

INDIGENOUS

EXPERIMENTATION



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TV Wannabe

One of my most memorable and defining encounters with a gang of film and video arbiters occurred in France in 1987 during a discussion of one of my early productions. Their conclusion was that I was not a film or video producer, but an artist. Nothing wrong with that, except that they had just screened *Itam Hakim Hopiit*, a television program I had produced and directed for Das Kleine Ferensehspiel, ZDF National Television. It had also been awarded the Gold Hugo in the television category at the 1984 Chicago International Film Festival.

The program had been commissioned upon the recommendation of Dieter Kronzucker, who was then anchoring a popular evening show, *Views from America*. He and his crew had arrived on the Hopi reservation in 1981 to film a segment on the Hopi tribe; he had been directed to our trailer where, rumour had it, we had equipment that produced something akin to television. We showed him a rough cut of what we were working on at the time, and he eventually provided funding (despite the strenuous objections of his field producer) to edit our program with his opening introduction, which was then aired on ZDF television.

This first production was edited directly, using a 1640 Sony camera playing onto a 3/4-inch Umatic recorder/player — an improvised process that required intense concentration and

three arms: one to start the camera, one to hit the record button, and the third to signal hallelujah when the edit hit the mark. This third arm has come to be a very important hallmark of my development and aesthetic.

The program's content was a compendium of our world as seen through the experiences of a recent college graduate (me), one high-school graduate, and various high-school dropouts who dropped in to see what we were up to and were subsequently recruited to help out. The content addressed what other producers had written, recorded, and filmed about us and how we would represent our own culture given the opportunity.

Given this opportunity, we knew we didn't want a paternalistic English voice-over. We threw out every idea that might lead to a flute sound track. Then we selected representational scenes from the four seasons and loaded up the sound tracks with ambient sounds, songs, and a dose of our mother tongue and called it *Hopiit* (The Hopi). We had fun. So when ZDF came along, we told them *Hopiit* is what it's all about, so your work is done for you. Broadcast our program, sleep in our tribal motel, eat at our tribal restaurant and, by the way, we could use more videotapes, a real microphone, and some Ikegami cameras.

So I was considered an artist and not a television producer because *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (which followed *Hopiit*) was produced in the Hopi language with no English subtitles and presented astounding landscapes and impressionistic images achieved through chroma manipulation (wow!). Truth be told, it was later translated into a German television program, with German subtitles from my Hopi-to-English translation, a re-titling from my *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (We Someone the Hopi) into *The Legend of Lone Wolf*, and a forewarning in their television review guide to the effect: "Germans beware, Karl May has not prepared us for this!" And, truth be told, my first-draft treatment of the program contained interviews with Hopis who could speak good English, without a heavy accent. The irony of producing an English-language program for a German audience was lost on me.

Visualogy 101: The Indigenous Aesthetic

As an anecdotal tract on Indigenous experimental films, my observations originate from near the southern U.S. border, but they apply equally north of the border. In a 1994 article for the *Independent* I wrote the following about the Native American aesthetic:

In the year 2000 I see that Native American languages and the songs made from these languages will not be used profoundly. Our Native American languages will no longer be effective as our languages fall into disuse in the dominant culture as we drift away from the inspirational roots. Rain songs for cornfields will not be heard by the clouds, nor curing songs by the Healers.

Facing this daunting future the current group of Native American filmmakers have run out of the luxury of access to the creative old-timers for whom language and song was the ultimate human creation, particularly when it was woven into ritual, ceremony, and worship. Sadly, fewer filmmakers knowledgeable about tribal aesthetics continue to create the songs that are sung and danced to by our community. At this late hour the Indigenous aesthetic has become faint and it is critical that we recognize and accept this situation and begin the changes that will stimulate profound and exciting films, originating from an Indigenous aesthetic.¹

This article concluded with the question: What is it that is so important that it must be shared? What risks are tribal people willing to take to make this available? In this view I espoused an aesthetic based on the assumption that Native film/video producers were knowledgeable about and committed to working from and within the structures and conventions of traditional expression, including the use of the mother tongue as the narrative voice. In assuming this, I unwittingly shared a basic premise of visual anthropologists, a group from which I had previously sought a safe distance. The premise was that Natives skip to the beat of a different drum, originating in part from studies of Navajos by anthropologists John Adair and Sol Worth in this part of the country. I have not totally abandoned that position and am much more sympathetic now toward visual anthropologists.

