The enduring afterlife of *Before Tomorrow*: Inuit survivance and the spectral cinema of Arnait Video Productions

L'après-vie pérenne de *Before Tomorrow*: survivance inuit et cinéma spectral d'Arnait Video Productions

Dianne Chisholm

Volume 40, numéro 1, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040152ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040152ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiitiit Katimajit Inc.

Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)

1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Chisholm, D. (2016). The enduring afterlife of *Before Tomorrow*: Inuit survivance and the spectral cinema of Arnait Video Productions.

Études/Inuit/Studies, 40(1), 211–227. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040152ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet essai examine la façon dont les réalisatrices d'Arnait Video Productions, un collectif de femmes basé à Igloolik, inventent et associent différentes techniques et stratégies de « spectralité » et de survivance pour créer une puissante forme cinématographique de résistance culturelle et de résilience inuit. J'emprunte le concept de « survivance » au théoricien littéraire anishinaabe, Gerald Vizenor, qui l'emploie pour expliquer comment les traditions linguistiques et la littérature autochtones continuent de s'épanouir dans les médias contemporains malgré la suppression systématique, sous le colonialisme, de leurs traditions orales, et en réaction à celle-ci. Au moyen de ce concept, j'analyse la façon dont les films d'Arnait rejouent et font revivre la culture et la tradition orale inuit par la voix imprescriptible et l'esprit inoubliable des morts, dont l'art de vivre créatif résiste à l'extinction. Jusqu'ici, Arnait a produit trois longs métrages : deux films de fiction, *Before Tomorrow* (2009) et *Uvanga* (2013), et un documentaire, *Sol* (2014). Je démontre que ces films exposent tous trois ce troublant mélange de spectralité et de survivance, le premier film d'Arnait servant ici d'étude de cas.

The enduring afterlife of *Before Tomorrow*: Inuit survivance and the spectral cinema of Arnait Video Productions

Dianne Chisholm*

RÉSUMÉ

L'après-vie pérenne de *Before Tomorrow*: survivance inuit et cinéma spectral d'Arnait Video Productions

Cet essai examine la façon dont les réalisatrices d'Arnait Video Productions, un collectif de femmes basé à Igloolik, inventent et associent différentes techniques et stratégies de « spectralité » et de survivance pour créer une puissante forme cinématographique de résistance culturelle et de résilience inuit. J'emprunte le concept de « survivance » au théoricien littéraire anishinaabe, Gerald Vizenor, qui l'emploie pour expliquer comment les traditions linguistiques et la littérature autochtones continuent de s'épanouir dans les médias contemporains malgré la suppression systématique, sous le colonialisme, de leurs traditions orales, et en réaction à celle-ci. Au moyen de ce concept, j'analyse la façon dont les films d'Arnait rejouent et font revivre la culture et la tradition orale inuit par la voix imprescriptible et l'esprit inoubliable des morts, dont l'art de vivre créatif résiste à l'extinction. Jusqu'ici, Arnait a produit trois longs métrages : deux films de fiction, *Before Tomorrow* (2009) et *Uvanga* (2013), et un documentaire, *Sol* (2014). Je démontre que ces films exposent tous trois ce troublant mélange de spectralité et de survivance, le premier film d'Arnait servant ici d'étude de cas.

ABSTRACT

The enduring afterlife of *Before Tomorrow*: Inuit survivance and the spectral cinema of Arnait Video Productions

This essay investigates how the filmmakers of Igloolik-based women's collective Arnait Video Productions invent and combine various techniques and strategies of spectrality and survivance to create a powerful, cinematic form of Inuit cultural resistance and resilience. I borrow the concept of "survivance" from Anishnaabe literary theorist Gerald Vizenor who uses it to explain how Aboriginal literary and linguistic traditions continue to flourish in contemporary media despite and in response to colonialism's systemic suppression of oral traditions. With this concept I analyze the way Arnait's

* Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, 3-5 Humanities Centre, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E5, Canada. dianne.chisholm@ualberta.ca

films re-enact and revive Inuit culture and oral tradition in the abiding voice and spirit of the dead whose creative art of living resists extinction. Arnait has to date produced three feature films: two fictional films *Before Tomorrow* (2009) and *Uvanga* (2013), and a documentary *Sol* (2014). I demonstrate that all three films exhibit this uncanny mix of spectrality and survivance with focus on Arnait's debut film as a case study.

