

Lopičić, Vesna; Kaličanin, Milena

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In: *Beyond the 49th Parallel: many faces of the Canadian North*. Le Calvé Ivičević, Evaine (editor); Polić, Vanja (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2018, pp. 147-164

ISBN 978-80-210-9192-4

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.81459>

Access Date: 20. 03. 2025

Version: 20250213

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A Vision of the Canadian Aboriginal North in *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*

Vesna Lopičić and Milena Kaličanin

University of Niš, Serbia

Abstract

This article aims to explore the representations of the North in the 2001 Canadian film *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, directed by Zacharias Kunuk. It was the first feature film to be written, directed and acted completely in Inuktitut, the language of Canada's Inuit people. Set in the vast Arctic landscape in a distant past, the Inuit legend of Atanarjuat and his older brother Amaqjuaq depicts the indigenous philosophy deeply embedded in the Inuit oral tradition. *Atanarjuat* represents an attempt of the Inuit peoples in Canada to offer an inside view of this popular legend. By resisting appropriation, the film accomplishes its initial goals: to show how for thousands of years Inuit communities have survived in the Arctic, and to introduce the new storytelling medium of film which becomes a tool to re/enforce a sense of pride and belonging to the Inuit community in the Canadian north. The views of Raheja (2007), Ginsburg (2002), Clifford (2000), MacDougal (1997, 1994), Ruby (1996) and other ethnographers and film critics have been employed to support our findings.

Keywords:

Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner), north, Inuit, Fourth-World cinema, myth

Résumé

Cette recherche se concentre sur l'analyse d'un film canadien, *Atanarjuat (La Légende de l'homme rapide)*, réalisé en 2001 par Zacharias Kunuk. Ce film constitue le premier film long métrage écrit, réalisé et interprété en inuktitut, la langue des Inuits du Canada. Située dans le vaste paysage de l'Arctique, dans un passé lointain, la légende inuite de Atanarjuat et de son frère aîné Amaqjuaq (Strong One) met en scène des motifs indigènes profondément ancrés dans la tradition orale inuite. *Atanarjuat* illustre un effort des Inuits au Canada pour offrir une vue de l'intérieur de cette légende populaire indigène. Opposant une puissante résistance à l'appropriation, la version filmée de cette légende inuite authentique atteint brillamment ses objectifs initiaux: elle montre comment les communautés inuites ont survécu et prospéré dans l'Arctique pendant des milliers d'années et recourt à un nouveau support narratif filmique pour aider les communautés inuites à re/bâtir leur fierté et leur sentiment d'appartenance dans le Nord canadien. Les lectures de Raheja (2007), Ginsburg



(2002), Clifford (2000), MacDougal (1997, 1994), Ruby (1996) et d'autres ethnographes et critiques de cinéma viennent étayer nos conclusions.

Mots-clés :

Atanarjuat (La Légende de l'homme rapide), nord du Canada, Inuits, cinéma du quatrième monde, mythe

We are grateful to the reviewers for their kind comments and insightful criticisms that significantly improved the quality of our work.

This research was supported by the project 178014 granted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

Introduction: Two dis/similar filmic stories

Many of its aspects make the film *Apocalypto* (2006) absolutely mesmerising at first watching. The unexpected lush setting of the Mesoamerican rainforest, the strange sound of the Yucatec Maya language, the tattoos and scarification customary for that civilisation, the premeditated cruelty against their own kind, the quiet patient endurance of women, all these features make one believe that the producer, Mel Gibson, created a masterpiece of seemingly ethnographic recuperation of a collective story, more than original in comparison to the typical Hollywood production. In view of this, it is disappointing to learn that Gibson and his script co-author Farhad Safinia's main goal was to make an original film in the action-chase genre. The chase indeed takes a good half of the film, and often leaves the viewer breathless just as it should, according to the genre, but what may spoil the effect of the film for a more sophisticated spectator is its lack of authenticity. In many an archeological, architectural, historical and ethnographic detail, *Apocalypto* is a Hollywood-fabricated spectacle rather than an insight into a lost culture (Lovgren 2006; McGuire 2006; Garcia 2006). However, despite all these shortcomings, we find the film magically beautiful, thought-provoking, and awareness-raising.

