

FORUM

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'Through the Camera Lens': Cultural Practice as Media Image

Zusammenfassung

Der Essay konzentriert sich auf Zacharias Kunuks Film Atanarjuat (2001), der von der internationalen Filmkritik als erster „authentischer“ Inuit-Film und einzigartiges Dokument der Inuit-Kultur gefeiert wurde. Im Rahmen der dokumentarischen Wirkung wird er verglichen mit Robert Flahertys Nanook of the North (1922), der eine romantisierende Version des Lebens im hohen Norden anbietet. Hinsichtlich ihrer medialen Repräsentation von Wirklichkeit werden beide Filme auf ihren Gehalt überprüft. Während Flaherty deutlich das Leben der Inuit zugunsten seiner romantisierenden Sichtweise des ‚edlen Wilden‘ manipulierte, demontiert Kunuk filmische und kulturelle Zuschreibungen durch Medientechnologien. Entgegen der Filmkritik wird Atanarjuat hier als Produkt der Videokunst begriffen, in deren Traditionen er sich durch Kameratechnik und Montage einschreibt. Durch die Videokamera wird ein anderer semantischer Raum als im Film konstituiert, wobei auch die vom Film evozierten Stabilitäten von Identität unterwandert werden. So gesehen ist der Film ein Dokument über den komplexen Zusammenhang von Identitätskonstruktion und Medientechnologie.

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur le film Atanarjuat (2001) de Zacharias Kunuk, célébré par la critique internationale comme le premier film inuit « authentique » et comme un document unique sur la culture inuit. Dans sa dimension documentaire, on le compare ici à Nanook l'Esquimau (Nanook of the North), de Robert Flaherty (1922), qui propose une vision romanesque de la vie dans le Grand Nord. En outre, le contenu de ces deux films est examiné du point de vue de leur représentation médiatique de la réalité. Tandis que Flaherty a clairement manipulé la vie des Inuit au profit de sa vision romanesque du « bon sauvage », Kunuk démonte les catégorisations cinématographiques et culturelles au moyen de

technologies médiatiques. À rebours de la critique cinématographique, Atanarjuat est analysé ici comme un produit de l’art vidéo, dans les traditions duquel il s’inscrit par la technique de la caméra et le montage. La caméra vidéo produit un espace sémantique différent de celui du film, allant jusqu’à saper les stabilités identitaires évoquées dans le film. Ceci conduit à considérer ce film comme un document sur les rapports complexes entre construction identitaire et technologie médiatique.

Introduction

The topic of this essay is a reconsideration of the relationship between identity, subjectivity and self-representation. In this regard the medium – as a very generally defined tool – plays an important role. In the context of media anthropology, each act of self-understanding is supported by a tool that can be understood as medium.

In the following I do not want to talk about technical tools as a means of self-portrayal and self-understanding, but rather I want to focus on the medium *film* and elaborate upon a concept of *indigenous self* and the construction of identity through the medium film. My essay is divided into three parts which more or less reflect different aspects of self-representation with the help of visual media.

Firstly, I start out with some theoretical remarks about the connection between nationality and film production. This seems to be necessary since until today film is dealt with in discourses of nationality and representation of the national self. These notions have to be tackled or even questioned and re-framed.

Secondly, I will present a short overview of the history of the First Nations’ film production.

Thirdly, I will discuss aspects of self-representation in connection with specific avant-garde film and media technologies.

1. Nationality and film production

Theoretically speaking, issues of national film production have to be put under close scrutiny. The film theorist Paul Willemen, for instance, understands nationality within film production as a merely discursive construct on shifting ground (Willemen 2006, 29). To specify the relationship between the enunciative products and self-images of a certain group Willemen proposes different categories for the constitution of discourses of the “national” or “national cultures”. Firstly, he suggests to restrict the term “national” to a defined set of institutional practices, “seeking to define and impose a particular, reductive politically functional identity” (Willemen 2006, 30). Thus nationalism functions as a kind of straitjacket for the individual, subjecting him or her to a set of institutionalized practices.

Following Willemen in another aspect of nationalism, it is, according to him, a dynamic that “seeks to bind people to identities” (Willemen 2006, 30). In this sense

nationalism mobilizes cultural power and institutional weight and re-inscribes it into individuals through certain modes of address, which can be traced in media semantics and everyday media practices. Thus – and this is Willemsen's third point – nationalism opens up a gap between identity and subjectivity. Identity can be conceived as a fixed set of norms and rules, which can be applied to a person. Contrary to this, subjectivity appears as a shifting and factual field in which a variety of grammatical subjects is activated within all kinds of languages and cultural practices. Subjectivity thus exceeds identity since identity always tries to pin down the subjects to a certain use of specific, well-defined cultural practices.