The bleak reality is that those with access to the means of film/video production — an expensive proposition wherever you are in the world, no matter the currency — are most likely those who have traveled a distance from their mother tongue, traditional instruction, and Indigenous learning. Their aesthetics were most likely shaped in film schools and their target audiences are most certainly shaped by the marketplace and not the community of

their origins. Loss of language, loss of contact with community and traditional expressions, compounded by a lack of resources have all contributed to the dearth of Native American films and videos. This situation is mirrored in the Indigenous communities where I have worked in the past, in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

We have gone far from home and from our childhood. Or have we? Our earliest childhood experiences play a role in shaping our future sensory world, our later reconstruction of what affected us when we were young. This is at the root of the third-arm aesthetic. If you were surrounded by Native speakers and immersed in traditional performances from an early age, then this shaped your instinct to pounce on the record button at the epiphanic moment. Deciding when to record is shaped by these early experiences. The defining moment is the pounce, which is executed not by the first or the second hand, but by the third hand—the flourish of the Indigenous aesthetic.

For example, one winter night while listening to a story I had recorded in 1982 by Macaya — an elderly, respected storyteller who passed away in 1984 — I was mesmerized by the cobwebby (*wishapiwta*) delivery. The story was about famine and starvation and the impression appeared like cobwebs, swayed like cobwebs, and felt like cobwebs. That same night, I also listened to a recent version, which I had asked a local person to narrate for better audio-recording purposes. After listening to Macaya's story he narrated a version that was clean — no cobwebs.

My responses to each had already been shaped early in my childhood. My grandmother, who was blind and for whom I was responsible as the youngest in the family, had told me a similar story — among many others — to pass the time and keep me in close proximity. The story included children who became orphaned as the adults succumbed to starvation. There were ghoulish diversions, such as cannibalism, for my exclusive entertainment as I listened, transfixed. Years later this experience found expression in a poem/photograph of mine, an experiment with form and content:

FAMINE

Flies shelled and husked by the blowing sand
It was a windy year

We dug our cornplants out of the sand
And lived on watermelon seeds

There was a lot that we ate that year
In the wintertime we ate our children

When I listened to Macaya tell the starvation story for the first time, I could say that I had been there, so strongly had my grandmother's story stayed with me. With the most recent retelling for television, the story had completed yet another circumambulation.

This accumulative experience is what defines and refines the Indigenous aesthetic. Not only is it the accumulative experience of one individual, but it gets passed on to everyone with whom he or she comes into contact, clinging like sticky cobwebs. The immersive experience in community — beginning with the earliest, affective childhood experiences — continues to refine even the matured Indigenous aesthetic.

Such a mundane reflection would not merit a single sentence except for the fact that Indigenous filmmakers are competing fiercely with other Native tongues and expressions to be heard on the international stage. And when monetary support for Indigenous programming comes from the governments of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, then it merits considerable attention, since these subsidies (which acknowledge the worth of Indigenous productions) draw the ire of home-bred bigots.

One cannot dispute the multicultural face of this planet, and yet corporate marketing strategies persist as if the planet had just one bland face. As we are all caught up in this overpowering undertow, experimental films and videos provide an example and lead the way to breaking out of the undertow. If one has the resources for production and the market is not the driving factor in making programs, then conditions are amenable to risk-taking and creativity. The following videotapes are prime examples of what is possible under these circumstances.

Northern Lights

1. *Qulliq and Piujuq and Angutautuq* by Arnait Ikajurtigiit
(The Women's Video Workshop of Igloodik)

The productions of Arnait Ikajurtigiit are beguilingly simple. *Qulliq* (1992) is concerned with the starting and maintaining of a fire with seal fat. The wick saturated in fat is a sophisticated metaphor of television technology used to illuminate a Native value, that of patient observation. The stark situation of attempting to light a fire within the confines of a cold igloo and a frigid environment,

combined with all the implied sensations of warmth and human companionship, sweeps the viewer away. However, there is a constant methodical rhythm of observation: how one processes the wick and carefully distributes the wick and the fuel to produce the desired effect. The camera is patient and focuses on the sequential process so as to not leave out any important steps. This is not about igniting a fire with gunpowder. I believe this skill of patient observation is essential to the success of any hunter, and *Qulliq* demonstrates this value at the hearth as well. The camera work and editing are performed with the caution of a hunter.