Halfway through the film *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk 2001), one is reminded of *Apocalypto*, although seemingly there was no room for comparison. While the hero of *Apocalypto*, Paksiw (Jaguar Paw) is shown in the exotic jungles of Central America as representative of the Mayan civilisation steeped in lively colours, the main character Atanarjuat, whose name in English reads as Fast Runner, lives in cold and eternally white arctic spaces of North America where the concept of colour



would be almost non-existent to the Inuit if not for the shades of animal fur. On closer consideration, it turns out that the two films have a lot in common despite that radical difference in setting. The director, Zacharias Kunuk, also chooses a native language, Inuktitut, the dialect of one of Canada's Inuit peoples, which in the case of both films "allows the audience to completely suspend their own reality and get drawn into the world of the film," according to Gibson. Analogous to the impressive body tattoos of the men in *Apocalypto* are the gently drawn stylised seal whiskers on the faces of the women in *Atanarjuat*. Body decoration is evidently a universal feature of mankind, present in all cultures and all historical periods. Further, while men engage in acts of atrocious cruelty in both films, women struggle patiently in their different ways to survive and protect their children and the community. It may be surprising that the trope of chase figures as the central element in *Atanarjuat* as well. Both heroes accomplish incredible feats because they escape and defeat their pursuers against all odds in their own manner: Paksiw is exceptionally ingenious while *Atanarjuat* is a fast runner, faster than the adversaries who chase him. Most interestingly, the time frame for both films seems to be the 16th century. *Apocalypto* is set around 1511 in pre-Columbian South America where Paksiw, through super-human effort, saves his family against the backdrop of his people's encounter with the European explorers. At about the same time, a similar drama is enacted in the frozen tundra of the sixteenth-century pre-settler Nunavut (Ginsburg 2002) where *Atanarjuat* successfully deals with a curse. In fiscal terms, both films were equally profitable, tripling the budget in the box office. Finally, reviewers agree that *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, though a far cry from a Hollywood spectacle, in April 2015 deserved the position of number 1 Canadian film of all time, according to the fourth edition of Canada's All-Time Top Ten List. Remarkably authentic and anthropologically accurate, this film is even more intriguing and engaging than *Apocalypto*.

Visual anthropology or not?

In the *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* Jay Ruby was tasked with defining the concept of visual anthropology and ethnographic film within it. His words explain why it is easy to confuse ethnographic film, indigenous cinema and Hollywood spectacles:

There is no standard agreed-upon definition of the genre, and the popular assumption is that it is a documentary about "exotic" people, thereby broadening the term "ethnographic" to stand for any statement about culture. Some scholars argue that all film is ethnographic (Heider 1976), whereas others (e.g., Ruby 1975) wish to restrict the term to films produced by or in association with anthropologists. (1996: 1346)



Though we are inclined to support the view that all films have ethnographic elements in the sense that they may offer insights into a particular culture, it is indisputable that these different genres have different meanings in film theory. Therefore, neither *Apocalypto* nor *Atanarjuat* satisfy the criteria of ethnographic film-making. According to David MacDougall, "... the canonical ethnographic film, framed in intercultural terms - /is/ a film made by one cultural group (usually Euro-American) attempting to describe another (usually of the Third or Fourth World¹)" (1997: 284).

Gibson's movie is a romantic, exotic and spectacular aestheticization of the Other, who in this case are the representatives of the Mayan culture of the 16th c. while *Atanarjuat* does not have the scientific approach that is a prerequisite for ethnographic films, especially the traditional ones. These are both feature films, where *Apocalypto* is a mythic action-adventure, while *Atanarjuat* is an epic film which qualifies for the category of indigenous cinema.

The question which can be raised here is the one David MacDougall poses in his essay "Whose Story Is It?" (1994)². Namely, this renowned anthropologist identified the problem of the author's voice in ethnographic works and emphasised the complexity of the politics and ethics of representation in visual anthropology. The threat of distortion and the trap of appropriation of the culture through the appropriation of the voice are acknowledged as important issues whose significance is widely accepted today in cultural studies broadly speaking. MacDougall is asking whose the voice of the film is because the situation can be highly ambiguous: is the film making indigenous statement or using it for its own purposes? This opens ontological and moral dimensions an average viewer is not necessarily aware of, which in turn means that they may not be able to interpret the film properly or even that they may be manipulated by the 'voice.'

