

ON INUIT CINEMA/INUIT TAKUGATSALIUK-KATIGET. Edited by MARK DAVID TURNER. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador: Memorial University Press, 2022. ISBN 9781894725910. xv + 247 p., maps, b&w illus., index, bib. Softbound. Cdn\$34.95.

This is an unusual book, but then any writing about Inuit cinema is unusual. Inuit cinema is not a term one commonly uses or understands. Editor, Mark David Turner, has done an extraordinary service not only for film scholars but for anyone interested in the North, in media, in representation, and in the art of creating a book itself.

As a self-described “experiment,” Turner’s achievement is to capture the voices of Inuit filmmakers, artists, and producers, as well as their “collaborators, colleagues, and families” (p. 3). In giving the space almost exclusively to his subjects, he removes himself from the traditional position of the Western humanities researcher-scholar, he who would typically produce and dominate an analysis of his findings. Instead, Turner does not take a back seat so much as he guides the many conversations gathered in this book, asking smart, relevant questions but letting the speakers have the floor, letting their words speak for themselves. This approach turns traditional research production on its head, a humbling act that necessarily respects what these filmmakers and their collaborators are largely talking about—in short, the misinterpretation and misunderstanding, the stereotyping, and the inappropriate representation of Inuit by others, by settlers with arguably good intentions and bad practices.

Most of the work comprises a collection of interviews Turner conducted between 2015 and 2017, but there are three other sections, as well. The first is his introduction to the project in which he describes his inspiration for tackling such a subject and wisely points out the complexities of defining Inuit and Inuit cinema itself. The second is the interview collection. The third section is what he titles “Moments in Cinema,” an extended list that helps shape a loose canon of significant industry production, beginning as far back as 1901–02—yes, the birth of cinema—with the titles of three surviving films made by none other than early entrepreneur Edwin S. Porter, which were featured at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. The list ends in 2021 with the launch of Uvagut TV in January 2021 by NITV and Isuma TV, the first television station in Canada devoted “exclusively to Inuit languages” (p. 179).

The fourth section is a remarkably well researched filmography, indispensable for anyone attempting any serious study of Inuit cinema, defined here as being by and about Inuit people and culture. Turner also provides a terrific selection of images from this rich filmography, including *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Atanarjuat—The Fast Runner* (2001), among many other productions, many of which might be familiar to those of us old enough to remember mandatory NFB film screenings in our public schools in the South.

The interview section provides readers with the opportunity to eavesdrop on the reflections creators and their families in the business, so to speak, offer on a broad range of themes, such as the material conditions that inhibit film and television production in the North, the difference between North and South approaches to storytelling, the influence of evolving technology on film and television practice, the difference between older and younger generation approaches to representation, and so on. There is a lot here.

To be sure, these are individual voices speaking to their own experience and thinking aloud about what shaped their personal approach to making film, what obstacles or challenges they have uniquely faced. No one here is proclaiming absolute knowledge or generalizing about producing documentaries or fiction films in the North. But in offering their own thoughts and reflections on their experiences, it is not surprising that they share similar themes with others, whether in Greenland, northern Quebec, Nunavut, or in northern Labrador.

Turner sets the table in section two with a composite transcript of three separate interviews conducted in 2017. Arnait Productions have been involved in production for many years championing the voices of Inuit women. The conversations weave the voices of Marie-Helene Cousineau, Madeline Ivalu, and Lucy Tulugarjuk, with the latter two translated from Inuktitut by Blandina Makkik. How’s that for linguistic diversity? And it works. To the English-speaking reader the conversation flows naturally as if one were in the room with all these women. Among other insightful notes is that they were free to create whatever they wanted with a small Canada Council grant in the early nineties, but more public funding meant more restrictions on what they could submit as a final product. Notable is that their early practice of letting a woman speak on film of her profound experience for as long as her story extended was not as advisable after a while. One could not just let the camera listen. It had to cut away or edit for shorter takes.

