Opera in the Arctic: Knud Rasmussen, Inside and Outside Modernity

L'Opéra dans l’Arctique : Knud Rasmussen, traversées de la modernité
Ópera en el Ártico: Knud Rasmussen, travesías de la modernidad

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I. Early 1920s: under western eyes

1 When Greenland / Danish ethnographer Knud Rasmussen approached a small Padlermiut camp in what is today the Kivalliq Region of Nunavut, Canada, he was surprised to hear “a powerful gramophone struck up, and Caruso’s mighty voice [ringing] out from his tent” (Rasmussen, K., 1927: 63). It was 1922, and the Inuktitut-speaking Rasmussen was after traditional Inuit knowledge, specifically spiritual and cultural practices. Hearing Caruso’s voice is represented in his narrative, Across Arctic America, as an unanticipated and, thus unsettling, experience that prompted him to write that he had arrived there “about a hundred years too late” (ibid.).

2 Obviously, this was not a first contact moment. By the time of Rasmussen’s 5th Thule expedition to the Canadian Arctic (1921-1924), on which he was accompanied by, among others, Peter Freuchen and Therkel Mathiassen, Inuit social life had already begun to change in irrevocable ways as a result of intermittent and subsequently continuous exposure to and interactions with explorers, non-Inuit traders, whalers, and missionaries. Not all the Inuit as yet had met white foreigners but “even the most remote Inuit were aware of the existence of qallunaat strangers” (Graburn N., 2006: 140). That Rasmussen knew this renders his remark about his belatedness highly ironic, a coy trope that discloses his “fashioning” method as an ethnographer-narrator who, to echo James Clifford, not merely makes but also makes up (Clifford, J., 1986: 6). Rasmussen’s response is, then, deliberately anachronistic in that he draws the reader’s attention to “what is out
of time, the heterogeneous within time” (Tambling, J., 2010: vii), thus registering at once the before and after of first contact in a manner that condenses different temporalities. His affected surprise allows him to situate his narrative within a time frame that both dechrontologizes and compresses the two different temporalities characterizing the production of ethnography: the time of fieldwork inhabited by both “self and other” and the “ethnographic present” that “locates the other in a time order different from that of the speaking subject” (Pratt, M., 1986: 33).

If listening to opera in the Arctic is represented as an aberration, it is because for Rasmussen modernity is far from being an untrammeled event; the assumption underlying his response is that certain conditions must be in place before modernity befits certain peoples. Although modernity has been construed as universal, in his text it operates conditionally, relying on principles of inclusion and exclusion that are at a certain level invisible to itself but which, nevertheless, surface in Rasmussen’s narrative with relative regularity. In what follows I examine how modernity signifies in Inuit culture at a particular moment and place, Igloolik in 1922, a moment constructed through different media and perspectives and represented within different temporalities: Rasmussen’s *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (1927) presents and problematizes modernity among the Inuit, while the Inuit film *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, released in 2006, re-visits that same moment via a critical adaptation and appropriation of, among other sources, Rasmussen’s narrative. While mindful of modernity’s capaciousness as a concept, I approach it as an event that both produces and is the product of a cultural and capitalist logic invested in institutional processes that manage cultural values as much as market-driven economies, thus inciting the displacement of traditions configured as backward, hence the violence—material, psychic, representational—it incurs. Reading these two representational instances in relation to each other but also as distinct configurations of the fact that modernity “always required an Other and an Elsewhere” (Trouillot, M., 2002: 224), I focus on the various tropes through which modernity effects adverse change at the same time that it posits itself as a rebuttal to the impact it has.

In Rasmussen’s narrative, modernity is thematized directly but also emerges as a metanarrative that typifies, and thus stages, the advent of modernity in the Arctic and its abiding impact. His structuring of the moment when he hears Caruso’s voice discloses the conflictual temporal economies and ideological differences inscribed in his ethnography. Anachronism, one of the tropes in Rasmussen’s narrative that allows him to construct a paradoxical image of the modern “primitive,” embeds into the scene a heterogeneity that cancels out his expectation to alight upon a pre-modern culture. If modernity arrived in the Arctic prematurely, as Rasmussen would have it, then his own belatedness that accompanies his anachronistic formulation accentuates the cultural gap between himself and his subjects but also functions as an affective device that determines his construction of the “Eskimo as [the] hero” of his book (vii) and his own self-characterization as ethnographer-narrator. Ultimately, along with the other tropes employed in *Across Arctic America*, anachronism both underscores and subverts Rasmussen’s intentions.

*Across Arctic America* precedes the publication of and condenses Rasmussen’s *Intellectual Culture of the Hudson Bay Eskimos* (1930), the 7th volume of the *Report of the 5th Thule Expedition 1921-24* published between 1929 and 1932. A “book of proper length,” as Rasmussen puts it, it is clearly designed for a general audience, the reason why, as he says, it “omits more than it includes” (v). *Across Arctic America* recasts Rasmussen’s
scholarly ethnographic account as a linear travel narrative but he does so without, however, entirely forfeiting the distinction Mary Pratt proposes between these two genres: if “narration first, description second” determines the latter and the reverse order the former (Pratt, M., 1986: 35), Across Arctic America is best understood as a blend of both.

This is abundantly apparent in the opening of the “Introduction” that begins with the completion of his expedition. He stands “on the summit of East Cape, the steep headland that forms the eastern extremity of Siberia,” relishing a panoramic view that stretches “from one continent [Asia] to another [America],” an expanse of land and the Bering Strait. “At the foot of the hill […] he has] just ascended,” he can see “a crowd of Tchukchi women on foot […] They fit, as an item of detail, so picturesquely into the great expanse that [he] continue[s] to gaze at them until they are lost to sight among the green slopes of the valley” (iii-iv). The “landscape” unfolding under his all-seeing gaze means that he is “west of the last Eskimo tribe, and that the Expedition has now been carried to its close” (iv). The “height on which [he] stand[s] … gives [him] a wide outlook, […] the earth’s entire circumference,” that allows him to imagine, “as in a mirage, the thousand little native villages which gave substance to the journey” (ibid.). This is clearly a scene that bears the glee of consummation. The vast and awe-inspiring spectacle his gaze assembles evokes a sublime feeling for the reader but his insistence on referring to that broad sweep of land and sea as “landscape” and in “picturesque” terms aligns his triumphalist description with a different tradition, one that manifests contiguity and domination. His commanding gaze reveals the relationship of the picturesque to colonialism, both functioning, as Jeanne van Eeden writes, “as modes of knowing and control founded on visuality and spatial practice” (van Eeden, J., 2007: 122). Thus the tropes of the sublime and the picturesque operate as discursive formations that reconcile the unfamiliar with what has already been familiarized, visualizing a foreign (for the reader) landscape as colonial settlement. The Inuit he encountered during his expedition are rendered absent, figures of a mirage-like reverie, existent only via narrative representation.