For this reason, *Apocalypto* is not the voice of the Mayan people though it uses indigenous speech, nor is it an ethnographic film though it abounds in exotic local detail. It speaks the fiscal language of its producers and voices the mercantile values of Hollywood filmography, far from objectivity, scientific precision or even fair play. *Atanarjuat*, on the other hand, seems to be closer to visual anthropology because both the producers and the actors were telling their collective story through the medium of film. Still, as MacDougall said for the characters of Rauch's film *Jaguar*, "This is their

1) Fay Ginsburg in her 1995 article "Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media, Ethnographic Film, and the Production of Identity" explains that "the term 'indigenous media' respects the understandings of those Aboriginal producers who identify themselves as members of 'First Nations' or 'Fourth World People,' categories that index the sense of common political struggle, shared by indigenous people around the globe" (211). Fourth cinema becomes a tool of resistance and resurgence in constant negotiation with the power structures. Ginsberg describes it as "small-scale, low-budget, and locally based" (211). It was not easy to anticipate the fast rise of the indigenous cinema in less than a decade.

2) It is interesting that the question of authenticity and ownership was articulated in Canadian fiction by Rudy Wiebe in his story "Where's the Voice Coming From", published as early as 1974, even before postcolonial academics introduced the term 'cultural appropriation.'



story, and yet through the strange circumstances of filmmaking here they are, *playing* their story (1994: 30). *Atanarjuat* is a feature film produced by Indigenous people who gave us a filmed version of a segment of their culture. It perfectly fits MacDougal's conclusion regarding ownership in anthropological films dealing with rituals: "These films serve political and ritual purposes. Even if it is not always evident to the outside viewer, they are part of a continuing process of cultural reinforcement and contestation. They have themselves become emblems" (1994: 34).

Indeed, *Atanarjuat* has become one more emblem of Inuit culture whose success in promoting and reinforcing it is remarkable although its only concession to the non-Inuit speakers is the subtitling of indigenous speech. The indigenous culture is presented with verisimilitude in mind, but the fact remains that actors were *employed* and the director *staged* every minute of the film, guided mainly with artistic not with scientific and anthropological intentions.³

Atanarjuat within Indigenous cinema

It is claimed that "indigenous films are slowly climbing their way into the mainstream" (Peet 2015). Indeed, 2002 seems to mark a turning point after which the rise of indigenous cinema could not be denied. To quote Cousineau: "After *Atanarjuat* it became obvious to the system that people wanted to make those films, that they needed to make them, and that the outside world was interested in receiving them" (Mayer 2015). The global success of the fourth-world cinema is undeniable, but the questions John Adair articulated in *Through Navajo Eyes* (1972) have not been fully answered to this day, though they are still relevant for this developing cinematic field as well as for the Indigenous people:

...what kind of visual and temporal style and aesthetics might Navajo use if they were trained to use the camera? What would they choose to record, how might they frame and compose their images, and how might they lead our eyes to "see" their world from a Navajo perspective? (Wilson 2009)

3) Jay Ruby reminds us of a unique example in old anthropological filmography: "In *The Silent Enemy: An Epic of the American Indian* (1930), director H. P. Carver employed an all-native cast to tell the tale of an Ojibway warrior. The film begins with Chief Yellow Robe, the lead actor, in a complete Indian costume, confronting the camera directly to inform audiences, "This is the story of my people...Everything that you will see here is real... When you look at the picture, therefore, look not upon us as actors. We are Indians living once more our old life" (Ruby 1996: 1348). *Atanarjuat* is similar in its approach. It is a story of the Inuit people, told in visual language, where the participants both are and are not actors because they are living once more, though for the sake of the film, their old way of life. In the words of Isuma-TV, it is a "re-lived" cultural drama, combining the authenticity of modern video with the ancient art of Inuit storytelling" (Isuma-TV).



A variety of relevant answers to these questions are being given by the contemporary Indigenous filmmakers through their acclaimed productions, which seems to be the best aesthetic strategy in view of Jay Ruby's belief that "in a postpositive and postmodern world, the camera is constrained by the culture of the person behind the apparatus; that is, films and photographs are always concerned with two things – the culture of those filmed and the culture of those who film" (Ruby, 1996:1345). To avoid these constraints, the most authentic visual communication is probably achieved when the two cultures coincide and Fourth-world films become "articulated sites of indigeneity" (Clifford 2000: 388).

The success of *Atanarjuat* is one of the first examples of this new trend in cinematography. The high acclaim of film critics and audiences, and numerous awards including the prestigious Golden Camera at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, inspired a body of academic work.