This division between identity and subjectivity becomes extremely important when we consider ethnic film, especially the visual and aesthetic practices of a certain ethnic group that may diverge from the official, institutional programme.

Even if ethnic groups and their image production are 'officially' supported, multicultural ideology and the material support of cultural diversity can eventually function as a restrictive factor. The ethnic group may be imprisoned by art, funding bodies, and local government practices, "within a restrictive and fossilized notion of culture. In this way, such groups are condemned to repeat the rituals of ethnic authenticity, regardless of how uncomfortable many members of those so-called communities may feel with them" (Silvermann 2002, 378). Even a positively understood multicultural financial support can re-inscribe the more 'traditional', 'conservative' or 'traditionalist' aspects of the communities in question.

I'll come back to these considerations in my analysis of the Inuit fiction film *Atanarjuat. The Fast Runner*.

2. First Nations film production

If we direct our attention to Inuit film production, we meet a concise history of institutionalized support, which appears to be a valuable and culturally original factor within Canadian film production (cf. de Rosa 2002; Kotte/Heide 2006, 177–183). For example, Maria de Rosa considers the emergence of a genuine Inuit film activity as one of the most remarkable facts within the history of Canadian film production:

(...) ten years ago, only a handful of First Nations filmmakers had ever directed a film at the NFB – a number that has, over the span of a single decade, soared to dozens – forever altering the opportunities for aboriginal filmmakers throughout the industry in Canada. Decades from now, it will be seen as one of the most important developments in the history of the Canadian film and television industry (de Rosa 2002, 331).

Support for indigenous filmmaking has come mainly from the National Film Board of Canada. The National Film Board (NFB) was founded in 1939 by the British documentary filmmaker John Grierson. Since then the NFB has initiated and controlled most Canadian Film productions. The strong presence of the NFB is respon-

sible for the dominant documentary aesthetics of Canadian film production, which also governed fictional film production. As far as the history of the First Nations is concerned, the NFB set out to record the life of the First Nations from the 1940s onwards. Grierson's documentary intent did not involve aesthetic experimentation, but meant to support educational goals for the Canadian people, as he himself remarks:

Making short films, which deal with the reality and are based on actual observation does not involve the same vast technical equipment, the same immense variety of skills, the same names, and the same demand for big salaries. When it comes to education – and I mean education in a live and real sense, which I have described – our country can be as fervent and imaginative as any other (Grierson in White 2002, 366).

Although Grierson refrained from aesthetic experimentalism, which influenced Canadian filmmaking in general, he was eager to display a sensibility towards his 'filmed subjects'. But nevertheless, his documentary activity constituted indigenous cultures and their individuals as objects of the white documentary gaze. Especially with the Netsilik Eskimo films (1967-68) the NFB has taken an anthropological view at Inuit life and played a colonial role in its relationship toward Inuit culture. During the seventies the NFB sent producers and directors to Arctic communities with the task of training local people in the techniques of film production. The NFB also set up production workshops, broadcasting Inuit films in order to provide the Inuit with an opportunity to control their representation within the visual media.

In 1991 Studio One was founded, particularly designed for the production of aboriginal film. With the exception of Alanis Obomsawin and Gil Cardinal all films made by the NFB before Studio One were made by non-aboriginal people. The overall goals of Studio One were the following:

- to give the aboriginal filmmakers the resources to tell their own stories and to address the communication needs of their own people;
- to enhance the film and video production skills of aboriginal peoples;
- to provide effective distribution outlets for these productions so that their intended audiences may be reached (Heide/Kotte 2006, 82).

Beginning in the fall with an initial annual budget of C\$250.000, the Studio would develop over two years in three phases:

Phase 1: Apprenticeship,

Phase 2: Vignette Production: A committee chooses 10 candidates and each of the candidates gets support in the form of C\$10.000.

Phase 3: Documentary Film production: Established native producers and directors will find the studio an important resource for their projects.