Across Arctic America exemplifies the performance of a particular Eurocentric inflection of modernity that references capitalism through knowledge production and westernization, both of which are the process and product of an undifferentiating understanding of the Enlightenment, and more specifically science and progress. Yet, what signifies progress in the West, and thus for someone like Rasmussen, not only seems to be out of place in the Arctic, it is also exhibited as negative modernity. Negative modernity, as a number of scholars have argued, is not necessarily the opposite of modernity; rather, it advances on a path of modernity that is mutually determined by the power and difference characterizing the dialectic of dominance and alterity which, in turn, is reconfigured as colonialism.

Negative modernity is inscribed in Rasmussen’s text in more ways than one. As the opera example above suggests, it signifies modernity’s misplacement and thus produces a jarring effect when it is found where it presumably does not belong; modernity as shocking not only posits itself as exogenous to the location where it appears but also summons up naturalized modernity, a modernity that is at home. Modernity also turns negative when it assumes an apotropaic function, namely, turning away the western gaze that falls upon it; this is evinced when Rasmussen is “disappointed beyond measure” when his expectation to find Inuit “living in quite a primitive state” (63) proves to be wrong, an experience that occurs rather frequently and which prompts him to move on.
Driven by the desire to discover some pristine Inuit character, he sees “no reason to spend any time,” for example, “among [. . .] the Qaernermiut,” for they “had for a long time past had [sic] dealings with the whalers, and much of their original character had been lost” (54). This troping away from modernity among the Inuit does not signal a rejection of modernity as such; rather, it reflects a momentary aversion to it because Rasmussen assumes it masks what he takes to be the natural state of Inuit culture. In this instance, negative modernity performs its own otherness: the dissonance it exposes between modernity and alterity circumscribes difference, suggesting that the consumption of modernity in colonial contexts threatens authenticity. Finally, although not exhaustively, another way in which negative modernity appears in Across Arctic America is as a highly injurious condition perceived from inside and outside of Inuit culture. Rasmussen is ambivalent in his acknowledgement of this: he concedes that the “introduction of firearms has affected the movements of the caribou […] and when the caribou hunting fails, it means famine to the Eskimo” (67), but elsewhere he attributes the starvation of the Inuit to a lack of natural intelligence, their failure to correlate “the use of firearms” with “the frequent periods of famine” (73). Beyond reiterating Rasmussen’s binary logic about modernity’s naturalness and unnaturalness vis à vis particular peoples, this aspect of negative modernity postulates management as a discursive tool necessary to induce progress. These significations of negative modernity, distinct yet often overlapping, are premised on modernity as a phenomenon that is both ideological and historical; moreover, they are produced by the tensions that arise from the incommensurable relationship between Rasmussen and the Inuit.

One of the tropes in Across Arctic America that represents negative modernity is Rasmussen’s habit of declaring different levels of surprise every time he encounters yet another instance of western modernity. This pattern of repetition, accompanied by variations in tone and degrees of astonishment, is launched at the very beginning of his text. He is startled when, at the commencement of his journey, he is greeted, as it were, by the sound of a rifle shot. “I had often imagined,” he writes, “the first meeting with the Eskimos of the American Continent, and wondered what it would be like. With a calmness that surprised myself, I realized that it had come” (3). This dramatic opening unwittingly operates as a sign of colonial violence at the same time that its amplification throughout the text, via the trope of repetition-with-difference, brings into relief the rift this kind of event incurs when the expectation of discovering cultural authenticity is disrupted by an encounter with an already adulterated tradition.

When later in his narrative he comes across a small camp of Caribou Inuit on the verge of starvation, he is “past astonishment” when the people he meets there, after consuming “with remarkable celerity” (106) his caribou meat supply that he shares with them, produce a gramophone, which “kept going for the rest of the afternoon. The natives declared, in sober earnest, that jazz tunes were no less comforting to an empty stomach than soothing to a full one” (107). The fraught link between starvation and modernity here evinces the complex structural disjunctures already evident in Inuit social life at the turn of the 20th century whereby colonial capitalism overlapped with the Inuit’s bartering economy, a reminder of the uneven temporality of modernity and the taint that often accompanies its advent in indigenous territories. Rasmussen is not simply surprised to hear jazz in a remote camp of starving Inuit; the rhetoric and tone he employs when he narrativizes such moments reiterate an acute sense of discrepancy, which helps reify his perception that modernity is misplaced in these contexts, that it cannot possibly belong
in a culture that makes him feel “transported to another age; an age of legends of the past” (5). Contact with foreign others may be one of the main ways through which modernity has unraveled, but contact with the foreign for the Inuit is rendered as contagion, a threat to their purity. Modernity, in Rasmussen’s account, seems to be a one-way-traffic concept.