For example, Monika Siebert of Syracuse University in her article "Atanarjuat and the Ideological Work of Contemporary Indigenous Filmmaking" (2010) exposes the formal puzzle of the film which recreates the Inuit way of life in pre-contact times but ends with outtakes which subvert the illusion of indigenous sustainability because they show the actors in a contemporary environment and modern-day clothes. We believe, along with Clifford, that an even greater and misleading illusion would be representing the Inuit way of life as frozen in time, as early ethnographic films did. The point is that Indigenous cultures survive, some even thrive today, though not unchanged since all cultures change:

So these persisting – not exactly "living" – cultures use prosthetic processes, that is, added or connecting devices more like political alliances than grafted limbs or hybrid growths. Nothing weird or bizarre, then, about Indian Gambling Casinos, or Aboriginal video productions, or Hawaiian reggae, but just the normal activity of cultures, changing and adapting in the contact zones of colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial situations. (Clifford 2000: 374)

It is surprising and obsolete, to say the least, to expect that native cinema should show 'stills' of their past as if it were their present when their communities are undergoing rapid changes. The practice of Fourth cinema is one of them just as using motor sledges or wearing branded clothes. The subtle subversion of *Atanarjuat* is in fact exactly in turning against exoticization by busting the myth of petrified civilisation while preserving the memory of it.

Further, the ideological trap which Siebert identifies is related to the fact that the film has been funded by the Canada's National Film Board seemingly to allow for indigenous self-representation but actually to provide for Canada's multicultural feder-



alist project. Instead of now unacceptable politics of appropriation, displacement and exclusion, a new strategy is employed to support representing indigeneity as distinctive only to secure national cohesion at the expense of political autonomy of aboriginal peoples. Playing Indians⁴ is for that reason now reserved only for 'Indians' so that in *Atanarjuat* an all Inuit cast is engaged along with an all-Inuit crew (except for one person) to create a story told from a categorically indigenist point of view. However, Siebert claims that the story diverts the gaze from the present to the past so that the protagonists become simply actors playing roles, and not their own reservation or urban realities, marked by unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, and alienation, as well as cultural resistance. According to her, instead of Inuit cultural and economic empowerment, the film offers a mythical story of the by-gone times rather than an ideological investment in Inuit sovereignty, rhetorical, cultural, political, and economic. In the end, Monika Siebert concludes:

So here's an illustration of a terribly vicious circle: a need to perform cultural difference in order to gain recognition, which in turn precipitates official incorporation into the state and its capitalist economy, which, in yet another turn, results in an erasure of any meaningful difference (that is difference in social and economic arrangements) behind the screen of difference performed. (Siebert 2006: 25)

This conclusion is also questionable despite its heuristic logic. Writing six years before Siebert, Clifford addresses the same question of difference and provides an answer we would like to back up:

Many people continue to feel themselves whole and different despite the fatal impact and all the many subsequent changes. They continue to feel themselves Native Pacific Islanders, or Native Americans, or first Nations peoples of Canada. Even though they may not speak their native languages, though they may be good Christians or good businessmen, these groups have built alliances linking elements of the old with the new; and while certain cultural elements have dropped away, others have been added in. (Clifford 2000: 374)

Cultural identity of a group does involve the elements of nationhood, social status, and economic arrangements, but cannot be reduced solely to them though it can be threatened by their aggressive imposition. Communal identity is not easily erased though it is constantly reshaped.⁵ The depiction of an Inuktitut-speaking

4) Though genuinely interested and concerned, we are acutely aware of our outsider position in relation to Indigenous traditions we are trying to inform ourselves about. The word Indian is used in the text without any prejudice against the Aboriginal peoples.

5) "Manuel Castells underlines the fact that today our world and our lives, as well as our identities, are strongly being reshaped by globalization and information technology revolution. People are influenced by



community of the 16th c. by modern Inuit people who made *Atanarjuat* proves the (changing) persistence of that identity and the survival of its more than meaningful difference.