Also notable is another related theme that emerges in other conversations, specifically how rare it is today to hear of how stories were once passed on for important messaging. An unusual event in the woods or at home would generate a whole story. And the storytellers possessed an uncanny capacity to recall every detail of the event. It would be bad form to interrupt someone in the middle of such an account, forcing them to lose focus. But even more startling is the observation that today, with everyone living in homes with separate bedrooms, the incentive for gathering everyone around to listen to a story has been diminished.

An interview with Stephen Agluvak Puskas, born and raised in Yellowknife, and now freelancing in Montreal, is intense, with implications for the troubled politics of Quebec-Inuit relations. He insists there is a “long way to go in terms of Inuit being in control of our own representation and in telling our own stories” (p. 61). In

particular, he calls out the “legacy of propaganda from the Quebec and Canadian governments” who define “Inuit as part of Canada, and our land as part of Canada” (p. 62). One has heard this before, but Puskas reminds us of the long “history of people coming into the community and taking what they want and leaving” (p. 63). His is the most stridently political of the conversations, but he offers an essential perspective on the continuing exploitation of Inuit community. Helpfully, his interview concludes with “A Checklist for Making Film in and With Inuit Communities” (p. 79), a useful benchmarking template for future filmmakers in whom he does have hope.

The interview with Greenland-based Inuk artist, Silis Høegh, is fascinating for several reasons, not the least of which is the prominence with which Greenland has emerged as the object of American territorialism at the time of this review. Høegh studies in the UK but eventually moved back to Nuuk, capital of Greenland, where he speaks of the very late development of Inuit film. He is a fascinating source of commentary on the dominance of Danish culture and media and on the challenges of filming people in such a small minority community who are self-conscious about being represented. He was blown away when he saw, as were many of us, Zacharias’s *The Fast Runner*, and inspired to make his own art in that spirit.

One of Turner’s sharpest comments appears in this interview when he notes that “it’s interesting how challenging it can be to bring an oral culture into a visual medium” (p. 121). That insight sums up so much about the history of Inuit cinema, and it compels Høegh to reflect rather solemnly on how important it is for small minorities to make their own stuff, adding that their cultural “diet” is lacking some “vitamins” (p. 123). Perhaps prophetically, he adds that “the whole Inuit People, we are kind of a little bit stuck, you know? It’s like frozen in time, a little bit. But it just seems like something is building up … I hope that something explodes soon” (p. 131). I guess we’ll see.

Fran Williams, born and raised in Hopedale, Nunatsiavut, Newfoundland and Labrador, delivers fascinating insight as longtime program director for the OkalaKatiget Society, whose mandate was to “preserve and promote and protect Labrador Inuit culture and language … keeping the language alive through programming, so that our future generations could see it and hear it” (p. 142). Williams’ observations on the changing nature of production are echoed in earlier conversations, particularly when she notes how the national network, APTN, directs certain kinds of content and specific kinds of storytelling. She implies that APTN favors stories with youth mixing with Elders, “drum playing and all that” (p. 100), manufacturing a homogenous representation of Inuit society. And she has hugely important things to say about how mainstream news, particularly the public broadcaster, focuses too much on the courts and not enough on the real stories behind whatever is happening in northern communities.

A paradox that emerges from so many of these conversations is that, as globalization makes media production more accessible and filmmaking so much easier when you do not have to lug a lot of gear to the North, it has also diluted a lot of the interest in traditional Inuit ways and the stories they generated to pass on for generation after generation. And so, while technological change is leveling the difference between North and South, to some degree it also brings with it a lessening of the uniqueness of Inuit storytelling. The future remains to be seen, of course.

In keeping with the spirit of this project, Turner notes that all transcripts of these conversations have been sent to their subjects for feedback and editing wherever necessary and appropriate. In no way does he claim authority for the final edit. One final point, Turner notes that all proceeds of this book are to be directed to a fund “maintained by the Inuit Art Foundation that is used for further communication in, on, and about Inuit cinema” (p. 6). Reason enough to buy this book, but it is worth reading for itself.

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