Rasmussen’s compulsion to record time and again such signs of western modernity among the Inuit—ranging from aluminum cooking pots and rosaries to sewing machines, woolen blankets and watches hanging around necks—is not merely an aspect of his intention to document accurately what he encounters in order to establish the veracity of his account; it also reveals his anxiety to break new ground as an ethnographer. Keen to fulfill his goal to study the primordiality of Inuit religion, he often resorts to such statements as how the “natural obstacles” of that barren land “kept others away” so that he and his team were the first ones to visit “tribes of Eskimos” that had remained “uncontaminated by white civilization, imprisoned within their swampy tundras, unaltered in all their primitive character” (19). He may have been a relatively sensitive ethnographer, in part due to his own Inuit background, but he “was definitely,” as Birgitte Sonne writes, “not an anti-colonialist […] he represented the colonial politics of good will” (Sonne, B., 1988: 31). While ethnographic etiquette prevents him from positing himself as an agent inclined to release the Inuit from their presumed imprisonment in their natural habitat, he often reinforces his credentials as a civilized subject who feels impelled to establish boundaries between himself and the Inuit, not only because he wishes to be as unobtrusive an ethnographer as possible but also because he cannot abide their “barbaric” ways (65). That he feels compelled to share with his readers why, although he and his team usually slept “in the houses of the natives as we found them” (71), he stayed in his “own quarters” when visiting Igjugarjuk’s camp reinforces the conceptual and physical boundaries that modernity circumscribes. Rasmussen does not repress his response to the visual and olfactory elements—picking up lice or filthy hands with long, coarse nails—that trigger this shift in attitude; instead, he narrativizes it in a fashion constitutive of an aesthetics of disgust that performs both his own distastefulness for what he represents as the unappetizing fare and manners of the Inuit subject and that subject’s own subversive response to it.

Igjugarjuk

Credit: Knud Rasmussen, Across Arctic America
A scene that displays his aversion in no uncertain terms unfolds while Rasmussen is partaking of a caribou feast as Igjugarjuk’s guest:

I have set down to many a barbaric feast among Eskimos in my time, but I have never seen anything equal to this. Only the elders used knives, the younger members of the party simply tore the meat from the bones in the same voracious fashion which we may imagine to have been the custom of our earliest ancestors. Besides the two caribou, a number of heads had been cooked […]. Then came dessert; but this was literally more than we could swallow. It consisted of the larvae of the caribou fly, great fat maggoty things served up raw just as they had been picked out from the skin of the beasts when shot. They lay squirming on a platter like a tin of huge gentles, and gave a nasty little crunch under the teeth, like crushing a black-beetle (65-66).

One of the most graphic moments in the text, this description accentuates the tension that arises between his reiterated desire to meet Inuit who are “not so hopelessly civilized” (64) and the limits of this desire. The rhetorical slippage from host to parasite that occurs when he admits his hosts “were—to put it mildly—so uncleanly in their habits that it would have been difficult” to tolerate those conditions (71) delineates the hierarchical difference drawn here between self and other, a difference that manifests in action modernity’s developmental logic but also its fear of contagion.

The degree of detail Rasmussen offers encodes his acute revulsion in a rhetoric that is replete with pleasure, a thrill that captures what Fredric Jameson calls modernity’s “libidinal charge,” a kind of intellectual arousal that bears the “promise within a present of time […] of a future temporality” (Jameson, F., 2002: 34). This is what constitutes in Rasmussen’s narrative the allure of the “savage” (11), his use of scare quotes gesturing his nervousness about the simultaneity of his desire for pure primitiveness and his aversion to barbarism, a sign of his modern consciousness that discloses the tension that “makes the desirable thing disgusting in itself” (Miller, W., 1997: 116). Significantly,
Igjugarjuk is not oblivious to Rasmussen’s disgust and the latter, to his credit, registers in full his host’s response, without, however, commenting on it:

“No one will be offended if you do not understand our food; we all have our different customs.” But he added, a trifle maliciously: “After all, you have just been eating caribou meat; and what are these [the larvae] but a sort of little eggs nourished on the juices of that meat?” (66)

Igjugarjuk does not simply verbalize Rasmussen’s disgust; his response reflects “the give-and-take of honor and insult” that William Miller argues characterizes disgust norms (Miller, W., :148). Here is a “primitive” who not only puts his cultivated guest in his place, he also dares speak through the universal “we,” thus inserting himself within the very space of difference Rasmussen’s disgust reifies. Igjugarjuk unsettles the western subject’s moral superiority, thus exposing the pathology of western modernity that claims exclusive rights to civilized practices. That he does so by directly invoking difference, by re-ascribing what constitutes unbecoming behaviour to his western guest, executes a reversal of western modernity’s hierarchizing categories as manifested in Rasmussen’s narrative.

Although Rasmussen does not posit his expedition as a civilizing mission, the dialectic between civilization and primitiveness as a form of imprisonment, another recurring motif in his work, leaves no doubt as to the colonial politics of authenticity inscribed in his narrative. His eagerness to discover and record a pristine culture may not entirely avert his ethnographic gaze from the fact that Inuit society was on the cusp of change but reveals, nonetheless, his ethnographic disposition toward an unproblematized concept of tradition that attributes a certain ideality and stability to “primitive” culture; this, in turn, propels the desire to salvage it, by recording it, from extinction. Subject/object relations are at the core of the western project of modernity, accounting for its obsession with “cultivate[ng] […] the individualistic self” while maintaining its fascination with “primitive societies” (Torgovnick, M.: 157). For Rasmussen, then, modernity is the epistemological vehicle that allows him to study the Inuit, not something that comes naturally to them.

The asymmetry that characterizes Rasmussen’s encounters, as well as their narrative repetition, grants them paradigmatic status as ethnographic moments. An ethnographic moment, according to Marilyn Strathern, straddles two different sites, the field site and back home, and occurs at different times, its simultaneity capturing the relationality that links “what is observed at the moment of observation […] to […] what is observed at the moment of analysis” (Strathern, M., 1999: 6). The paradigmatic value of Rasmussen’s reiterated ethnographic moment lies in the fact that it inhabits the present while at the same time calling up the past and incorporating the future. The representational economy of this simultaneity relies on the double trope of return and repetition that instantiates what was once a first encounter—what will never return as such—the impact of which, however, persists and thus returns and repeats itself as embodied trauma but also as a gesture that attempts to critique and resist colonial norms.