Introduction

Watching the film *Before Tomorrow* for the first time, I was haunted by something I could not describe.¹ After a second or third viewing I began to see what it might be: an uncanny resistance to death as a terminal event even in the face of certain extinction. From the outset, the film signals its uncanniness. As the opening credits roll, a gray and wispy host of traditionally dressed Inuit characters fade in and out of a black void. One hears the McGarrigle sisters singing their metaphysical protest song “Why Must We Die?” Then the credits end and the story begins. The film switches into living technicolour and tracks an ambulant pair of mortals with such snow-brightened exposure that the first ghostly frames dissolve into vivid luminosity. The switch places us briefly in the narrative present before jump cutting to the story's beginning and retrospective telling. One of the mortals, an old woman, tells us the story, gradually revealing the extremity of their situation and uncertainty of survival. When her story of the past catches up with the present the camera relates what happens next, tracking her movements closely until she resolves the situation with a mercy killing and a suicide. But this is not the end. The closing credits roll, the colour fades back into black and white, the McGarrigles' singing commences, and the initial phantoms reappear—only now we recognize the story's sole survivors among them, living on as abundantly as before in another realm. The film's opening apparitions fade from view but resonate subliminally with the story's haunting unfolding.

More than haunting is going on here. Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu's film mediates the reappearance of the dead before foreign powers lay their ghosts to rest. It conjures the living on of nomadic lifeways that were destined to die out in the wake of colonization and modernization. Into the living present it brings a maligned past whose stories were omitted or deleted from official history, including the story of how Inuit made contact with foreigners and met fatal consequences with a prevailing wisdom long cultivated over millennia of living on the land. What makes *Before Tomorrow* a phenomenal cinematic event is its mix of *spectrality*, or its visualization of the spirit of the dead, and *survivance*, its narration and reactivation of that spirit's enduring and evolving character.

1. *Before Tomorrow* (2009) is Arnait Video Productions' debut feature film and the third film of *The Fast Runner* trilogy, produced in association with Igloodik Isuma Productions.

The aim of this essay, then, is to explore and explain how the filmmakers of Arnait Video Productions, an Igloodik-based women's filmmaking collective, combine cinematic techniques and strategies of spectrality and survivance to create a powerful, new form of Inuit cultural resistance and resilience. To date Arnait has made three feature films: two fictional films, *Before Tomorrow* (2009) and *Uvanga* (2013), and a documentary, *Sol* (2014). All three films exhibit this uncanny mix of spectrality and survivance, although I focus on the first. I am prompted to begin discussion of *Before Tomorrow* with the following statement by the film's co-director Marie-Hélène Cousineau: "I have always imagined the characters of the film *Before Tomorrow* leaving the kingdom of the dead, crossing the threshold of light, and coming to tell their story to us, the living" (Cousineau 2008: 9, my translation). As Cousineau would have us imagine, the film's characters come back from the dead. They reappear to tell their story, and they come alive in the film's reanimating medium of storytelling. They do not, like zombies, ferment on the border of life and death with resentful unrest. Rather, they inhabit collective memory and traditional territory as ancestral spirits, even as helping spirits, profoundly at home in their Arctic cosmos. Nor like the undead of horror movies do they stalk the living as automatons of plots of appalling retribution. Instead, they are spirited by a desire to reclaim their historical presence in contemporary Inuit culture—for the sake of the vitality of that culture, which depends on people knowing and adapting their traditions over time. The film conjures these spirits into view from distant landscapes with the visionary power of an *angakkuq* (shaman). It deploys the spectral technology of digital video to become a "seeing" medium to help viewers look beyond the historicizing gaze of the colonial archive to the thriving afterlife of traditional ways.

Is it strange that Arnait should people its films with ghosts? Not really, since "the cinema is full of ghosts" (Leeder 2015: 9). Moreover, ghosts "can be a potent representation of and figure of resistance for those who are unseen and unacknowledged, reduced to a spectral half-presence by dominant culture and official history" (ibid.). Film critics have recently begun to consider the spectral mode of Indigenous cinema as a potent form of cultural resistance. For instance, Gerry Turcotte (2008: 8) investigates films made by Aboriginal women from Australia for their power to haunt the "imperial legacy of spectralizing Indigeneity." Accordingly, films by Tracey Moffat and Becky Cole feature ghosts who ironically return to life on screen to dispel prevalent colonial myths of the "vanishing native" and the "spectre of the primitive" (ibid.: 9). These cinematic ghosts, Turcotte contends, are concerned above all "with the insurrection, not the resurrection of the dead [...]" given that they often gesture towards spectres produced by a violent encounter with colonialism that 'ghosted' Aboriginal peoples [...] through exterminating practices, or in political processes such as

terra nullius where it was argued that they had never quite existed” (ibid.).² I likewise argue that the ghosts of *Before Tomorrow* overshadow the spectral images of Inuit life that occupy colonial archives as documentary evidence of a deceased or surpassed existence, and that they do so by reappearing in the land of the living with their traditional ways as intact as ever. To say this more poignantly, they defy their assignation to so-called “prehistory” and they pre-empt the supposed “tomorrow” of cultural extinction.