Like *Qulliq*, the first section of *Piujuk and Angutautuq* (1994) is a sophisticated expression of Indigenous aesthetics as expressed through an ordinary occurrence: radio communication. The situation is that of two women — separated by a great distance and by weather — communicating and telling a story through their CB radios. This situation can be likened to filming a two-person scene with the camera changing angle from one person to the other as each delivers his or her dialogue. The beauty and genius of this type of setup is how it has gentle fun with an over-the-shoulder film-school convention. The humor is reminiscent of the teasing one finds in Native communities as a form of communicating with visitors and making them feel at ease. In cutting to computer-generated drawings of a sea monster (like something out of the “Black Lagoon,” but different climate, different creature), the videomakers further instill a sense of fun into their gentle persuasion.

The profundity expressed in *Piujuk and Angutautuq* is that of how much the past lives on in the present, regardless of distance. How often have we heard time and space described as recurring cycles? This is a Native reality, and the representation of storytelling through CB radio by Arnait Ikajurtigiit provides a pure distillation of the concept. These choices, these aesthetics, could only derive from Indigenous people, who take changes in their way of life, such as technology, and shape them to their own values, purposes, enjoyment, always aware that the past continues to be ever present.

II. Nunavut (Our Land), Episode 8: Avamuktalik (Fish Swimming Back and Forth) by Zacharias Kunuk

A prominent feature of Kunuk’s work is its involvement with time: cultural time and television time. What is not obvious is that the productions are equally about community time. Those who

are already engaged in adapting and restoring traditional practices in their communities will recognize the huge effort required to galvanize the community behind these productions. In a recent article in the *Nunatsiaq News*, Sean McKibbin describes the efforts of Igloodik elders to pass on their knowledge about hunting and survival, for which they won a Northern Science award.² Their intention was to “reclaim the traditional method of transferring knowledge from one generation to the next” by taking youngsters out onto the land. The elders worked with the young people year round in order to impress traditional knowledge upon them, taking into account the introduction of such devices as the snowmobile into the knowledge base. They used as an example the challenge of how far one could travel into hunting territories with limited amounts of motor fuel.

I believe it is a tremendous effort on the part of the elders to come to terms with the past and begin the process of preserving those values that will serve the next generation. They are preparing for the day when they will no longer go out with the hunters but will stay at home. In this soul-searching cultural moment Kunuk decided to make *Avamuktalik* (1995) — and the other programs in the thirteen-part series *Nunavut (Our Land)* — and in the process he has taken charge of the elders and has changed his community forever.

Some may wonder about the importance of this transition from hands-on experience to TV instruction, and certainly there are those who question the value of this transition, particularly when the results or rewards take the form of film and television. However, you cannot feel the impact of this until you have experienced for the very first time the sound of your language and the image of your relatives where before only foreigners were seen and heard. It is a radical empowerment when you become engaged with and develop an opinion about what you see on the screen.

It is particularly astounding when one considers, in these crowded times, the physical isolation of northern Indigenous communities from one another and how they have conceived and adapted communicative devices such as radio, television, and the Internet. I recollect that the earliest use of computer technology by Indigenous people was by Yupik Eskimos in the polar north, selling their arts and crafts on the Internet.

We take it for granted today that modern technology has prompted a virtual community on the World Wide Web, but the

radical position would be to acknowledge that northern people, in their vast landscapes, were among the first to experiment with these Web links, creating virtual communities through communication technologies as a means for physical and cultural survival.

Avamuktalik and *Piujug and Angutautuq* play a part in this as they manipulate space and time (long ago) to address present cultural needs, much in the same way that artisans sell their crafts over the Net in order to survive economically in their home territories. This is survival of and by the most creative.

In Kunuk's work, community prevails not solely as the content of his programs but also in the manner in which the distance is bridged between subject and camera. Kunuk achieves this by reconstructing traditional events, which become unmasked by a glance or a gesture that reveal that the participants are performing before the camera and are self-conscious about what they are doing, what they are wearing, and what they look like to viewers. They are self-conscious about what their neighbours will think of them. At certain times you can see the characters make contact with the camera and make self-deprecating comments: How do I know this? Do I understand the language? Do I have a translation or personal communication from Zach or any of the producers or the actors? No. But I have viewed and reviewed hours of footage in which the camera subjects have reached across the divide with similar expressions and body motions.

This unmasking of the re-enactment is visible in *Avamuktalik*. There is a moment when a man arrives prepared with the pegs traditionally used for stretching skins and an old woman is unable to wield the stone used to hammer in the pegs because it is too heavy. The stone and pegs are props for the re-enactment and not what would normally be available tools of choice.