II. The 1920s in the new millennium: under Inuit eyes

The reader of Across Arctic America can return to the paradigmatic moment when Rasmussen hears Caruso as the viewer of the high-definition digital film, The Journals of Knud Rasmussen. Directed by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, it is the second film of
Igloolik Isuma Productions, following the internationally acclaimed *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), the first ever feature-length digital video film directed, written, acted, and produced by Inuit in Inuktitut. Isuma, which means “think” in Inuktitut, was Canada’s first Inuit-owned independent production company. Founded by Kunuk, Paul Apak and Cohn (the only non-Inuk member) in 1985, its main goal, in Kunuk’s words, was to “create traditional artifacts, digital multimedia and desperately needed jobs in the same activity. Our productions give an artist’s view for all to see where we came from: what Inuit were able to do then and what we are able to do now” (Kunuk, Z. 2002: 15). Isuma’s feature-length films and many video productions, which involved local Inuit under a broad range of capacities, had a major cultural, social, pedagogical, economic and political impact on the community of Igloolik until the company declared bankruptcy in 2011.

Despite its title, *The Journals* does not replicate Rasmussen’s ethnographic gaze but does make liberal use of the Inuit cultural material collected by him and Mathiassen, as well as narratives about the Arctic composed by Freuchen and others, like Canadian-born American whaler Captain George Comer. Nor does the film, as the title seems to suggest, make Rasmussen its central character. In fact, although Rasmussen is accompanied by Freuchen and Mathiassen when he visits the small camp of Avva, the last great shaman in the Repulse Bay region, he departs soon after while his teammates stay behind and witness the action that unfolds, namely, the tensions that arise within Avva’s family as well as between Avva’s camp and that of Umik, the leader of the Inuit Christian converts in Igloolik.

The scene in question, which both echoes and departs from *Across Arctic America* as well as *Intellectual Culture of the Hudson Bay Eskimos*, unfolds early in the film. Having just arrived at Avva’s camp, Rasmussen announces his and his teammates’ purpose: Freuchen and Mathiassen need a guide to take them north to Igloolik, while he intends to move further into the interior to study the Caribou people. In the meantime, however, he states his most immediate goal: “I came to hear songs and legends, if you share them with me, and to learn about your beliefs.” Avva is a gracious host but he rightly intuits that Rasmussen’s interest in his shamanistic knowledge is not just a matter of curiosity-driven desire, never mind the fact that he speaks Inuktitut. He genially accepts the offerings of tobacco and sugar, but his response, “My family doesn’t work for Whites”, conveys his understanding that working for Whites is not the same as working with them, and thus neither a beneficial nor a reciprocal dealing, hence his reluctance to give in to the proposed transaction. Nevertheless, his son, Natar, excited by the prospect of trading “for many things” for what promises to be an extended period of time, is eager to serve as guide. A subtle moment that offers “a brief glimpse of the growing divide separating traditional and modern Inuit even in the same family,” as the script’s directorial annotations suggest (Kunuk, Z. and Cohn, N., 2008: 301), it sets the tone for the entire film.

After a brief silence, Avva overcomes his initial hesitation and invites Rasmussen to “sing something in [his] language,” thus displaying his interest in learning about the other’s culture but also initiating trading as cultural bartering. As Ian MacRae writes, this gesture is “a sign of respect […] but also an inversion of the traditional colonial relationship” (MacRae, 2012: 277). Rasmussen obliges by singing the aria “M’Appari tutt’ amor” from Friedrich von Flotow’s opera, *Marta*. While we listen to his rendering of it—his voice tentative—the scene shifts away from the dim interior of Avva’s igloo, lit only by the warm glow of a *qulliq* (soapstone lamp fed by seal oil), to the sun-lit outside. Rasmussen’s
voice fades, and Caruso’s takes over, singing the same aria, “(playing on a gramophone),” a subtitle explains. The camera lingers through a low-angle shot on the mesmerized faces of Inuit children who stand still before it focuses, via an eye-level shot, on Mathiassen who is sitting on the ground. The children are as entranced with the charisma of Caruso’s lyrical voice as they are intrigued by Mathiassen seasoning the meat he eats with a substance as yet unknown to them, salt. He offers a taste of the flavored meat to Apak, Avva’s daughter. When her face registers her delight at tasting it, he gives her his small vial of salt, an instance of gift-giving that completes this sequence’s interest in intercultural commerce.

Most critics who have written about the film refer to the above sequence. As Hugh Brody writes, it is a scene that encapsulates the “encounter between European opera and Inuit life, between high culture of the South and a parallel high culture of the North” (Brody H., 2008: 46-47). He offers a highly nuanced reading of this encounter and its reverberations in the rest of film, but his claim that in this “battle” of civilizations “the aria prevails” (ibid., 47) comes as a surprise, at least to this reader. If opera reigns because it has a “strangely irresistible power” (ibid.), it is because Brody, although he has long been one of the most important scholars of Inuit culture, listens to it through his western ears. The film certainly revolves around the clash between western modernity and Inuit tradition, but opera does not displace the ayaya songs; rather, it is employed as a synecdoche for modernity and colonialism.

There is a tight relationship between opera and the history of colonialism. As Timothy N. Taylor states, “opera provided a way of dealing with the powerful ‘discovery’ of other peoples, from home and abroad; [...] once combined with a powerful new musical language, tonality [... opera] offered new and effective ways to (re)present and control difference” (Taylor, T.: 2007, 34). Beyond the fact that Rasmussen pursued a brief career as an actor and opera singer before he committed himself to exploration and ethnography, opera epitomizes Rasmussen’s cultural baggage, thus functioning both as a trace, in the Derridean sense of the term, of its history and as an acoustic/oral link between the Whites’ “high culture” and Inuit oral culture. Rasmussen’s choice of Marta (premiered in 1847) further reinforces this ironic link; not only did it enjoy a lot of popularity in early 20th century and was performed by Caruso many times around that period but, as a comic opera, its dramatization of class differences, mistaken identities, and chicaneries operates as an ironic inference of the differences between Avva and Rasmussen, as well as the ideological implications of their impending transaction. The famous aria Rasmussen and Caruso sing (Act III, Scene IV), which was interpolated in Marta from von Flotow’s two-act opera, L’âme en peine, in 1865, can also be seen as symptomatic, if not reflective, of the film’s approach to its deployment of historical sources. Neither an instance of colonial mimicry, nor quite one of cultural syncretism, the concomitant presence of both western and Inuit musical scores enacts not so much a contestation but a process that requires a mutual shift in each culture’s epistemic frame. Kunuk and Cohn, as their collaboration between an Inuk and a White also suggests, practice a kind of critical syncretism that stops short from polarizing modernity and tradition; a discursive method, it remains, self-consciously so, marked by its unavoidable complicity with the regime of colonialism and modernity’s constructions of authenticity, thus being able to perform a subtle yet radical critique of the limits of both.

