

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MICHAEL ROBERT EVANS, *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2008, index.

Michael Robert Evans' *Isuma: Inuit Video Art* looks at the production of videos within one small Inuit community located in Nunavut. Igloodik Isuma Productions (an Inuit-run company) is the focal point of his analysis, although he also writes about the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation and the Tariagsuk Video Centre. Evans' research is based on ethnography, interviews, analyses of videos, and watching rehearsals of Isuma's famous feature-length film, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, which won the Camera d'Or Award at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival. His research differs from the better-known research on Indigenous media production by Sol Worth in the American Southwest and Eric Michaels in Australia in that Evans did not give video equipment to the Inuit. By the time he began his study, Inuit in Igloodik (population 1,200) had already been making videos for about two decades.

The challenge for Igloodik Isuma Productions is to be its own voice. For over a century the Igloodik community has had to contend with increasingly influential outside forces. European colonialism was manifest in forced displacement, residential schooling, and the pressures of globalization. Oral tradition and knowledge that had been passed down from elders in the community were "misplaced" or undervalued. Also, the leaders of the mass media industry are in Bourdieu's terms, "cultural gatekeepers"; and the rules for production are, for the most part, capitalist-inspired. The cultural uniqueness of Isuma videos and the successful competition for funding and viewers are dependent on the cultural gatekeeping of broadcasters and funding agencies in southern Canada. Nonetheless, since the early 1980s video has been an innovative tool for the Inuit in Igloodik, which has encouraged the retention of traditional knowledge. The story of Isuma Productions is hopeful for Indigenous groups everywhere that are trying to find a balance between the old ways and the modern.

The documentaries produced by Isuma adhere to an Indigenous tradition of passing down knowledge orally through storytelling genres: "[f]or a millennia Inuit have shared knowledge, taught children, negotiated and passed along their culture, and conducted myriad social functions through storytelling" (117). Traditional storytelling was accompanied by highly descriptive and animated forms of expressions. Thus oral tradition is conducive to videography as it brings to life both the traditional knowledge and the visual imagery of a story.

The targeted viewers of these videos are other Inuit, who see them on local cable television; non-Inuit are a secondary audience. Community participation in the making of videos as actors, film crew, set designers, costume makers, etc. has

encouraged residents of Igloolik “to consider the intricacies of their culture more directly than do most people” (50). But the introduction of videography was controversial because it implied conformity to modernization that may hinder the reclamation of traditions. Evans addresses this concern: “Video should not be seen as a threat to a tradition of oral narrative; rather, it should be seen as the logical next step in an evolving process” (13).

Throughout the entire book there are references to authentically produced work by Igloolik Isuma Productions. Isuma videos tell stories about the values most important for their targeted viewers, stories of what it was like to live in the Arctic in the early 20th century when European colonial contact was minimal, how to survive amidst a harsh environment, the need to be at balance with the natural world and to gain respect through one’s position within the community. These are stories about the importance of hunting and gathering, fashioning clothing and shelter from the materials the natural world provides, and historic ceremonies. Most importantly, all documentaries are scripted in Inuktitut, although they may have English or French subtitles. Isuma videos are not typical Hollywood blockbusters. The editing is not always clean, the narrative and pacing is sometimes slow, and they tend to lack dramatic special effects (41). Avoiding Hollywood techniques is deliberately done in ways that “bring out the majesty and awe of the Arctic and the Inuit” (26).

The author’s academic background in folklore is most obvious in his handling of narratives. His discussion of narratives is more subtle than similar discussions by most sociologists. Evans also makes a persuasive argument that community videos are an appropriate medium for folklorists to study; research about the medium should not be relegated to sociologists and communication specialists. On the other hand, if his background were in sociology, he might have been more sensitive to the advantages of working with an explicit theoretical model of organizational structure. For example, Richard A. Peterson’s Production of Culture model would have been a useful guide in better delineating the institutional side of Igloolik Isuma Productions. The six facets of this model are: technology, law and regulation, industry/organizational structure, occupational career, and market. It is possible for the readers of Evans’ book to piece together this paradigm – for an “independent” (28) company whose participants vary from project to project – but readers are left to infer some of its features, especially the broader social context, and may inadvertently misunderstand them.

Evans, who teaches journalism at Indiana University, certainly seems to have developed a relationship of mutual respect with his interviewees and allows the voices of Isuma’s artists to resonate throughout the text. The decision to let founder Zacharias Kunuk (the visionary of Isuma) and co-founder Norman Cohn to speak at length about their experiences is consistent with Evans’ background as a folklorist. Although the inspiring quality of Isuma: Inuit Video Art is a consequence of his close relationship with these key informants, friendship can be a liability. Readers cannot expect that researchers who depend on a few informants will turn around and criticize their friends in print. The result is that the readers of Isuma: Inuit Video Art must sometimes imagine a counter discourse to informants’ remarks because alternative viewpoints are either absent or deemphasized. For example, one of the four founders of Isuma, Norman Cohn,

is of European ancestry. Evans, too, is of non-Inuit ancestry. It can be difficult for Euro-Canadians or Euro-Americans, who are sympathetic to or employed by ethnic-minority organizations, to be critical without feeling that they are contributing to problems rather than helping to solve them. Evans does not seriously question Cohn's assertion that his ancestry has no real impact on Isuma videos (74). The book lacks as well a balanced perspective of the conflicts between Isuma and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. Evans also raises the question of how videos are shaped into narratives, but this question is not convincingly answered with respect to how the form of the videos reflects Inuit culture (204). He concentrates instead on the more superficial level of narrative content.

Retaining Inuit viewers seems rather problematic given the history of Euro-colonial pressures of assimilation. This raises questions as to whether or not videography is, in fact, an effective tool that allows for the retention of historic Inuit knowledge. Although the productions of Isuma can act as a time capsule and store Inuit traditions, who is watching if traditional knowledge is not valued? What effective methods is Igloolik Isuma Productions using to keep the attention of its audience? Without Inuit viewers, videography as a tool of cultural preservation resembles the proverbial tree falling in the forest: if no one watches, these videos are meaningless. Evans fails to adequately address this concern by focusing on the challenges Isuma faces in obtaining funding and maintaining its position as a beacon of hope. Evans briefly acknowledges the effects of residential schooling and forced displacement as being detrimental to the retention of traditional knowledge. It is my impression, as a person of Aboriginal ancestry, that his explanations are somewhat over-generalized. There is, for instance, little explanation of the history between Inuit and Europeans. Evans' historical representation presupposes that his readers have an extensive background in Inuit and European colonial relations.

Despite my nit-picking criticisms, I want to emphasize that I enjoyed reading *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*. The book is a reassuring and inspiring achievement. It would not have been easy for Evans to leave his family in the American Midwest and spend nine months in Nunavut. The volume is relevant to anyone investigating social stratification, ethnic minority media, cultural anthropology, sociology of culture, and ethnicity.

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