Although critical of almost every aspect of the film, not only of its possibly auto-subversive ideological underpinning, even Siebert cannot object to the use of digital video technology for the purpose of self-representation. Masterfully employed, digital video replaces the orality of traditional story-telling without destroying it. In favour of the new technologies of representation, Faye Ginsburg describes the rise of Inuit television in her article “Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media” (2002). The Inuit Broadcast Corporation (IBC), licensed in 1981, had a mission to provide for the absolutely non-existent aboriginal content or local broadcast in the CBC’s media invasion of Inuit communities after the launching of a satellite to broadcast to northern Canada. Communications technologies have proven crucial in providing long-distance communication and raising awareness of their significance in preserving cultural heritage but also in politically mobilising Inuit. Only a year after the creation of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) in 1999, the first of its kind in the world, according to Ginsburg, Kunuk’s Iglolik Isuma Productions premiered *Atanarjuat*, the first feature film written, produced and acted by Inuit. The unexpected success of the film supports the arguments that new technologies of representation have been boosting and revitalising indigenous peoples in the North instead of having the potentially deleterious effects. The willing participation of the Inuit deemed by Ginsburg an act of self-determination, self-empowerment and political maturity (contrary to what Siebert would say), contributes to the new dynamics and power-relations in the North. Ginsburg closes the Inuit part of her article with these words: “The *fact* of their appearance on television on *Inuit* terms, inverts the usual hierarchy of values attached to the dominant culture’s technology, conferring new prestige to Inuit ‘culture-making’” (Ginsburg 2002: 44).

What is more significant is the attitude of the Fourth world themselves, as illustrated by Ariel Smith, an Indigenous filmmaker creating since 2001 who has had lived experiences with difference, abuse, and marginalization:

Native cinema is bigger than the individual movies we make. As Indigenous peoples living in colonial times, our presence – our very existence – is in itself a political statement, and our uncensored artistic expression is itself a beautiful declaration of sovereignty, and self determination. (Smith 2015)

pervasive, interconnected and diversified media systems. Work has become flexible and unstable, labour is being individualized. Globalization and the restructuring of capitalism are part of the process that is reforming societies and people’s identities.” Irmeli Luoma, 2005. Available at: <https://moniviestin.jyu.fi/ohjelmat/hum/viesti/en/ics/13>



Indigenous cinema becomes a handy tool to reclaim the history and land of Indigenous people, to create original conventions and techniques of filmmaking, and to maintain an autonomous identity moving away from the practices of national film and generally Western influences (Herrington 2011: 2). *Atanarjuat* contributes to all these aspects of Inuit culture, and sets standards for how modern film technology can be applied to these purposes.

The use of modern technology has been thoroughly explored by Michelle Raheja in her article “Reading Nanook’s Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*” (2007). She focuses on visual sovereignty “as a way of reimagining Native-centred articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media, but that do not rely solely on the texts and contexts of Western jurisprudence” (Raheja 2007: 1163). The point which is brought to light is the actual lack of clearly definable political sovereignty with regard to native peoples so dispersed and disunited all over North America that only *expressions* of sovereignty can indicate a degree of cohesion. Therefore, similarities in performance, songs, stories, dreams, and visual texts coming from old times, and modern documentary, experimental, dramatic, ethnographic, and feature films along with video and TV programme materials constitute elements of collective visual sovereignty, more than important in preserving spiritual traditions in contemporary culture-making. In this context, *Atanarjuat* does play a very significant role, according to Michelle Raheja.

The film exercises authentic indigenous aesthetics in various ways. For example, to the non-Inuit viewer the way time is presented may be confusing because the past, present and future co-exist and scenes depicting them are linked without any hint to the uninformed viewer. For that reason, the beginning of the film requires focus in order to understand what is happening ‘now’ (in Western conceptualisation of time) and what happened twenty years before. The filmmakers refused to give hints to those who are unfamiliar with Inuit traditions and world-view⁶. Also, Inuit visual sovereignty is expressed through representation of spiritual traditions and discrete cultural practices in their original form (at least to the best of their knowledge). The members of the family are shown going about their daily work of cooking, hunting, fire-keeping, house-building, clothes-making, equipment maintenance etc. which may be puzzling to non-Inuit viewers because they are exclusive to the Inuit world.

6) In her 2009 article “‘Today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow’: Reflections on Inuit Understanding of Time and Place,” Nicole Gombay gives a useful explanation: “In a sense, what I am proposing is that at a fundamental level, one which is predicated on, and yet also constructs their understanding of place, Inuit are encouraged to perceive and behave as though each moment were meaningful, and so they inhabit what Momaday (1987: 158) calls ‘an extended present’ or Carpenter (1956: 3) calls an ‘everlasting now’. This is predicated on the mindset that one cannot and should not assume control over the world. Adopting such an attitude means giving over to being in a state of perpetual becoming. Nothing is what it seems and one must simply take each moment as it comes.”