Indeed, *Before Tomorrow* presents the story of a small and isolated group of Inuit who do not survive their first encounter with foreigners who infect them with a virulent disease. Ningiuq, the last surviving elder and grandmother to 10-year old Maniq, the last surviving child, tells the story of how they came to be alone in the world and how they died. How uncanny, then, that the story they come back from the grave to tell us is precisely that of their own demise. This is emphatically not a story of survival. Nor is it simply a ghost story. The film captures and conveys the survivance of traditional lifeways, including shamanism and oral storytelling, both harshly anathematized by colonialism. Arnait advances a form of cinema that brings to light Inuit traditions of enlightenment. It uses the new medium of digital video to revitalize the old medium of storytelling. Conversely, it uses traditional practices to enhance the lifelikeness of videography. For instance, as a primary source of lighting it uses the *qulliq* (women’s seal-oil lamp), a traditional source of light and heat, as well as a place for gathering around in the communal igloo and telling stories through the long Arctic night. The stories that the ghosts of *Before Tomorrow* tell are traditional stories, well-known to Inuit audiences yet surprising in how they are adapted to meet a particularly extreme situation. In other words, the film presents a supreme storytelling occasion within the frame of a ghost story. We see the dead come back to life to show us how traditional stories can be conjured creatively for an audience pondering and weathering even unsurvivable circumstances. The film highlights the illuminating process of traditional storytelling itself, and specifically that process through which ancestral Inuit become wise to subliminal, as well as the unprecedented change wrought by contact with foreigners.

I borrow the term “survivance” from Anishnaabe literary theorist Gerald Vizenor, who uses it to explain how Aboriginal literary and linguistic traditions continue to flourish despite and in response to colonialism’s systemic suppression of oral culture. He derives his usage from Jacques Derrida (1996), who associates survivance with two forms of “the return of the repressed,” namely the “phantoms of the past” and the “triumph of life” (Vizenor 2008: 21). Accordingly, “the afterlife [survivance] no longer means death and the return of the spectre, but the surviving of an excess of life which resists annihilation” (Derrida 1996: 60 in

2. “[...] What is surprising perhaps, given this imperial legacy of spectralizing Indigeneity, is that contemporary Indigenous filmmakers have turned to such metaphors in order to counter [...] the ‘colonial camera’” (Turcotte 2008: 8).

Vizenor 2008: 21). Vizenor (2008: 19) elaborates that “survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories.” More than a postcolonial phantasmagoria of remnants and *revenants*, survivance demarcates a thriving afterlife of traditional culture.

In *Before Tomorrow*, I see cinematic survivance take shape in the transition between the opening and closing frames shot in black and white and the interim, narrative frames shot in living technicolour. The framing shadow-world that surrounds the life-world is the latter’s cosmic landscape. Yet the shades who appear before us with their story come alive in the natural light of the sun and the seal-oil lamp. And they come alive in the telling, for survivance is very much at work in the narrative dimension of the film. Fundamental to Arnait’s art of survivance is its use of Inuktitut as the universal language of its film-worlds. *Before Tomorrow* speaks directly to viewers whose first language is Inuktitut but whose fluency may be impaired by national and global imperatives to speak English. English and French subtitles translate the story, but only partially, thus limiting the reliance of Inuktitut speakers on subtitles while tuning their ear to their native tongue. Arnait gives the primary storytelling role to skilled elder, actress, and co-director Madeline Ivalu, thus ensuring the film’s accurate and compelling transmission of oral tradition.

