

Report: Travelling Through Layers: Inuit Artists Appropriate New Technologies

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When the time came a few years ago to find an Inuktitut term for the word “Internet,” Nunavut’s former Official Languages Commissioner, Eva Ariak, chose *ikiaqqivik*, or “traveling through layers” (Minogue, 2005, n.p.). The word comes from the concept describing what a shaman does when asked to find out about living or deceased relatives or where animals have disappeared to: travel across time and space to find answers. According to the elders, shamans used to travel all over the world: to the bottom of the ocean, to the stratosphere, and even to the moon. In fact, the 1969 moon landing did not impress Inuit elders. They simply said, “We’ve already been there!” (Minogue, 2005, n.p.). The word is also an example of how Inuit are mapping traditional concepts, values, and metaphors to make sense of contemporary realities and technologies.

Like shamans in the digital age perhaps, Igloolik Isuma Productions (<http://isuma.ca>), the acclaimed Inuit media-art collective behind the award-winning feature film *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (Kunuk, 2001; <http://www.atanarjuat.com>), employs cutting-edge technologies such as high-definition video and wireless broadband to “travel through the layers” of time, geography, language, history, and culture. Isuma’s films, like the award-winning *Atanarjuat*, the 13-part *Nunavut (Our Land)* television series (Igloolik Isuma Productions, 1994-1995), and the upcoming feature film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (Kunuk & Cohn, 2006), allow us to see the living traditions of the past and demonstrate through their re-creation in film and video that Inuit are still able to practise them in the present. Isuma’s films extend the ancient art of Inuit storytelling into the digital age through video art and filmmaking, appropriating these technologies to present to the world a discourse from a distinctly Inuit point of view and thereby combating the historical media image of the Inuk as Other. In this media report, I hope to illustrate how Isuma “travels across time” through its films and videos and “travels across space” through its work with the Internet.

Travelling across time

In the period of a few generations, communities of Inuit throughout the North have undergone a dramatic transition from lifestyles based predominantly on

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nomadic subsistence hunting and fishing to a sedentary, wage-based, consumer economy. Values, traditions, and skills that had in some cases existed for thousands of years were challenged and threatened by new conditions, living arrangements, and other stressors. Starting early in the twentieth century, missionaries both promoted widespread conversion to Christianity and concomitantly devalued and stigmatized traditional religion and healing practices. Shamans and their traditional practices were denigrated and suppressed. The few shamans that continued to practise did so in a way that did not draw the attention of governmental and Christian religious authorities. In many instances, the missionaries were eventually seen by the Inuit to be replacing the shamans, and Christian beliefs and practices became widespread.

As elsewhere among Aboriginal populations in North America, young people were mandated to go to school, often in residential settings far from their original communities. These institutions facilitated further loss of cultural traditions, both through their emphasis on the values and traditions of the dominant Southern culture and the active denigration of the traditions, languages, and beliefs of the Inuit culture. As the twentieth century progressed, the presence of both the federal government and the military played a greater role in the lives of the Inuit. Communities were consolidated into large settlements with residential populations sometimes numbering in the thousands, and lifestyles changed significantly in many ways. Although there is evidence of 4,000 years of continuous habitation on the island (called *Iglulik*, “or place of houses”), the settled community known today as Igloolik was created only in the last fifty years, when federal government agents coerced Inuit living in small nomadic hunting camps in the region to settle in one location as a way of more easily administering them.

Arctic scholar Robin Gedalof writes how the Inuit are “time-travelers,” and “. . . are probably the only people in history ever to have made the transition from the Stone Age to the Atomic Age in one generation. [They] . . . have adjusted from an admittedly rich but primitive nomadic isolation to a life of satellite communication. They have grown up in a bone culture and have grown old driving tractor-trailers and typing out their memoirs for the benefit of millions of people . . .” (quoted in Columbo, 1997, p. 12). Indeed, Isuma’s upcoming feature film documents some of these dramatic changes. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (in production) is about the cultural encounter that occurred when the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen and his Greenlandic companions passed through the Iglulik region in the 1920s during the Fifth Thule Expedition, a voyage by dog-team across the Arctic from Greenland to Alaska. Rasmussen’s goal was to collect material, spiritual, and intellectual elements of indigenous culture in order to prove that there was a common language and culture across the Arctic (Rasmussen, 1999). Rasmussen was unique among Arctic explorers in that his grandmother was an Inuk from Greenland, he was raised in both Denmark and Greenland, and more importantly, he spoke Inuktitut fluently.