The film’s cultural capital, then, does not derive from its operatic references or the long valorized ethnographic narratives it borrows from; it is established through the Isuma
creative team’s tactical deployment of a double gaze: that of western discourses that already incorporate the colonized other, and that engendered by a production method similar to the one used in making *Atanarjuat*, namely, a method that entails “a unique process of cultural authenticity” (“Production diary”). The singularity of this authenticity is constituted by Isuma’s critical syncretism, notably, digital technology, Inuktitut as the film’s language, and, among other elements, the contracting of local (amateur) actors and production crew. The film’s cultural authenticity, then, does not reflect a desire to retrieve a static notion of pre-contact Inuit identity; instead, it posits cultural authenticity as a complex process of identity-production that is concomitant with the social and material contexts of the Inuit today. While *The Journals* as a title nods toward a certain kind of evidentiary realism, its interweaving of western historical material with the oral storytelling of Inuit elders in the present draws attention to the complex materiality of the film’s cultural production, a materiality that demands the recognition of an alternative agency within the historical moment the film re-visits.

Kunuk and Cohn’s visual narrative and production method locate this agency as much in the residual areas of Inuit experience that colonialism has left untouched as in the material labour that produced the film as cultural product. This is precisely what makes it possible for the film to practice and convey a decolonizing perspective both in relation to the past and to the present, signaling in the process that authenticity is a relational concept, for, like the self, it emerges only in relation to otherness.

In this context, opera and *ayayas* are cast in the film not as a binary structure but as a relation that reminds us of Derrida’s “strange economy of the supplement” (Derrida, J.: 1974, 154). If to supplement means both to add and to substitute, an ambivalent gesture that completes at the same time that it identifies a gap or deficiency, then the supplement is always already at the origin. Understood this way, the coevality of opera and *ayayas* de-hierarchizes the valorization logic that we have seen in Rasmussen’s approach to the modern versus the “primitive.” This is evident in the fact that, in sharp contrast to Rasmussen’s goal to discover an unadulterated authenticity, *The Journals* opens with the very modern object, a gramophone, that he feigned such astonishment when encountering it in an Inuit camp. The film begins with a brief pre-credit moment that privileges music, specifically an *ayaya* sung by three male Inuit voices. The scratchy sound of a (yet unseen) gramophone not only suggests that the *ayaya* is being recorded, it announces the film’s post-contact temporality, as well as its interest in re-presenting the representation of Inuit authenticity via a modern device. This scene, then, an instance of remediation, both rehearses and critiques Rasmussen’s narrative, for it bears the mark of a double modernity, that which is contemporary with Rasmussen and that of the film’s temporality. If modernity is synonymous with contemporaneity, and if contemporaneity is not just of the present but signals, as Peter Osborne writes, a “con-temporaneity, a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but of times” (Osborne, P.: 2016, 17), then the contemporary does not simply reference the now of the present; it holds, as Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges put it, “a critical and analytical relationship to the now of history” (D’Arcy, M. and Nilges, M.: 2016, 6). Kunuk and Cohn instrumentalize this condensed temporality in order to critique colonialism but also to problematize their own entanglement with modernity.

The *ayaya* at the film’s onset continues as a kind of overture, a musical segue to the scene that begins to unfold in what is obviously the dim, cozy interior of a “house,” the term used by whalers for the space they built on the deck of their vessels when they wintered...
in the arctic. As the opening credits begin to roll, referencing the production companies, we see a group of male and female Inuit being arranged for a photograph by an Inuk donning a captain’s cap, whom we will come to know as Nuqallaq. Performing a director’s role, one of the self-reflexive moments in the film, and squatting in front of the standing Inuit, he is one of the two people smiling when posing for the photograph. The scene takes place in “Arctic Canada, January 1912,” an annotation in English informs the viewer. Immediately after, the color fades into black and white, morphing the photograph just taken into an archival image, a picture within a picture that re-produces the mode of thousands of such photographs taken by Whites in the Arctic, while the camera slowly zooms in on the young woman sitting next to Nuqallaq. She is Apak, Avva’s daughter, and she announces, in voice-over that suggests this opening scene to be one remembered, that she is going to tell us her story. An enunciative act, it registers both ethnographic practices and the importance of oral storytelling in Inuit culture. Apak was 13 years old when she first saw a White man, she tells us in her voice as a much older woman.

As the screen turns into color again, we get a better sense of the house’s interior, lit both by a lantern and qulliq, and what transpires there. There are books and a government map on the wall—“of the Eastern Canadian Arctic ca. 1900” according to the script (Kunuk and Cohn: 2008, 288); Nuqallaq lights his pipe; Apak is trying to play the accordion; Evaluarjuk, Avva’s younger brother, under the watchful eyes of the other Inuit in the room, is learning to write and spell his name in syllabics. People feel comfortable; they laugh merrily. And there is more ayaya singing, the last image of this prelude to the main story being a close-up shot of the gramophone that has just recorded the ayayas. But before the camera shifts away to the film’s present, Apak verbalizes what has already been obvious through their body language, that she and Nuqalluq have been “sweetheart[s].” “Even then he was already working for the Whites,” she says, the first time this phrase is uttered in the film.