Aboriginal people saw a significant role for this studio; they foremost expected support in the depiction of their traditions. Carol Geddes describes the advantages of the studio as follows:

- Counter non-representation and misrepresentation of aboriginal people in mainstream media;
- Address the lack of meaningful cultural education for aboriginal peoples and the issue of appropriation of cultural images by non-aboriginal producers;
- Provide and assist with the professional development of aboriginal peoples in the film and video industry;
- Provide an environment compatible with the unique cultural aspirations of Canada's aboriginal people. To do this, the Studio is committed to provide an atmosphere sympathetic to special cultural ways in which to work, that is, use of elders for consultations, consensus models for decision making etc.
- Provide opportunities for the expression of contemporary themes in film and video production (Geddes in Heide/Kotte 2006, 89).

This service outline breathes the spirit of Grierson's democratic ideal of film production and it points to the role of film production as documentary film with the intention of enlightenment and education. With the appointment of Michael Doxtater in 1993, a Mohawk writer from Ontario, some films really came into conveying the educational and socio-critical ambitions of Griersonian documentarism. Fabulous examples are *Tlaxwa Wa: Strength of the River* (1995), *Forgotten Warriors* (1997), *Picturing a People* (1997), or *No Turning Back* (1997). These films usually are revealing documentaries about the cultural realities of aboriginal people. Very often they combine original footage with contemporary documentary material and recorded interviews in order to reveal an image of the bygone culture and its contemporary manifestations. Especially long forgotten, everyday practices and special rituals are recorded on film and thus preserved for the newer generation. The early National Film Board films had been so important because they rendered an idea of foremost forgotten aspects of aboriginal cultures. Arnold Krupat discusses the special meaning of the medium film within the First Nations' culture, differing highly from the more technical-economic structure of western film production. For the First Nations' film still functions as a medium of self-representation and thus comes very close to the respective cultures (Krupat 2007).

Subsequently it can be concluded that the activities of Studio One function as continuation of Grierson's ideas of documentaries and cultural practices. In this concept, audiovisual and recording media figured as transparent transmitters of material reality into a recording and archival device. The relationship between the filmed person or object and its representation on film is considered as unproblem-

atic, since in this view, media function as a tool to transport reality into a storing vessel.

In terms of media theory, this view is more than highly problematic. Each visual technology carries a certain set of technological possibilities and assumptions, which structure the application of the medium and bring about its special semantics: This underlying, technical and cognitive structure is called the dispositiv of a medium (Baudry 1994, 1047-1074). Taking these theoretical implications for granted, it becomes more or less impossible to conceive of a transparent medium. Each single technology has to be accounted for by its structural and aesthetic possibilities.

Another reason to critically tackle the unquestioned consolidation of aboriginal media practice is the monolithic concept of origin and nationality, expressed in the peoples' urge to be visually represented. As has been mentioned in the beginning of this essay, the concept of aboriginal people as a culturally monolithic group and the attribution of a certain kind of media practice are highly doubtful. As Willemen has argued, nationality in film is not to be referred to ethnic representation but belongs to a set of well-defined institutional practices (Willemen 2006, 29-43).

Thus considering the specifications of media theory and the reflections of cultural studies about media pragmatics and images of ethnic groups, the self-assurance of the NFB Studio One and the desire for representation has to be examined in a theoretical field that engulfs media theory on the one hand, cultural theory on the other hand. Aboriginal film production has to be re-evaluated along the lines of media theory and the deconstructive intent of cultural studies.

3. Aspects of self-representation in Native film

The Inuit film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* by Zacharias Kunuk is a formidable example of the shifting fields of visual and structural semantics that are at display. Released in 2001, the film received a variety of festival awards, among them the *Camera d'Or* for the Best Feature at Cannes in 2001. *The Fast Runner*, the first Inuit fiction film made in Inuktitut, has received national and international attention. The *New York Times* calls it a "masterpiece". Margaret Atwood labels it a "knockout" and a "generational saga with many Homeric elements" (Atwood in Knopf 2006). The Vancouver based film critic Katherine Monk, who has written an outstanding book on Canadian film, confirms in the *Vancouver Sun* that the film is "is nothing less than a complete revelation and reinvention of the cinematic form" (Monk in Knopf 2006).

According to Kerstin Knopf this film is

an electronic retelling of an ancient Inuit legend that is a central story in the Inuit oral tradition and one that the filmmakers have heard as children. The story has didactic functions and it admonishes the audience not to let envy, rivalry, and personal interests overtake the sense of re-

sponsibility and community that is of utmost importance for survival in the Arctic (Knopf 2006).

