

## 2002 SPRY MEMORIAL LECTURE

### The Public Art of Inuit Storytelling

By Zacharias Kunuk

*Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, 25 November 2002*  
*Universite de Montreal, Montreal, 28 November 2002*

I was born to a family of twelve in a sod house on the land. My mother would be telling these stories, like Atanarjuat, to put us, my brothers and sisters, side by side, to sleep. I used to use my kammiks as my pillow and I would wake and they would be frozen and I would put them on and they'd thaw out. I was learning. My father was a hunter and he had dogs and he would be harnessing his dogs. My job was to untangle the ropes. I had one dog that he couldn't catch so my mother would wake me up and say "go get your dog," and I would go out and the dog would only come to me and I would give it to my father. I dreamt that I would be a hunter one day, but at the age of nine, I was dragged to school when my parents finally got the message, "why aren't your kids in school?" with the family allowance check from the Federal Government. Kids in Canada are in school at the age of five and here I was, nine years old. When I went to school they would not let us speak Inuktitut. And so that was my worst day, going to school.

I came to Igloolik in 1966. There was no TV in Igloolik in 1966. The community kept voting TV out, twice, because the CBC had no Inuktitut programming. Before TV came, we used to go to our community hall, which had 16mm movies. At the age of twelve I started doing sculpture and would sell them to my teachers to make a little money, because it cost a quarter to get in. I would try and finish carving before the show time, filing away. I would sometimes be late, but most of the time I made it.

I remember watching movies with cowboys and Indians and John Wayne and the cavalry. I was watching this movie one evening and John Wayne was my man. We were in the fort and he sent out scouts. I was one of the soldiers, and so we went out and didn't come back. The soldiers were dead, and there were soldiers and horses with arrows in them everywhere. I asked, "What kind of Indians did this?" Because I was thinking like those soldiers. As I got older and saw myself as an aboriginal person, I learned that there are two sides to every story.

As I got older, I continued doing good sculptures in soapstone, carving for more money. I learned I could own 35 mm cameras, experimenting with different types of cameras and different scenes, documenting the hunt. But then came the moving camera. So one day in 1980, I heard that any breathing person could own a moving picture camera. And that was the day I decided I got to have one. With my carving buddy, who also played Atanarjuat, Natar Ungalaaq, we spent two weeks carving. We flew down and I traded my carvings for a Betamax camera, portapak and a VCR and I bought myself a 26 inch TV.

Because I wanted to record, I would watch my father. He would go hunting, come home with his hunting buddies and drink tea and tell these terrific stories and I wanted to capture it. So I started. I tried filming and even though my camera said it was colour, everything played back black and white for two months because there was just a little button called a colour balance that I missed. So every night I would try and play my tapes through my TV. I noticed kids playing outside would be stuck to my window

watching my TV, and some nights I would just start to realize there's a lot of kids in my house watching TV. [laughter] Yes, the power of TV. When TV came to Igloolik in 1983 (in time for the hockey series), everybody stopped listening, visiting one another and telling stories., The only way was to put these stories in the box: it was time to tell these stories through TV.

Since I was already trying to do it on my own, Paul Apak, our late screenwriter, who was the only person of our team working at the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation when it was starting in 1982, hired me. I learned a lot from him. Our centre was run in the Ottawa office. IBC had an Ottawa office, to run everything and their finance department is in Ottawa. In eight years with the Corporation, I worked with the camera and became a station manager. In my eighth year, in 1985, there was a camera seminar happening in the nearby community of Iqaluit, and I never had any formal training so I flew down. The Corporation flew me down, and I met this guy who was training with the camera, Norman Cohn. That's how I met my partner and I flew back with Norman. We became friends and it seems like we've been married for seventeen years. In the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, there was no room for drama because they never had any money to do that. They only did current affairs, but I wanted to do more. Norman Cohn introduced us to the Canada Council and we applied and we got our first Canada Council grant in 1985. We made a short video from the Inuit point of view which today we still haven't subtitled. I had to do these films on holidays and leave-without-pay, and I started doing my own projects with my team. My team was Norman Cohn, Paul Apak, and Paul Qulitalik. We also made Qaggiq in 1988.

In 1991 we decided that the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation was not the place for our goals and we broke off . We made the first independent Inuit video production company. Isuma, we called it, because when you're doing all these sorts of things, you have to do a lot of thinking and Isuma means "to think." These same four partners are as shareholders. We started to recreate the past because when we used to work for Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, we would visit elders and they would tell us terrific stories but when you got through at the editing table, you had no footage of them left. So to make it was our goal. We got to do the Nunavut series, thirteen half hours following five families over the four seasons which was aired on the Northern Broadcasting Service. When we started we had no script. We told the actors what we wanted and they just did it. I never ran so much with a Betamax on the tundra. Then the next ambitious project to do was to do a feature length film.

Paul Apak decided that we would do Atanarjuat because we all grew up with this story and once it was taught to you, you never forgot that naked man running out on the ice. We all heard this story and now it was the time to use new technology to put these stories through the TV.

We started to write Atanarjuat in 1995. We talked to seven elders to get the story right and we wrote it in Inuktitut. We did not shoot until 1999 because it was very hard to get funding until we translated it into English. CBC and Telefilm did not believe in us. The writing team turned the story into a professional script - Apak, me, Norman, Qulitalik and Paniak - writing every day for two months. We also consulted with a scriptwriter, Anne Frank, from Toronto. Then we submitted it to Telefilm in 1998 but they refused us. The aboriginal language fund was too small. There was no space for Inuit in the national system. It took us all year arguing for that space in the national system. Independents seem to be so alone. The system shuts them down. Even if you have a great idea if you fill out the form wrong you will not get it. Finally we got approved by the National Film

Board and Telefilm Canada and we started to shoot in 1999. Editing was in 2000. Our first premiere was in Igloolik in December 2000.