In 1922, Rasmussen met the famous Igloolik shaman Avva and his family. He stayed with them for a period of time and collected the life stories of Avva and his

wife Orulu before leaving for another region. This moment in time would later prove to be a turning point for Inuit in Igloolik, unleashing many of the radical changes described above. Indeed, one year later Rasmussen returned to Igloolik and found that Avva had converted to Christianity.

While these changes are astonishing, Inuit culture and identity has nevertheless remained profoundly tied to the land. The Inuit of Igloolik, for instance, have been in regular contact with the South for over 40 years, and actively incorporate Southern technologies and consumer products into their everyday lives, all while renewing and re-inventing “appropriated uses” that suit their needs. From this is born a contemporary aesthetic that is rarely understood or valued—since the outside world prefers the classic symbols of ancient/traditional Inuit culture associated with Otherness.

Igloolik, a remote community of 1200 people on an island in Canada’s Eastern Arctic, has a long, rich history of community media production for cultural purposes. In the 1970s, Isuma co-founder Paul Apak Angilirq participated in the Inukshuk Project, an experimental federal program that trained Inuit in basic television production skills. In 1975 and again in 1979, the community of Igloolik voted against accepting satellite television, preferring instead to wait until Inuktitut-language television programming became available, which it did with the establishment of the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) in 1982.

Paul Apak Angilirq and Zacharias Kunuk worked for IBC for a number of years before deciding to leave that organization to pursue independent media production. Their chief complaints with IBC were that the management was based in Ottawa and that they never had the budgets to make drama that could visually illustrate oral history and storytelling by the elders. In the late 1980s, the pair met New York video artist Norman Cohn at an IBC training workshop in Iqaluit, and the three, along with Igloolik elder Pauloosie Qulitallik, founded Igloolik Isuma Productions in 1990. As Canada’s first Inuit independent production company, Isuma’s mission is to create a distinctive Inuit style of community-based filmmaking that preserves and enhances Inuit culture, creates needed employment, and offers a uniquely Inuit point of view to the global media audience. Since 1989 Isuma’s twenty-five films have won awards and critical acclaim in Canada and worldwide, including the Camera d’or at Cannes in 2001 for *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner*.

Isuma is known for its unique “docu-drama” aesthetic, which brings forward the past and melds it into the present. In many of Isuma’s earlier videos (such as the *Nunavut [Our land]* series), actors were given only a general story arc and improvised the details. As Norman Cohn points out, Isuma’s docu-drama is “based on people living the dramatic experience . . . Inuit historical fiction is possible because the traditional history is so close in time to contemporary life, there are still people who can live their traditional history as actors. So that instead of having to act out, having to simulate the building of a stone-house, we actually build a stone-house” (quoted in Wachowich, 1997a). In more scripted projects, such as *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, actors

often inhabit their namesakes¹ and ancestors, which Cohn describes this way: “Instead of taking an actor and putting him in a character, we take a character and put him in the actor” (quoted in Wachowich, 1997a, n.p.).

For his part, Zacharias Kunuk sees Isuma’s style of filmmaking as a way of re-imagining an obliterated past:

After the missionaries dropped their religion on us, storytelling and drum-dancing were almost banned. [Filmmaking] is one way to bring it back. And shamanism, I have never seen it. I have only heard about it. I can only imagine how it looks. One way of making it visible is to film it. Not because there is a Qallunaat [White] director telling you what to do. You just make it up. (quoted in Wachowich, 1997b, n.p.)

Isuma’s films and videos are always based on the oral history of the community elders. In the case of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, the film’s storyline is based on the events recounted in Rasmussen’s writings, but as the film’s co-director Norman Cohn asserts, “Those events are interpreted through an *Inuit point of view* . . . Like looking at your reflection in the window and seeing through to the other side of the window pane” (Norman Cohn, Secretary-Treasurer, Igloolik Isuma Productions, personal communication, October 31, 2004).

Stephen Muecke, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Technology in Sydney, has written a great deal about how the *form* of discourse shapes our understanding of Aboriginal history: “The main problem for Aboriginal History, as I see it, is to authenticate the appropriate discourse for its transmission. At the moment the ‘authentic’ accounts of Aboriginal history are firmly locked in academic standard English” (1983, n.p.) Isuma’s unique style of docu-drama counters this privileging of the written word penned by Europeans as the “authentic,” “true” historical record. The films do this by appropriating communication tools to transmit an audiovisual form of Inuit oral history and storytelling to a hybrid audience: Isuma’s primary goal is to delight other Inuit, and its secondary goal is to connect with a global media audience. Indeed, Cohn argues that “[Inuit] storytelling as an oral form is most compatible in contemporary form with film-making or theatre” (Norman Cohn, personal communication, October 31, 2004).