Interestingly enough, this highly aesthetic and hybrid product is subsumed under quite stable and essentialist categories such as 'oral story telling' and is understood as a seemingly authentic revelation of Inuit culture, done by an original Inuit and told in an intrinsic language. Although *The Fast Runner* is a genuine Inuit film production, it deploys aspects of self-reflexivity and media-awareness that have been ignored up to now. Arguing against the grain of native, monolithic attempts of cultural attributions, Jerry White underlines the intertextual and intermedial aspects of the film: He argues for a range of intertextual relations *The Fast Runner* performs (White 2005, 58). Kerstin Knopf also terms it a "hybrid" product that displays characteristics of the Danish Dogma Film movement of the 1990s (Knopf 2004).

If we consider *The Fast Runner* a highly hybrid and intertextual product, we can come to a set of completely different readings, which strongly challenge the notion that this film is the straightforward, homogeneous representation of Inuit culture and manages to give us an objective insight into an ethnic past. Instead a critical viewing has to point to the deconstructive processes of the film, which are brought about by a variety of media technologies.

Apart from a deconstructive reading of the film, Jerry White conveys genuine differences the filmmaker experienced with the institutional organization of the film. Kunuk, originally a stone carver, started his FICA career with a video camera he bought in 1983 and began working for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) station in Iglook, a settlement north of the Arctic Circle.

The IBC was licensed in 1981 and it went on the air in 1982, transmitting four hours of programming a week. The IBC was set up along the lines of Sir John Reith's vision of public broadcasting with four constitutional elements, which were

- being non-profit,
- national coverage to serve the whole community,
- unified control and
- maintenance of high standards.

The last point can be criticised as confirming Christian, white middle-class values within broadcasting (White 2005, 57). Over the years differences within the IBC arose: filmmakers criticised that it was too much southern based (Ottawa) and that the interests of the northern population were disregarded. Zacharias Kunuk finally fell out with the IBC in 1990 and devoted his energy to his small production company, Iglook Isuma Productions, which he had incorporated that year with – among others – the New York video artist Norm Cohn. He himself gave the following argument: "I was IBC as a dog team, Inuit producers as dogs, the sled as the Ottawa office and people who sit in the sled as the board of governors" (Cohn in White 2005, 58). By 1994 Kunuk had also acquired a considerable reputation as a video artist.

These institutional details of Inuit film production provide an insight into the cultural diversity of film production and confirm Paul Willemen's notion of film production as a discursive construct on shifting grounds.

Another important aspect within Kunuk's film production and his visual, experimental aesthetics is the fact that he started working with a video camera and that he worked for television and not exclusively for film. He thus emerges from a completely different organizational background than other filmmakers, who began their careers as filmmakers with a film camera. "Video – as the cheaper technology gave the Inuit a chance to create video in an Inuit way – but that opportunity was not seized because the IBC took a different path" (White 2005, 54).

Kunuk self-consciously undercuts the clichéd image of an aboriginal filmmaker, since he has been a member of New York's video art circles and he has applied the respective visual technologies of this genre. His occupation with video art reappears on the visual surface of his film *Atanarjuat*: Considering Kunuk's approach to film as a part of video culture, promotes a reading of the film, which does away with the idea of film as exclusive ethnographic document, but foregrounds the formal quality of the movie. The following statement by film theorist Bill Nichols seems to cater for a more complex reading of Kunuk's film:

Bridging the gulf between interpretation as content analysis and interpretation as discourse analyses, between seeing through a film to the data beyond and seeing film as cultural representation, may reorient cultural anthropology toward questions of form and their inextricable relation to experience, affect, content, purpose, and result (Nichols in White 2005, 56).

In this regard a structural analysis of Kunuk's *Atanarjuat* will display a variety of media semantics and through that, speak about issues of identity as well.

Additionally *Atanarjuat* engages in a dialogue with Robert Flaherty's famous documentary *Nanook of the North*. Finished in 1922, *Nanook* portrays the life of an Inuit family. Flaherty provides his character Nanook with all the features of the noble savage. Many comments have been written on this topic and it is quite evident that Flaherty falsely and intentionally provided his audience with an image of Inuit life that had already ceased to exist at the time of filming during the 1920s. While Flaherty documents Inuit culture from the outside, Kunuk points to an insight into a mythical native life, similarly fictionalising Inuit culture without applying exact historical markers. Thus he chooses the form of the fiction film, contrary to Flaherty, and he re-injects a mythological past into his narrative.