Ivaluartjuk (Evaluarjuk in The Journals of Knud Rasmussen)

Credit: Knud Rasmussen, Across Arctic America
28 This line, which, as we have seen, is repeated by Avva when he first encounters Rasmussen, announces the film’s decolonizing tropes. Through practices that are at once deliberately redolent and reversive of appropriation, the film confiscates western archives of traditional knowledge in order to recast and supplement them via its Inuit / Isuma mode of production. That it opens with a scene that takes place on Inuit land but inside a white abode where the Inuit are guests; that the ship they are supposed to be on, as the script explains, is Captain George Comer’s Era, which had foundered off Newfoundland in 1906; that they are being taught to read and write and play instruments while their host and tutor, presumably Captain Comer, is rendered invisible and silent; that one of the women is cast in a fashion that represents Niviatsinaq (also known as Shoofly), Captain Comer’s companion and the mother of at least one of the children he fathered in the Arctic—all these elements pose this scene’s evidentiary realism as an instance of what Stephen Greenblatt calls mimetic capitalism. Representation, Greenblatt writes, “is not only the reflection or product of social relations but […] is in itself a social relation […] This means that representations are not only products but producers, capable of decisively altering the very forces that brought them into being” (6). In other words, the photograph that captures this scene operates through but also beyond the colonial forces that produce it. It simultaneously enacts colonial ideology and Inuit agency as a form of cultural production that enables representation to picture the limits of the kind of negative modernity inscribed in Rasmussen’s work.

29 The second scene that takes place in yet another white space makes this abundantly apparent. It unravels “10 years later” at the Hudson’s Bay Trading Station in Repulse Bay, staffed by Cleveland, and is being narrated in voice-over by Evaluarjuk—a story within Apak’s story. Evaluarjuk describes to Avva and his family his first encounter with the Greenlanders at Cleveland’s cabin, an instance that both mimics and inverts Rasmussen’s ethnographic encounters. In the same way that Rasmussen identifies (via his mother
tongue and Inuit background) and disidentifies with the Inuit, Evaluarjuk notes that “they act like Whites but they speak our language”; they wear clothes similar to theirs but “Their pants are bearskin and their boots are mostly dog fur.” His telling overlaps with the arrival of these strange yet somewhat familiar guests. The brief scene of introductions is followed by the flashback that takes the spectator to the trading post a few days earlier. Much larger than the house on the Era, the cabin, with maps and other pictures on the walls, is similarly marked by modernity. Rendered through the same representational tropes that composed the action on board the Era, this scene does not show the host either. While a boisterous party takes place with Freuchen and the Inuit dancing to the sound of an accordion, Evaluarjuk is conversing with Rasmussen. Placing a map of Greenland on the table, Rasmussen presents, as it were, his credentials and, again, is interested in bartering information. “My grandmother spoke only Inuktitut,” he says, pinpointing the place where she lived, and asks, “Where is Igloolik?” Without hesitation, Evaluarjuk reciprocates by drawing his own map of the Melville Peninsula on which he marks a spot for Igloolik. This exchange reproduces the encounter Rasmussen had with Evaluarjuk in Cleveland’s cabin, included in both Across Arctic America and Intellectual Culture of the Hudson Bay Eskimos, but with a difference worth noting. “When I brought out a pencil and paper,” he writes in the latter, “he [Evaluarjuk] drew, to my astonishment, the whole coastline from Repulse Bay to Pond Inlet, without hesitation” (1929, 16); but whereas in this text he respectfully identifies Evaluarjuk as “the geographer of his tribe” (ibid.), in Across Arctic America he portrays him as “a geographical expert” but also as a “‘savage’” (11). The complexities that underlie the cinematic visualization of this encounter are too many to fully unpack here. Suffice it to say, the unevenness of representation that characterizes Rasmussen’s narratives is rendered in the film as a two-way traffic of cultural exchange that asserts not so much Evaluarjuk’s ability to draw a map of his land—the film, naturally, takes for granted that he is familiar with his land—but the Inuit’s right to their own land. Through this incident Kunuk and Cohn decolonize space by re-writing and re-mapping both Rasmussen and the settled land.

The Journals, then, does not quite repeat history; it represents it in a manner that releases it from its colonial determinations. This becomes obvious in the final shot of the flashback, when Rasmussen and Evaluarjuk’s conversation is suddenly interrupted by three Inuit women who are giggling and singing in Inuktitut, “Follow Him . . . Follow Him / Follow Jesus . . . Follow Him.” At the same time, they are shaking hands, the white way of greeting, in a mocking fashion. This parody of a Christian hymn shows this flashback to also be a flashforward, for it foreshadows the plot’s central element, namely, the pressure to convert to Christianity. When, after a pivotal sequence of scenes in the second half of the film, Avva capitulates to conversion, he does so because he and his family would otherwise die from famine. Avva converts not because he is persuaded that Christianity is better than his own spirituality but because Umik, a charismatic shaman who has now cast himself as a Christian prophet, evangelizes his Christian message by deforming gift exchange into an abominable scheme of power and redemption. In his Igloolik Christian camp, conversion becomes synonymous with coercion, spiritual redemption equivalent to physical survival, for Umik controls all available food. “We eat after we pray,” he tells Avva when the latter’s family, exhausted and hungry, arrives in Igloolik; “The hunters bring their meat first to me and we eat all together after my sermon. Will you join us?” “Maybe some day,” Avva replies.
This day arrives soon thereafter. It coincides with the very end of the film, a heart-wrenching moment during which Avva sends away his guiding spirits. They and Avva walk in opposite directions and gradually off the screen; the growing distance between them, an empty white landscape, turns black, and the closing credits begin to scroll, an “(Inuit song)” on the soundtrack. But the man singing off screen is not alone; we hear chatter, laughter, applause—reminiscent of earlier, happy domestic scenes in Avva’s snowhouse. In a gesture that parallels Rasmussen’s trope of repetition and difference, Caruso’s recording takes over as the soundtrack. Marta may be the last musical score we hear—perhaps this is why Brody says “the aria prevails”—but it is undercut by the complex visual narrative that both parallels and overlaps with the end credits. The return to the romantic passion in Marta does not signal that Inuit culture as represented in the film has fully succumbed to western influence. Far from being the moment when most viewers begin exiting the theatre or turning off a DVD, when the credits begin to scroll in this film we are compelled to remain seated, and not only because of the seductive power of Caruso’s voice. This is not quite the end of the film. We have arrived at a moment when the film’s historical integrity and compositional and production method come into full relief. The closing credits include black-and-white photographs of the historical characters next to the names of the main cast, thus reinstating Rasmussen’s ethnographic discourse, for most of the photographs were taken by him. Still, Rasmussen does not have the last word.