Travelling across cultures and space

For many years these media artists in Igloolik have dreamed of how to use the Internet in Igloolik to enhance and promote Inuit culture as well as their own creative process. While dial-up access has been available in Nunavut for several years, it has been a slow and unstable means of connecting to the Internet, with connection speeds usually in the 14.4 kbps range that most Southern Internet users last experienced a decade and a half ago.

Previous experiences using the Internet and the World Wide Web by artists in Igloolik include the experimental “Live from the Tundra” project (<http://nunatinnit.org>) produced by the Arnait Women’s Video Workshop of Igloolik in August 2001. A group of Inuit and non-Inuit artists took a two-hour boat trip from Igloolik to a traditional Inuit outpost camp called Najuktuktujuk, far from phone

and power lines. The camp was presided over by elders Enuki and Vivi Kunuk (the parents of filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk). Over five days the group uploaded daily audio, video, photo, and text dispatches to the Web from what was dubbed the Nunatinnit Mobile Media Lab employing a high-speed data satellite phone (which at that time meant 64 kbps).

This daily journal of life in a remote outpost camp was meant to give the world a sense of the experience of living on the land in the High Arctic, as well as to push the aesthetic and technological possibilities offered by digital media and the World Wide Web—namely, hypertext, satellite technologies, streaming media, networked experiences, and mobile computing. Specifically, hypertext and integrated media permitted the expression of simultaneous, parallel, yet different experiences of the same event or moment in time (for instance, a seal hunt, sunset, walk on the land, performance, discussion, et cetera). Thus the same story or account of an experience may be told from different points of view (Inuit, Southern, elder, youth, male, female, et cetera) and through different media (sound, video, photo, drawing, text, et cetera).

While a successful experiment in remote, mobile computing, the satellite phone technology used for *Live from the Tundra* was exorbitantly expensive (air-time alone cost U.S.\$10 per minute, never mind the cost of the phone terminal itself). It did, however, give Igloodik artists such as Zacharias Kunuk the desire to explore the possibility of one day establishing a permanent mobile media lab out on the land in a traditional camp outside the community of Igloodik, streaming their media art to the rest of the world through the Internet (Soukup, 2001).

The rollout of wireless broadband in every community throughout Nunavut in 2005, thanks to the efforts of the non-profit Nunavut Broadband Development Corporation (<http://www.nunavut-broadband.ca>), now makes cultural uses of the Internet far more interesting (and affordable). It may also be as, or even *more*, revolutionary to the economic and cultural thread of the Arctic than the launch of satellite communication across Northern Canada in the 1970s. Broadband can accommodate media-rich content, such as audio and video streaming, and thus a departure from text-based Web interaction, which is especially appropriate for a culture based on an oral language like Inuktitut (the language only came into written form less than 100 years ago with the introduction of the syllabic writing system introduced by Christian missionaries). Beyond cultural uses, broadband also brings great potential for distance learning, e-commerce for Nunavut's artists and craftspeople, and distance-medicine for a small population spread across a vast territory. Wireless capacity makes Internet accessible outside of the communities within a radius of 30 km, meaning that Inuit will be able to use this form of communication from their hunting camps if they wish.

Isuma's goal is to find a way through wireless broadband for Inuit artists to return to a thoroughly contemporary nomadism that does not seek to throw Inuit back into the Stone Age, but instead marries tradition with the modern: remaining out on the land, living a traditional life of hunting and gathering, all while being in contact with the rest of the twenty-first century through the Internet. In Isuma's

case, this means making films and television outside of the confines of town, in the beauty of the Arctic landscape where the company's films are shot, and having a remote media lab at Siuraajuk, the ancestral home of Zacharias Kunuk's family. This traditional hunting camp, about three hours by skidoo over the frozen sea ice, was most recently the location for Isuma's new feature film, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. For Zacharias Kunuk, who would consider himself a hunter before calling himself a filmmaker, the appeal of this "outpost camp media lab" is obvious: "being able to edit a movie, take email, and if you see a seal in the bay, you drop everything and go out after it" (Zacharias Kunuk, President, Igloolik Isuma Productions, personal communication, August 27, 2001).

In fall 2003, Isuma began developing SILA (<http://www.sila.nu>), an e-learning website about Inuit culture based on its current and future films and videos. In Inuktitut, the word *sila* means "atmosphere, the outside, temperature, weather, the world." It is the dominant force in the Canadian Arctic, even in today's modern world. Nature and the vagaries of weather still trump modern technology in the Arctic (view the arctic weather live at <http://silacam.isuma.ca>.) Funded by Telefilm Canada's New Media Fund, SILA represents Isuma's first large-scale new-media project.