On a structural level the dialogue with Flaherty is expressed in the extreme wide angles and long shots both filmmakers use. For Flaherty it is one of the possible expressions of an immobile camera – taking in the landscape and rendering his subjects as part of the landscape. Kunuk on the other hand, who possesses a hand-

held video camera, imitates Flaherty's framing. Thus his landscape shots function as a reference to his famous forerunner. And they additionally figure as self-reflective references to the medium film. With his video camera, working in a televisual context, Kunuk evokes televisual aesthetics and structures.

Another self-reflexive device of filmmaking is the use of the hand camera, having become prominent with the Danish Dogma Group, which has opposed Hollywood's aesthetics in order to redefine filmmaking in a self-referential manner during the 1980s. In this context, the excessive use of the hand camera serves as a self-referential device. Contrary to the usually stable film camera, the use of the hand camera is connected with documentary film and a stronger FICA authenticity. But the hand camera also highlights the use of a camera. The image is not transparent, it instead displays its mediality and technicality on the visual level.

Kunuk's film is often quoted as an example of ethnographic filmmaking – recording the practices of daily life. At many instances the narrativity and time line of the film are extremely slackened with the depiction of details, the building of an igloo or the preparation of food. Once again, Kunuk deconstructs the filmic narrative form in order to achieve something else, a greater performative and intensity of the image. Jerry White compares Kunuk's film to Andre Bazin's theoretical approach:

That depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore, it is correct to say that, independently of the contents of the image, its structure is more realistic. That it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress (Bazin in White 2005, 59).

With reference to Bazin's remarks, Kunuk surely achieves greater involvement of the audience and a higher realistic structure. But while Bazin attributes this to a general filmic effect, it rather seems to be furthered by the use of the medium video. As has been mentioned above, Kunuk has a reputation as a video artist and the New York based video artist Norm Cohn has been participating in the film as well. I would like to argue that *The Fast Runner* integrates structural elements of video art, such as the handheld camera, the detailed movements and actions and the imprecise and shifting framing of the images. With a deconstructive intent, Kunuk applies the stylistic devices of the medium film and stretches them into the shifting visual aesthetics of video art. Displaying thus the strong elements of video art, Kunuk offers a different visual semantics. While film usually functions as the medium of stable identities, video art figures as medium of subjectivity. Most works of video art have been located in the shifting ground of subjectivity. This attribution has been brought about by the easy-to-achieve technology and the expressed subjectivity of the medium. From its beginning on video art has been considered as a medium of privacy and enhanced subjectivity. In this context, forms of video art

have triggered forms of subjective expression and technologies of the self, such as the video writing by Raymond Bellour and Gary Hill or the video diary and the video installation, which has usually underlined aspects of corporeal culture.

As a medium for political activists, video – still even today – means quick information and resistance to dominant institutionalised media such as film and television. Maureen Turim argues that video serves as a re-examination of traditional media technologies and their respective semantics.

Photography and film serve as the cultural premonition of video, forecasting its electronic means of display through their mechanical approximations. Yet video seems to look nostalgically back at the modernist heritage of photography. With what can be called a cultural lag, it makes more immediately accessible the properties the avant-gardes in earlier media already explored and provides a fresh way of sorting through and redefining much of the flurry of new visual and auditory thinking proposed in this century (Turim 1990, 339).

With reference to Zacharias Kunuk's film *The Fast Runner*, the use of the video camera makes sense insofar as it quotes respectively intimate historical media forms such as photography and film. Through his quotations Kunuk rejects the identificatory means of the medium film and he instead spins off a process of re-examining the capacities of different media. Video thus "has the potential to become a conceptual technology, one that can look at the history of the image, of sound/sense articulation in language and speech, and narrative through a refiguration of space and a multiple mapping of time" (Turim 1990, 342).

Through his highly developed awareness of the implications of media technologies, Zacharias Kunuk manages to claim forms of identity. Yet, on the other hand, he medially rejects identity and manages to visually display the gap between identity and subjectivity. In this respect his visual artefacts oppose identity and refuse to be turned into an essentialist discourse of ethnic minorities. Interestingly enough, through his refusal to ascribe a well chosen set of characteristics to the Inuit and their media products, Kunuk advertises one of the dominant features of Canadian fiction film, the refusal to offer any form of identity.

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