The closing credits are interrupted by one final continuous shot, a wide-angled camera view of the snow-covered arctic landscape that is being crossed by a dogteam pulling a sledge with two figures. Caruso continues to sing as this rather long scene unfolds until the sledge approaches a cluster of igloos and people come out to greet them. Who are they? Where have they arrived? Might they be Avva and his wife Orulu coming to Umik’s camp? This is what Brody thinks, calling this concluding shot “a heartbreaking moment” (Brodie: 2008, 51). But I do not think this is necessarily the case. I believe the film ends on a deliberately ambivalent note, showing that its assemblage of historical material and oral stories is far from seamless; it remains inconclusive because the story of the Iglulingmiut continues. Evidence of this appears immediately after the sledge reaches its destination, and Caruso is silenced once and for all. A long list of names of the Iglulingmiut who have participated in the film’s making in different capacities begins to scroll. It belies Rasmussen’s anxiety that the Inuit culture he had encountered was under threat from modernity. From storytellers, whose stories are living archives, to ayaya song writers and performers, from seamstresses of caribou fur clothing to igloo builders, from dog wranglers to cooks, the list of names, by and large all Inuit, reveals a community that embodies resilience and renaissance. If the film, as Gillian Robinson, the script editor, writes, “is an act of remembering” (Robinson: 2008), the Inuit past is not only remembered in the present, it remains alive in it.
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**NOTES**

1. For their own narrative and ethnographic accounts, see Freuchen, P.: 1935, and Mathiassen, T.: 1928, respectively.

2. Qallunaat in Inuktitut refers to non-Inuit people.

3. See, for example, Tibebu, T.: 2011, p. xi-xxviii.

4. Rasmussen was of course aware of his precursors. Admiral William Parry and Captain George Lyon, of the British Naval Expedition to find the Northwest Passage (1821-23), compiled the first detailed accounts about the Inuit, followed by the journals of American Charles Francis Hall, who visited the Arctic (1860-63) in search of survivors of Sir John Franklin’s expedition. The famous whaler Captain George Comer, who often wintered north of Hudson Bay (1895-1912) and learned Inuktitut, was an amateur ethnographer who amassed a lot of Inuit information that he shared with Franz Boas and American museums; Boas, who spent a lot of time among the Cumberland Sound Inuit on Baffin Island, published his still classic *The Central Eskimo* in 1888.

5. It is worth noting that Rasmussen rarely failed to attribute the stories he was told to their tellers; he also reproduced them virtually verbatim, rendering the Inuktitut in the Roman alphabet and using complementary transcription signs. However, he has been criticized, for example, “for taking liberties with some” of his sources (Brody, H., 2000: 47). An example of the critical treatment his ethnographic work and practices have received is the special issue, “L’œuvre de Knud Rasmussen / The Work of Knud Rasmussen” (*Études/Inuit/studies* : 1988).

6. The son of a missionary father who married a woman, who was “proud of some portion of Eskimo blood,” he grew up in Greenland speaking Inuktitut (vi). He often draws attention to the degree of cultural intimacy he shares with the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, and does not neglect to compare Inuit stories and customs to those in Greenland.

7. Also directed by Kunuk and Cohn, *Atanarjuat* won, among other major awards, the Camera d’or at the Cannes Film Festival. The book of the same title (Robinson, G., 2002) includes the film’s Inuktitut and English scripts, as well as a lot of other pertinent information about Inuit history and the film’s production. The third film the company produced, *Before Tomorrow* (2008), is the first film written and directed by Igloolik’s Arnait Video Productions women’s collective, including Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu.

8. Isuma’s artistic success, along with its methods of production and community engagement, has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. See, for example, Evans, R., 2008, which offers a detailed history, and Jansen, S. 2013, which addresses the pedagogical role of the film in relation to Igloolik’s community. The fact that the company went into receivership reflects that, despite the hopes raised by the success of *Atanarjuat*, very little has changed in the Canadian infrastructures designed to support Indigenous films. Still, Isuma’s television channel, Isuma.tv, continues to operate ([www.isuma.tv](http://www.isuma.tv)) and its website includes a wealth of material about the making and
content of its films. Kunuk, along with Cohn, has established a new company, Kinguliit Productions. Their first feature-length film, Maliglutit (The Searchers), directed by Natar Ungalaaq, who played Atanarjuat and Nuqalluq in The Journals of Knud Rasmussen, was released in 2016.

9. See, for example, Comer, G., 1984.

10. The spelling of a lot of Inuit names rendered in the Roman alphabet is not always consistent; Avva, for example, is referred to as Aua in Rasmussen’s and Mathiassen’s work.

11. Repulse Bay was a popular whaling ground in the late 1800s, with a Hudson’s Bay Company trading post established there around 1916 managed by George Washington Cleveland, a history evoked in the film.

12. Citations are from the film; when followed by page numbers, they come from its English script written by Kunuk and Cohn (Kunuk and Cohn: 2008). The film does not follow the script faithfully; not only are entire scenes not included but, as co-director and co-author of the script Cohn says to one of the rehearsing actors, “Don’t be distracted by the script [laughter]; the script is not the Bible; we don’t care what you say,” a comment that reflects Isuma’s processual and collaborative process of production. See the documentary about the making of The Journals of Knud Rasmussen by the Greenlander Inuit Rasmussen, K. 2006, who continues to collaborate with Isuma.

13. The film adopts an interesting approach to subtitles that highlights its self-reflexive mode, specifically its awareness of its double audience, Inuit and non-Inuit spectators. While not all Inuit dialogue is translated, which some film reviewers have complained about, the film annotates some scenes, often redundantly so, via phrases that appear in parentheses. For example, a domestic scene that unravels inside an igloo, where the people eat, laugh or chatter, has “(chattering)” overlaid on it but offers no subtitles, thus preventing the non-Inuit spectators from eavesdropping. To further comment on this use (or lack) of subtitles, as well as the extra-diegetic annotations, would take me too far afield.