In the development process for SILA, Isuma consulted Inuit elders to understand traditional Inuit ways of learning and teaching, and these have been incorporated into the website activities and modules. The website lesson plans also adapt and incorporate elements of Education Nunavut's innovative new curriculum based on *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit* (IQ) (Nunavut Department of Education, 2003). IQ is defined as the Inuit way of doing things and the past, present, and future knowledge, experience, and values of Inuit society. The pedagogical framework and guiding or foundational principles are based on the essential elements of humaneness, collaboration, environmental stewardship, acquiring skills and knowledge, being resourceful to solve problems, achieving consensus in decision-making, and serving the common good. IQ values creativity and innovation in all of these essential elements, as well as in the discipline of the arts, to recognize the importance of creative expression in Inuit life and the value of artistic excellence as a way of interpreting and sharing culture and values. Isuma strongly believes that the core values and foundational principles of an IQ pedagogy will have meaning and significance to teachers and students of both Inuit and non-Inuit backgrounds. Like Isuma's films, the website is designed for a dual audience.

The biggest challenge in creating the website was to transpose Isuma's collaborative, community-based filmmaking style to the Web. At the core of SILA was the design and programming of an online collaborative space for creating content from different, remote locations, and also for those with or without much knowledge of Web design to contribute and work together. Behind SILA is a high-performance open source infrastructure, which allows for dynamic content management in real time. This authoring tool enables users with different access levels to contribute content through a very simple Web interface. Text, audio,

video, and images are stored in a database, dynamically displayed and instantly available online.

Muecke (1984) also suggests a multitextual and collaborative approach to documenting Aboriginal history, one that neither privileges one point of view (non-Aboriginal) nor entrenches the dominance of the written word (most often English). Multiple forms of discourse can therefore represent a historical account. In much this vein, "Live from the Set" (<http://sila.nu/live>), the online production journal that chronicled the six-week shoot of the *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, attempted to capture this diversity of cultures and points of view, as well as document an Inuit style of filmmaking. The collaborative authoring tool developed for SILA was first used to produce Live from the Set. The site featured video, audio, and hundreds of photographs produced by a crew of both Inuit and non-Inuit, as well as written "blogs" from ethno-historian Nancy Wachowich (University of Aberdeen), Inuit writer Jobie Weetaluktuk, and Isuma's own "embedded journalist,"² SF Said, a film critic with the *London Daily Telegraph*, who followed the entire filming process from first shot to production wrap. The goal of the website was to create a space on the Web that would open up a cross-cultural dialogue and intersubjective exchanges between contemporary Inuit life and culture and the outside world, between different aesthetic visions, and between different media (audio, video, text, image). In the hypertextual environment of the Web, these disparate visions could exist simultaneously, even in contradiction. Another way in which Isuma appropriates this new technology for literally travelling across space, to compress vast expanses of geography, is by allowing the world public to connect directly with Inuit artists and the Arctic environment. Considering that forty years ago, travelling to this region of the Arctic was only possible by ship (and took many, many months), and even today is only accessible by air (a return economy plane ticket to Igloolik costs in the order of \$3,000), Igloolik is still extremely remote and difficult to visit by conventional means.

In the future, Isuma will join forces with other artists and Igloolik-based Nunavut Independent Television Network (NITV; <http://nitv.nu>) to stream live video and video-on-demand from the community, as well as to interact with other communities in Nunavut and around the world through video conferencing. Isuma is also collaborating with international projects such as Slovene artist Marko Peljhan's Makrolab (<http://makrolab.ljudmila.org/current>), an autonomous, mobile media-arts lab that will be permanently installed in Nunavut for Polar Year 2007.

Isuma's videos, films, and Internet projects demonstrate how a community can appropriate communication tools to serve their own cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic purposes of Inuit culture (view some of Isuma's cultural works at <http://www.cjc-online.ca>). These audiovisual representations also enable Canadians to connect more directly with the images and their Inuit creators, and to establish a distinct and authentic Inuit voice within a global media discourse.

Notes

1. In Inuit culture, children are bonded to their ancestors through their Inuit name or namesake—*tuqlhuraniq*. According to Inuit custom, children “inherit” that person’s family relations along with the name. This is reflected in terms of address between people: A young child named after the deceased husband of an elder woman would call her “wife,” for instance. In turn, the elder would call the child “husband.”
2. This playfully refers to the term used to refer to journalists who were attached to a military unit involved in an armed conflict during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

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