I am reminded of an occasion when I brought Macaya into the editing trailer to show him the editing process during work on his story in *Itam Hakim Hopiit*. Some time later we approached him to do another recording session in his home. He was recovering from an illness and was not focused as we videotaped. When we finished recording he realized that he had forgotten certain key sections of the story and suggested that we record them then and edit them back into sequence. This was the moment when I knew he was no longer a passive subject but an active builder of our program. These are the moments when collaboration between the camera and the subject truly begins. The participants become

engaged in circular time, in which space is no longer separated forever into past and present but becomes unified in community time — when the elders pass on their knowledge to the new generation of knowledge holders, when patient camera technique and the relating of minutely observed events ensures survival. This recurring time — the circular aesthetic as applied in Kunuk's productions — is extremely persistent, on many levels.

III. *Untouchable* by Thirza Cuthand

Untouchable (1998) is about loss of community due to one's assertion of individuality. Because of this loss, one is left with the obsession of focusing on oneself — on one's private rather than exposed parts. Where community represents a lifelong curtailment of individuality, the assertion of individuality replaces community and one becomes an island.

The question comes to mind: Why does the portrayal of sex make this work "experimental?" Is it experimental because Natives have genitals? We already know that the whole notion of Native womanhood has been derogatorily reduced to vagina or squaw. Or does the experimental derive from sexual experimentation and the choice of same-sex partners when heterosexuality is considered the norm? Why does this specific program content qualify as experimental when there are so many others that have the same self-absorption and autobiographical delivery? In my view, what makes Cuthand's work experimental are the ideas of identity and distance that it evokes. What makes it experimental is the persuasive conceptualization of their interrelatedness. Where has she come from? When did she arrive? Where is she going? In considering Cuthand's current choice, in considering her present life, one wonders what she perhaps has left behind: parents, grandparents, community? The distance the character has traveled is what stirs the imagination.

Further, the experimental aspect of this program stems not from the subject of sex itself but from the subject of sex in relation to age. Superficially, the video skirts the borders of pedophilia, but more substantially *Untouchable* confronts the dispossession of and from one's flesh, bones, and personality that results in being stigmatized as an "untouchable." The dispossession is so complete that one can no longer touch oneself sensorily, morally, or psychically. Only on this extremely private level can the pure essence of any discussion about identity begin and end.

Cuthand's video defines that aspect of experimentalism by the risks it takes in breaking out of the undertow, venturing out past the borders, and in crossing those borders it provides a one-of-a-kind perspective. If experimental films and videos include risk-taking — challenge to and subversion of the status quo — then this work is a special form of that effort.

In addition, Cuthand provides the quintessential symbol as the subject of her video: her body, with all the permutations of privacy and sanctity that the sexual body engenders in a close community. Obviously the choice of using a revealing and highly public medium like video/film makes the subject touchable, not untouchable. The selected medium becomes an essential and defining part of her dialectic. Again the aesthetic applied is community derived and driven. By challenging sexual norms and dislocating the familiar, it brings a greater awareness to the larger issue facing Native people: dispossession.

Native Experimentalism

I have applied my own personal experience with experimentalism and marginalization in reviewing the videos from the North. My appreciation of this work stems from their use of what I have referred to broadly as the Indigenous aesthetic. These artists are sharing what it is that is distinct about living in an Indigenous community, not just giving you what is important to them personally. This is a critical distinction, for sharing implies equality and sovereignty at a time when sovereignty issues shape core aspects of Indigenous identity, even from the cradle.

My conclusions regarding experimental films and videos assume that the act of colonization through technology is well under way. The gun/camera/computer are all aspects of the complete domination of Indigenous cultures. From this perspective experimental films and videos can be defined by the degree to which they subvert the colonizers' indoctrination and champion Indigenous expression in the political landscape. This act of protest and declaration of sovereignty is at the heart of experimental mediamaking in the Indigenous communities. I say this with authority, believing that Indigenous medi makers have in common the humiliating experience of being treated like foreigners in the lands of our ancestors.