15. For a literary and cultural analysis of auyayas, and how they operate in the film, see Martin, K.: 2012, especially p. 89-97.


17. Although about Atanarjuat, this diary, along with other elements on Isuma’s website, provides an excellent narrative of Kunuk and Cohn’s approach; see Isuma. The books on Atanarjuat and The Journals of Knud Rasmussen also include a lot of material by the two directors, as well as others, that further illuminate their production approach and the overall significance of the films; see Robinson, G.: 2002 and 2008. See also Rasmussen, K.: 2007.

18. As Derrida writes, “The logic of the supplement—which is not the logic of identity—allows the acceleration of evil to find at once its historical compensation and its historical guardrail. History precipitates history, society corrupts society, but the evil that links both in an indefinite chain [...] has its natural supplement as well: history and society produce their own resistance to the abyss” (1974: 179).

19. Constructed with lumber brought in, such structures were designed for storing cargo but were also used for plays, concerts, and dances that involved the visiting Inuit, and were also the place where Inuit women did a lot of the sewing of Inuit-style clothing for the whalers. Captain George Comer’s An Arctic Diary abounds with references both to the construction of such houses and to the various entertainment activities taking place there (see Comer: 1984).

20. Interestingly, while Mathiassen includes Apak as Avva’s daughter in his catalogue of all the Inuit he met during the winter of 1921-1922 (Mathiassen: 1928, 17), Apak is not mentioned by Rasmussen.
21. Though the film narrative is often filtered through Apak’s perspective, what transpires does not always depend on her as eye-witness; nor does her voice-over re-appear in the film.

22. For example, as I have already discussed, it was at Igjugarjuk’s camp, not Avva’s, where Rasmussen heard Carusso; nor is there a historical record of Avva asking him to sing.

23. Cleveland, a colorful character, is referenced extensively by Rasmussen, Freuchen, and Mathiassen. See, for example, Rasmussen, K.: 192, p. 16; Rasmussen, K.: 1927, 9-10; and Mathiassen, T.: 1928, p. 6. For a most graphic description, see Freuchen, P.: 2016.

24. As the camera zooms in on Evaluarjuk’s drawing hand, we notice that, like many other adult Inuit, he wears a wedding ring, an interesting instance of anachronism in the film, but I do not have the space to comment on this.

25. The script tells us that they are Cleveland’s “wives” and Evaluarjuk’s own young wife (Kunuk and Cohn: 2008, 297).

26. Rasmussen did not have the opportunity to meet Umik while on his expedition, but Mathiassen refers to him (235). Umik’s version of Christianity was a rather peculiar mixture of Christian dogma and Inuit cultural customs, like that of exchanging wives. As portrayed in the film but also in other accounts, he urged his followers to shake hands the white way when meeting people and to sing Christian hymns in Inuktitut virtually all the time. As Avva says in the film, “They never stop singing.” The film’s portrayal of Umik follows the historical records; see also Frédéric B. Laugrand and Jarich G. Oosten: 48-53.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines how modernity is inscribed in Inuit culture, specifically in Igloolik in 1922, and how it is represented within different temporalities: Knud Rasmussen’s account of his time among the Iglulingmiut, Across Arctic America (1927), and Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn’s Inuit film, The Journals of Knud Rasmussen (2006), which revisits that historical moment via a critical appropriation of Rasmussen’s narrative. Reading these texts as distinct configurations but also in relation to each other affords a look at modernity as an event that effects adverse change at the same time that it posits itself as a rebuttal to the negative impact it has. Thus, through attention to such tropes as anachronism and opera as a sign of modernity, the article addresses, via Rasmussen, the colonial determinations that inform modernity as well as the decolonizing methods employed in the film that re-purpose modernity while at the same time exposing its limits.

Cet article interroge l’inscription de la modernité dans la culture Inuite de l’Igloulik en 1922 et sa représentation à travers les temporalités différentes : le témoignage de Knud Rasmussen de son expérience parmi les Iglulingmiut, Du Groenland au Pacifique : deux ans d’intimité avec des tribus d’Esquimaux inconnus (trad. du danois, 1929), et le film de Norman Cohn, Le journal de Knud Rasmussen (2006), lequel dans son appropriation du récit de Rasmussen propose un réexamen de ce moment historique. Identifier la singularité de ces représentations mais aussi la relation dialogique qui les définit offre une perspective double de la modernité, à la fois comme modalité de changement adverse et réplique des effets négatifs qu’elle occasionne. Par conséquent, en partant des figures de l’anachronisme et de l’opéra comme signes de la modernité, cet article réfléchit dans un premier temps, via Rasmussen, aux déterminations coloniales sous-jacentes à la
Este artículo interroga la inscripción de la modernidad dentro de la cultura Inuit del Igoulik en 1922 y su representación a través de temporalidades diferentes: el testimonio de Knud Rasmussen sobre su experiencia entre los Iglulingmiurt, *De la Groenlandia al Pacífico: dos años de intimidad con tribus desconocidas de esquimales* (trad. del danés, 1930), y la película *Inuit* de Zacharias Kunuk y Norman Cohn, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), la cual revisita aquel momento histórico a través de una reapropiación crítica del relato de Rasmussen. Identificar la singularidad de estas representaciones pero también la relación dialógica que las define ofrece una perspectiva doble sobre la modernidad, como modalidad de cambio infausto y como réplica a los efectos negativos que produce. Por consiguiente, al partir de figuras como el anacronismo y la ópera como signos de la modernidad, este artículo reflexiona, a través de Rasmussen, sobre la determinaciones coloniales subyacentes a la modernidad. Asimismo, acerca de la película, se exploran los métodos de descolonización implementados para reconfigurar la modernidad y al mismo tiempo exponer sus limites.

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**Palabras claves:** Inuit, *Le journal de Knud Rasmussen*, Knud Rasmussen, modernidad, colonialismo

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