For that reason, *Atanarjuat* resembles the practice of salvage ethnography since it records/recreates cultural specifics though, as explained above, this is not an example of ethnographic filmmaking *per se* since expert ethnologists' explanations are naturally missing from this work of film art. Even in the sphere of the spiritual, always more sophisticated than the mundane world, where the invisible clash of opposed forces is represented as a conflict between emblematic animals, the viewer is expected to decipher what is going on without a clue. It is rather obvious that the filmmakers did not want primarily to educate the non-Inuit public on their cultural specifics and spiritual traditions, but, foremost, to indulge in self-representation (the film was originally meant exclusively for Inuit audiences). Evidence of that are long (some may say uninteresting) shots of frozen landscapes. To an untrained eye, they show an unchanging scene – ice and snow everywhere, that only Coleridge could make dramatic and threateningly attractive.⁷

The particular geographical space of the Arctic, a frozen landscape seemingly unexciting and unvaried except for the equally frozen seascape, is a trade mark of Inuit aesthetics so that a persistent focus on it, absent from typical Western cinematographics, exemplifies visual sovereignty as an aspect of collective identity reinforcement. Although the image of Canada being “a few acres of snow” initiated by Voltaire survived to this day, snow storms and icy spells are usually depicted mostly in urban environments since man is not supposed to be part of vast frozen wilderness which is, in fact, still home to some Inuit bands. Therefore, long shots, adapted from Inuit oral tales, and panorama of the permafrost region are not simply a filming technique but a way of showing respect to the North that still nurtures the Inuit. As Laura Herrington claims, it proves “the possibility that an indigenous culture can maintain its separate identity through changes, adaptations, and integration of modern technologies—i.e. camera and cinema (2011: 15).

7) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”
...And through the drifts the snowy cliffs
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken --
The ice was all between.
The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound!...



Myth in the North

The idea of attachment to apparent Northern nothingness is not always comprehensible. For example, even W. L. Morton who acknowledges the significance of the North for Canadian history, asks a question like this: “How indeed can something which is after all only a freezing emptiness, an arctic void, a blizzard swept desert, a silent space, dark as the other side of the moon half of each year, mean anything at all?” (Morton 1970: 32). Provoked by this question, Sheng-mei Ma in his essay “The Myth of Nothing in Classics and Asian Indigenous Films” (2013) claims that sand and ice comprise a vast nothingness, but not a black hole of human experience. On the contrary, out of emptiness and void, a mythology is born. The frozen wasteland is not inhabited by primitive unsophisticated people who should be therefore rightfully marginalised, but by human communities imaginatively responsive to their environment. It has often been noted that though desolate, the landscape in *Atanarjuat* constitutes an important non-human character. Indeed, nature is fore-fronted from the beginning of the film, either in its harsh and threatening aspects or in its stunning sunlit beauty. The Inuit develop a relationship with the land, and their stories are part of the stories of nature, as Ma says. So, the North is not simply a backdrop to what happens in the film but almost an agent of the action. It is metaphorically significant that the stranger who brings evil into the community comes from the North, and dramatically affects their life and survival capacity.

A brief summary of the plot usually begins with *Atanarjuat*, a young man who wins the love of *Atuat* against *Oki* to whom she has been promised in marriage. *Oki*'s flirtatious sister *Puja* charms *Atanarjuat* to become his second wife and later seduces even his brother *Amaqjuaq* only to betray both of them to her brother *Oki* who kills *Amaqjuaq*. *Atanarjuat* escapes naked and saves his life running barefoot across the frozen sea. Helped by *Qulitalik*, *Oki*'s great uncle, who left the village many years ago, *Atanarjuat* returns for revenge but spares *Oki*'s life in the spirit of restoring peace. *Qulitalik*'s sister *Panikpak* puts a walrus tooth necklace around *Atanarjuat*'s neck thus making him a new leader while *Oki* and *Puja* are banished.

However, what precedes this part of the plot happened about twenty years earlier when a strange shaman, *Tungajuaq*, came from up north and caused the death of *Kumaglak*, the leader of the tribe. The cause and the effect are clearly indicated by positioning the title of the film between this scene and the one showing *Qulitalik*'s parting with *Panikpak* and leaving their formerly close-knit community with his wife. When evil enters the band and *Kumaglak* mysteriously dies, good *Qulitalik* leaves it to return only when it becomes existentially necessary. As he predicts (“*Tulimaq* is the one they'll go after now”), *Tulimaq* and his two sons *Amaqjuaq* and *Atanarjuat* will be from then on victimised by *Oki*'s family until balance is restored.



