids were supposed to learn about [the consequences] if you break... taboos” (Kunuk 2002:17). In the story, the shaman’s curse precipitates the near collapse of a community that had long depended on respect for elders, strict attention to proper family relations, and sharing resources in times of scarcity. By showing the disastrous consequences of departing from these traditions, Atanarjuaq insists on their contemporary value and relevance. Because shamanism provides both the source of evil and a means of expelling it, the film also emphasizes the power and efficacy of Inuit spirituality. Finally, Atanarjuaq’s careful attention to cultural details valorizes the practices that constituted Inuit life in the past. In this way, the film helps to counter the cultural loss that resulted from the government’s assimilationist policies, and it provides a means of recovering and reimagining a past distorted or obscured by colonialist practices, including mainstream media. Setting the film before the advent of European incursions thus provides, in the terms of Kenyan writer and activist Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1993), a means of “moving the center,” of representing Native society and culture independently, rather than solely in terms of its relationship to the West. If Atanarjuaq reconstitutes an Inuit world unmarred by the dislocations and losses of colonialism, it also reflects in important but indirect ways on the processes and consequences of European domination. As a story about a community ravaged by outside influences, the film functions as a colonial allegory as well as a narrative about identity reconstruction in the wake of this catastrophe. The evil that descends on the community in the opening scenes and results in a change in leadership provides a stark parallel with colonial policies that similarly disrupted social relations and traditional practices. This historical parallel constitutes a critique of the origins of colonialism as well as of the social discord and disruption it caused, a critique that consequently supports a return to traditions and political autonomy. Yet taken together, Kunuks films do not suggest an uncomplicated return to a way of life that preceded colonialism; indeed, the events that have transformed Inuit society over the last century render such a return impossible. Instead, by engaging social issues, the
film conceptualizes Inuit identity in a manner that both provides a sense of continuity with the past and responds to changing circumstances. Since the 1960s, the transition from nomadic, family-based communities to village life and a shared history of colonialism have tied Inuit people together across geographical, linguistic, and cultural divides and have helped to create an emerging regional ethnic identity, an Inuit nationalism defined in contradiction to other groups comprising Canadian society (Hicks and White 2000:51). Along with the long history of Inuit occupation of the land, this notion of a common, distinctive Inuit culture provided an important rationale for the land claims settlement (Gombay 2000:134). Media has been highly instrumental in facilitating this emergent nationalism, in part by providing a tool to define a common culture as well as by offering a means to disperse cultural knowledge and political information amongst geographically dispersed communities.

Through its focus on tradition and the political implications of its narrative, Atanarjuat contributes to campaigns for Native sovereignty and the reconceptualization of Inuit culture and identity. While some critics, as I have noted, contend that the film’s documentary-like effect renders it similar to ethnography, this effect serves another purpose in the context I have been tracing. While atemporality is an ethnographic convention, here it conveys that Inuit people have occupied the land since time immemorial, and it thus sets a precedent for their continued control of Nunavut. In addition, Atanarjuat’s close attention to cultural details highlights the differences between Inuit and Euro-Canadians in a way that supports Inuit nationalism by creating an affiliation among “nationals” who understand the cultural practices. This is apparent in viewers’ responses to the film, many of which suggest that its narrative is confusing and that (unlike conventional ethnography) it leaves cultural practices unexplained. The subtitles produce a similar alienating effect because they do not fully account for the action that unfolds on the screen and they frequently fade into the visual imagery. Intentionally or not, this absence of complete translation serves to distinguish cultural insiders from outsiders. In fact, the story itself suggests this distinction in the opening scenes when the narrator says that her song can only be sung to someone who understands it.

In its final scenes, Atanarjuat underscores this distinction between insiders and outsiders in its resolution to the problems that have fractured the community. At the story’s beginning, when “evil came to us like death,” the narrator explains that “we had to live with it.” But at its conclusion, the presence and consequences of evil no longer seem inevitable: community members expel the invaders, regain social control, and return to their way of life before these incursions. Following these events, Atanarjuat’s concluding images, which are interspersed with the credits, complement this narrative turn by showing scenes from the making of the film; not only do these images highlight its fictional nature and, thus, further distinguish it from ethnography, they also show Inuit mastery of Western technologies used to accomplish their own goal of self-representation, another aspect of self-determination. These events and images find a parallel in recent Canadian history in Inuit efforts to establish political autonomy and to revive the practices that have defined life in the region for centuries, at times using Western tools to accomplish these purposes. Atanarjuat rewires the Inuit past as well as the history and consequences of colonialism in a way that imagines, and consequently helps to realize, a different kind of future. In recent decades, if media has been complicit in the processes of colonization and assimilation, in the contemporary Arctic it thus also constitutes a means of refiguring Inuit histories, culture, and identity in ways that support Native campaigns for self-determination.

NOTES
1. The Calder decision pertained specifically to Nisga’a land claims in the Prince Rupert area, and it was the result of decades of Native activism in British Columbia, begun in the 1880s when Nisga’a and Tsimshian chiefs publicly demanded recognition of land title and rights to self-government. These efforts continued into the 20th century and resulted in the formation of a number of political organizations, including the Interior Tribes of British Columbia, the Indian Rights Association, the Nisga’a Land Committee, and the Allied Tribes of British Columbia. In 1955, the newly formed Nisga’a Tribal Council directed its efforts towards land claims settlements, ultimately bringing its claim to court in 1969. Courts in British Columbia ruled against the Nisga’a, and the case was sent to the Supreme Court. While the Court ruled against the Nisga’a on a technicality, its ruling paved the way for other Native settlements. The other landmark event of the period was the report of the Berger Inquiry, which analyzed indigenous-white relations in ways that supported significant changes in public policy (see Jull 2000:122).


3. See Ginsburg (this issue) and Sorenson (2000) for brief histories of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation that include a discussion of the complicated relationship between IBC and the emergence of Nunavut; on IBC, see also Poisey and Hansen’s documentary, Starting Fire with Gunpowder (1991).

4. See Gombay (2000) for one discussion of this issue and an analysis of the contradictory uses of tradition in the debate surrounding gender parity in the Nunavut legislature.

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FIGURE 3. Atanarjuat (played by Natar Ungalaaq) and his brother Amaquuaq (played by Pakkak Inukshuk) share a joke. © Igloolik Isuma Productions. (Photographer: Norman Cohn)