I am certain that other Native medi makers have also experienced what I have with non-Natives, who ask why I use new

technology to supplant oral knowledge and literature. In fact, new technology and Indigenous peoples have never been strangers or irreconcilable; since time immemorial our young people have traveled from and brought back to our communities the latest technologies. Like money, technology is now an integral part of our exchanges and, like money, we can use technology to purchase our needs. Now more than ever, we are aware of the necessity of becoming involved with extensive and comprehensive communication systems as we recognize and begin to act on our mutual concerns as Indigenous people. This was my experience in filming *Imagining Indians* (1994), which started in my village of Hotevilla and eventually encompassed tribes on the North American continent as well as in Central and South America. Concerns about representation and presentation by outsiders came to be an issue that transcended economic, linguistic and cultural barriers.

As the digital-divide issue heats up — provoked by protagonists such as the World Trade Organization and mono-economic federations — Indigenous communities will bring their own special rhetoric into the melee and adapt communication infrastructures to their own purposes, including the preservation of Native identity and culture. Already we have seen Indigenous uprisings in the Americas, fueled by advocacy of intellectual property rights, as the world economy steamrolls over tribal sovereignty. It is from these outrages, not from tourism promotion, that Indigenous experimental films and videos will be created.

Flying Paper and Masks

To continue my drumming of the Indigenous aesthetic, two principal, incandescent values propel me to the pulpit given any opportunity. The first relates to a prediction delivered by traditional soothsayers, *Hopi Ya-Yat*, who predicted at the turn of the last century that paper *tutuveni*, or messages, would fly through the air and disorient the people. According to them, we would hear things from miles away, far beyond our natural range of hearing, and see things far beyond our range of vision. This would make us drunk and crazy. This prediction has evolved into social protest and an embracing of modern media to the extent that we grab the paper out of the air and launch our own paper messages into the world so that we don't go crazy, so that we don't accept the medium as the message.

The second value is that of wearing a mask. I remember when my innocent son questioned the appearance of our spirit

ancestors, the *Katsinam*. They looked like regular men, he said. I thought what had he been doing, seeing, as he went about his waking? Had he merely been playing along with my world of ceremonial and ritual masking, which I thought was well disguised and hidden? I wondered what I had revealed to prompt this question. In many ways I had been careful: hiding, telling lies, and disappearing behind smoke screens; but apparently my sneakers had given me away. That and the flawed presentation of the *Katsinam* by other village members and myself.

I was disappointed. He had broken through the facade. My personal disappointment stemmed from the imminent loss of a profound satisfaction deriving from the effectiveness of the mask. It was inevitable. Children grow up. Old people become children again as they reach the far end of their earthly traveling. But it is on the great plain — between the arrival and the departure — that we live our lives, masked. It is no wonder that film and now video are the chosen masks for the presentation of ourselves to the world. Out of the colors and sounds of our cultures we have shaped the image before you. Subsequently our best presentation and most effective performances come from complete absorption in and expression of the Indigenous aesthetic.

The Digital Divide, Language, and the Indigenous Aesthetic

Accepting the idea that experimental films and videos derive from subversive activity, the future of experimentation will be based on challenging control in its various manifestations, whether it be in the modes of distribution, the form, or the function of film and television. Interactivity, as described by product purveyors in the form of television-computer packages, is part of this momentum and retires once and for all the icon of the couch potato.

The Indigenous aesthetic will become stronger in direct proportion to the oppressions of the colonizers. Witness the resurgence of Indigenous languages. Language is a sovereign matter. You cannot learn, speak, or mean it for me. The same is true of the Indigenous aesthetic. Each new medium of conveyance — whether it be the English language, video, film, theater, music, or song — poses a tremendous challenge to the tribal person. Knowing what I know and what I want others to understand, how do I best present my knowledge so that its expression will be understood? The tribal person today — who uses new technologies — must have quantitatively more knowledge than the traditionalist and be

more facile than the colonizers in order to be understood in the world community. It is said in the circus that the clowns on the high wire have to be more acrobatic than the acrobats in order to work their magic. It is equally true of the tribal person's trans-cultural performances, which are most profound when inherited skills and ancestral knowledge dominate the stage.

The Indigenous aesthetic — like each unique tribal language — is not a profane practice, a basic human protocol, or merely a polite form of etiquette and transaction, but rather it is the language of intercession, through which we are heard by and commune with the Ancients. Indigenous culture — not popular culture — will continue to dominate the North American continent as the clearest manifestation of its soul. Indigenous iconography will influence future generations and will continue to be reinterpreted by artists yet to be born. Even as ghosts, the Indigenous people of the Americas pervade and fill the continent's imaginative spaces, exactly like the winds that blow freely over national borders.