It is almost inevitable to read any contemporary art coming from the First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Canadian and American people as a political agenda aimed at correcting historical wrongs and improving their position at present. In the case of *Atanarjuat*, if nothing else, the original language of the Inuit used in the film is an apostrophe of the autochthonous condition of these people that sets them apart from the early settlers, their descendants and the modern-day immigrants. Yet, involving ideology, however justifiable and compulsory, does not give full justice to this work of art which seems to be in the first place an illustration of the myth-making instinct of the Arctic people. This mental and imaginative impulse ranks them equal to all great civilisations of the world which also depict the clash of good and evil in their mythologies, and the loss and restoration of balance as the driving force of communal life.

As represented in the film, Inuit mythology acknowledges the existence of evil and accepts it as a natural force. The narrator says: “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.” Evil is connected to the arrival of a stranger dressed in white furs who comes from the north. The symbolism of colour white and his exceptional powers make him represent the deadly aspect of the North, the cold North that kills by exposure or starvation, the usual causes of death among the Arctic people. When death happens, nothing can be done about it except endure its consequences. Tungajuaq the visitor is more powerful even than their shaman Kumaglak so that when they play a power game, Kumaglak drops dead, and Tungajuaq wins the right to decide who will be the next leader of the tribe. The magic walrus-tooth necklace goes to Sauri.

However, it seems that Inuit mythology does not simply externalise evil. When Tungajuaq puts the shaman’s necklace around Sauri’s neck, he warns him with the words: “Be careful what you wish for.” It becomes clear that Sauri wanted the position of shaman and wished his father dead so that his wish summoned Tungajuaq as a materialisation of his thoughts and an instrument of murder. This ancient philosophy is evidently in line with modern science which explains thought as a form of energy that can affect our reality. If one can control a computer game using only thoughts, then the power of thoughts is much greater than our modern civilisation believed. To the Inuit civilisation, this was quite familiar. Tulimaq shouts in anger at Sauri: “You helped him murder your own father!” confirming the fact that it was not only the evil shaman who caused Kumaglak’s death, but also the evil desires of his own son. The warning “Be careful what you wish for” was providential because Sauri wished his father dead, and he himself was later killed by his own son Oki.

Not only should one be careful with their thoughts but with their words as well. At one point, Oki in exasperation cries at Amaqjuaq: “I will kill you” which to a non-Inuit viewer is an inconsequential threat of a helpless angry person. Not so with the Inuit. Amaqjuaq with a serious expression on his face repeats to his brother Atanarjuat what



Oki told him, and *Atanarjuat* does not reassure him. Quite the contrary. They both understand that thoughts become words and words become actions. Having loudly spoken his thoughts, Oki now has a license to kill Amaqjuaq which he does. All this proves that the film *Atanarjuat* reveals a very sophisticated world view incorporating a complex mythology and system of beliefs.

Part of it is the very phenomenon of Inuit shamanism which implies the existence of spirits. Everything in this world, be it animate or inanimate, has a form of spirit, and since these unseen forces are very powerful the Inuit fear them. How powerful they are is demonstrated in the power game⁸ that the two shamans play. They are both tied with leather thongs and practically immobile so that the fight between them is in fact the fight between their spirits represented as a polar bear and a walrus. The necklaces of polar bear claws and walrus teeth owned by them symbolically link the shamans to these animals which being spirits are invisible yet capable of affecting their environment. The stone lamp breaks in half and the local shaman, Kumaglak, suddenly dies. Although this kind of animism as a religious belief precedes modern religions, it has to be treated as equal to them in terms of beliefs, emotions, sacred objects, rituals and symbols. It springs out of environmental nothing, so to say, but helps the Inuit people understand their world and organise their life in a meaningful way.

Its commensurability with the European imaginary is evidenced by the power game itself. It reminds one very much of the beheading game played in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a 14 c. English romance, in which the Green Knight challenges King Arthur in the spirit of fair play to cut his head off. The Green Knight clad all in green resembles Tungajuaq dressed all in white where both colours stand for the power of natural forces. Tungajuaq challenges Kumaglak and he accepts the spiritual duel in a friendly way just as Sir Gawain accepts the duel with the Green Knight. Both games determine the plot of the two stories and the life course of the persons involved. Most of all, this similarity is illustrative of the myth-making ability characterising different civilisations and invalidating culture hierarchies. The North as well as the South sparks the imagination of the people who live there, and the film *Atanarjuat* seems to be foremost a reworking of an old myth and not a “performance necessitated by the politics of recognition” (Siebert 2006: 24).