We spent six months shooting, from April to September. We went to the actual location where the story happened. We did it in the Inuit style. Of course, actors had to learn their characters. Following a script in all kinds of weather presents special challenges. The sun is always changing. For food, we hired hunters to hunt for us so we could eat because we had no catering trucks in the Arctic. The Inuit style of filmmaking takes lots of teamwork. We work horizontally but the usual Hollywood film work in a military style. Our team would be talking, "how are we going to shoot this?" with my art directors down to my sound man. We put the whole community to work. Costumes, props, we had a two million dollar budget, 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. [laughter] 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 your woman's seal oil lamp turned the wrong way around and the production doesn't really care. One time I saw our seal oil lamp was a torch like the big Olympic flame. [laughter] It is important we tell our stories from our Inuit point of view.

The first screening in Igloolik in December 2000 was my scariest moment because we finally put in on the table to the people what we are making. We have no theatres in Igloolik. We found the biggest room we could find which was a gymnasium. We bought a video projector, a wide screen. We put out four hundred chairs, and when we opened the gym, kids were running, pouring in. They were sitting on the floor. Elders were sitting and people were standing in the back for almost three hours. Sometimes there was silence, sometimes there was laughter, and then silence again. And when the credits rolled, people were clapping and crying and shaking our hands. That day I knew that we did our job right. For three screenings each night, about five hundred people came out of twelve hundred people. [laughter] Inuit loved it. Kids loved it. Kids were even playing Atanarjuat on the street. [laughter] Every household in Igloolik had a copy of the video. We made a thousand VHS copies and sent them to the co-op stores in other communities to distribute it throughout Nunavut. Nunavut doesn't have a theatre system. This was the only way, the fastest way, so that they wouldn't be left out when we launched it.

After screening in Igloolik, we transferred it to 35mm film. Our company, Isuma, took the risk, a hundred thousand dollars, with no help from Telefilm or NFB. We believed that the outside audience would like the film but no one else believed in us. The first subtitled film print was ready to submit to Cannes in March 2001. Cannes chose the film and we won the Camera d'Or, but we still didn't have any Canadian distributors. We won other prizes, in Scotland, Belgium, Toronto, were nominated for eight genies, and were Canadian choice for Oscars. But CBC and Alliance Atlantis, and other distributors, all still dragged their feet. Finally we got CBC and Alliance to sign six months after Cannes. We signed separate deals within the UK, France, US and Netherlands. The UK and French release was in February 2002 - to big success. France sold 250,000 tickets, and Atanarjuat became one of the top foreign language films of the year. The Canadian release was also successful ~ a 1.3 million dollar box office on less than thirty prints. The US release started in June and is still going on - 23 straight weeks, to become one of the top 60 foreign films in America. We have sold to thirty countries: it is playing now in

Australia, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Norway, Denmark, and opening in Germany, Russia and Japan. [audience clapping]

First of all, it was a really good film - exciting, entertaining, with good action, love, sex, good camera work, good music. [laughter] People didn't know, didn't believe that these guys knew what they're doing, but we had professional experience. Apak had twenty years, I had twenty years, Norman Cohn had thirty years in making professional video, before the word "digital film" got started. Our legend is a universal story: about love, jealousy, murder, revenge, forgiveness - the same for everybody everywhere. Not like Hollywood films. It was shot, acted, edited in our own style. Everything is authentic. The audiences really get the story. People today seem to want different points of view, different ways of seeing. The same old stereotypes about native peoples seem fake and boring to audiences.

Okay, I'm going to talk a little bit about what we are working on right now, a short documentary on Shamanism and Christianity. When Christianity came, we were told to forget your old way of life, become new. We started to realize that our young people growing up thought that square dancing was the Inuit culture thing. [laughter] It was just the awayers that brought it. We are just trying to wake up our audience, to get the story right.

How has Inuit filmmaking changed in the past twenty years? It hasn't changed much. IBC is still the same, but has probably disappeared more. IBC ratings have gone down a lot. Since this new Aboriginal Television Network started, Inuit politicians and critics kept saying over the radio, "What happened to us? Where is Inuit programming?" It is supposed to be on APTN but nobody knows their time slots. If it weren't for us at Isuma, I don't know - I absolutely don't know how it would be today. I have absolutely no idea. CBC is the main broadcaster and radio up in the North. It broadcasts in Inuktitut but there seems to be nothing if you don't work for the Corporation. There is hardly anything for our youth.

In 1982, '84, when Inuit Broadcasting started out, there was a whole bunch of us that thought it was great for Inuit broadcasting. I would give my left arm for it, and I went to work, but after eight years working in there I could not do it. When we started, there we were very promising filmmakers which we got the message that once we started to learn, that one day we were going to be director of the Corporation. That never happened. Directors stayed in Ottawa. It has never changed. So a lot of us promising starters went to work somewhere else. That's really sad for me. I guess I'm there. For a filmmaker in Canada, especially from way up there, when you try your first attempt, we thought that we would be treated the same, everywhere, because we were part of Canada. It was not fair in 1995 when we went after funding as Canadians, as tax paying Canadians and got turned down. It was a shocking experience and I hope we never have to go through that again.