8) Our further research will be aimed at exploring various games played in the film: wolfing, punching heads, pulling lips, tying limbs, to show their universality and therefore essential connectedness of mankind.



Conclusion

The last mythical element to be mentioned here is the idea of animistic reincarnations introduced by the film. Not only does each person possess a spirit, but the spirit (or multiple spirits depending on the Inuit tribe) does not die with the person. It moves into a new-born body giving it some qualities of the old owner. Atuat is as beautiful as Panikpak's mother whose name she shares, and little Kumaglak, Atuat's son will be a wise leader as Panikpak's murdered husband. It is interesting that the spirits do not remain within one family but move between them connecting them after periods of discord. When the evil afflicts the tribe, taunting, murder, patricide, adultery, deceit, and rape are its particular forms. They are the maladies that make the community sick, and in order to be reintegrated they need to heal. This is achieved by *Atanarjuat*, of course, who matures physically and spiritually through his ordeal and becomes capable of forgiveness because he is now the stronger one. He will not kill his brother's murderer because the killing needs to stop. However, Oki and his sister Puja are banished from the community by Panikpak, the woman who sees and knows more than the others. She recognises the spirits of the dead in Kumaglak and Atuat, she magically summons her brother Qulitalik to their help, and at the end she sings the song which opened the film. The cycle is completed, the interdependence and continuity are secured, everything is connected through the spirits, and the community is healed. The Inuit mythical story specific to the North is told only to those who already understand it, but to no others, as Panikpak promised at the beginning. However, the film *Atanarjuat* is there for all those who want to hear the voice of the Ab/originals and understand the revitalising power of aboriginal myth. One is inevitably reminded of that famous indigenous challenge to settler/colonials in Canada: If this is your land, where are your stories? *Atanarjuat* depicts one of these stories revived by the Fourth world film, as Ginsburg explains:

/i/ndigenous people are using screen media not to mask but to recuperate their own collective stories and histories—some of them traumatic—that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well (Ginsburg 2002: 42).

After its immense success, *Atanarjuat* now not only (re)claims ownership of the land but also becomes “aboriginal cultural property” (Sutton 1978:1), actively used as a tool to deal with “colonial oppression, exploitation and exoticization” (Herrington 2011: 1) but even more importantly as a tool to re/enforce a sense of pride and belonging to the Inuit community in the Canadian north.



Filmography

- Apocalypto*. Dir. Mel Gibson. Perf: Rudy Youngblood, Raoul Trujillo, Mayra Sérbulo, Dalia Hernández. Touchstone Pictures. 2006. Film.
- Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*. Dir. Zacharias Kunuk. Perf: Natar Ungalaaq, Sylvia Ivalu, Peter-Henry Arnatsiaq, Lucy Tulugarjuk. Los Angeles: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment. 2003. Film.
- Nanook of the North*: Dir. Robert Flaherty. The Criterion Collection. 1922. DVD.
- The Silent Enemy: An Epic of the American Indian*. Dir. H. P. Carver. Perf: Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, Molly Spotted Elk. Paramount Pictures. 1930. Film.
- Jaguar*. Dir. Jean Rouch. Perf: Damouré Zika, Lam Dia, Amadou Koffo, Illo Gaouadel. 1967. Les Films de la Pléiade. Film.

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VESNA LOPIČIĆ is a Full Professor at the University of Niš, Serbia. Her publications include *Fall into Culture: Human Nature in the Work of William Golding and Margaret Atwood* (2002), two collections of essays on Canadian literature and a number of course books, readers, and conference proceedings. She co-edited three collections of essays *Identity Issues: Literary and Linguistic Landscapes* (2010), *Challenging Change: Literary and Linguistic Responses* (2012) and *Values across Cultures and Times* (2014) published by CSP. She teaches English Literature and British and Canadian Studies Courses.

MILENA KALIČANIN is an Assistant Professor in the English Department in the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Niš, Serbia. Her MA thesis, “The Faustian Motif in the Tragedies of Christopher Marlowe” was published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2013. She defended her PhD thesis entitled “Public vs. Private in Shakespeare’s History Plays” at the Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad, Serbia in 2013. Her areas of academic interest include Medieval and Renaissance English literature, Shakespeare studies, British studies, Scottish studies and Canadian studies.