Before Tomorrow performs survivance in another, subtler way that resonates with Vizenor’s critical understanding. Vizenor relates an exemplary case in which an Anishinaabe spokesperson evoked the figurative presence of a deceased tribal member to serve as a trial witness in lieu of a formal, written precedent. With this “fourth person,” the Anishnaabe spokesperson was able to relate “intuitive, visual memories, a native sense of presence, and sources of evidence and survivance in federal court and defied the hearsay of historical precedent, cultural ethnologies, absence and victimry” (ibid.: 3). In *Before Tomorrow*, Ivalu’s character “Ningiuq” evokes something like this “fourth person.” Ningiuq’s traditional storytelling and singing adopts such customary first-person tropes as “Do you want *me* to tell you a story,” or “let *me* sing slowly and search for a song.” The “you” indicates her grandson “Maniq” or the other, primary character who posthumously haunts the film’s narrative present. Ningiuq’s stories feature animals (raven, whale, ptarmigan, snow bunting) whose third-person appearances she animatedly personifies for the benefit of Maniq’s young soul. Yet another *fourth* person animates the narrative dialogue. This is Ningiuq’s dead husband, whose presence she desperately invokes after discovering her people have succumbed to the foreigners’ disease. He comes from the spirit-world to attend her unfolding of unfathomable post-contact events. As a helping spirit, he eventually offers guidance in the actual voice of Ivalu’s husband. He appears in person vocally, but visibly only vaguely—in a suggestive rush of movement out of shadowy depths. He is, literally, a phantom figure of speech.

My investigation of *Before Tomorrow* does not, like Vizenor, stress the difference between survivance and spectrality; rather, it stresses the artful

indifference with which Arnait deploys these two techniques. I argue that, by embedding the present story (what happened to Ningiuq and her people) in the larger frame of Inuit cosmology, which includes “the kingdom of the dead,” and by presenting it from Ningiuq’s posthumous point of view, the film allows us to see how Inuit not only view their long-lived history but also envision life and death, and past and present, as a nonlinear process of creative involution. Arnait’s film-ghosts return from the dead to revise—or revision—history. They revitalize tradition for the living every time the film is screened and for as long as video’s digital life span (forever, in theory). This coming back to life of past life in new media is a *comeback* for Inuit culture. My essay proceeds to examine how this and, to a lesser extent, Arnait’s other films re-invent spectral cinema to mediate Inuit survivance.

Posthumous revelations, historical revisions

The dead in *Before Tomorrow*, save for Ningiuq, do not appear directly before us. They come to light and life in the film’s spectral frame of view as posthumous revelations of Ningiuq’s sense of what happened, which she narrates with retrospective understanding. Ningiuq is a ghost like the others. She comes back to life to tell her story as the last surviving elder and sole witness to her peoples’ undoing. She alone bears the communal and historical responsibility of making sense of and passing on what she sees and knows.

Ningiuq begins her story with the invocation: “Husband, we have traveled far, Maniq and I [...]” From then on, he attends her revelations with his invisible presence. We see what he sees as she relates her story for his beholding. He comes to her from the land where his spirit has been residing along with the other communal and ancestral spirits, and he comes not only to listen but also to offer his supportive wisdom. In this sense, she is not alone but attended by her closest of kin, who, in turn, connects her to the “kingdom of the dead.” He might also personify the spirit or wisdom—or geosophy—of long-inhabited territory. In light of his presence, Ningiuq reveals a narrative of history that has yet to be universally recognized, namely that of how the Inuit experienced Euro-American contact and its ensuing existential crises.

The film presents Ningiuq’s story of what happened in its own time, which differs from the chronological order of events. Instead of plotting what happened from the initial point of contact, the film features Ningiuq telling her story *in media res*, after she discovers her people are dead and before she decides to end her and Maniq’s lives. The film’s narrative present composes the moment when Ningiuq must think back to what happened to look forward to what she can do with the help of her grandson and dead husband’s helping spirit. Before tracking her memory of the event of contact, the film introduces the two protagonist-survivors and their critical situation. Ningiuq appears as a narrative projection of

her most mindful self. The camera extends our view of her situation by bringing into focus her growing apprehension of the existential landscape, her *silatuniq* ('intelligence, wisdom'). Zooming in and out, and panning widely, it captures the climate of intensifying precariousness that Ningiuq vigilantly witnesses.

The narrative present begins precisely when Ningiuq begins to tell Maniq a traditional survival story, and when they are themselves midway through their own survival story. The film embeds Ningiuq's telling of traditional stories within her telling of the present and historic story of how she and her people meet their end. The profound existential irony of this narrative embedding is that Ningiuq adapts traditional stories as stories for her and Maniq to live by even as they live out an event of extinction that climaxes with their death.

To help readers follow my narrative analysis, I draw the following chronological synopsis from the film's complex unfolding of events. A family of Inuit, including Ningiuq and Maniq, are going about life as usual at their summer camp on the edge of the sea. They are unexpectedly and happily joined by a seafaring family who have been a long time away. The seafaring family tells of meeting strangers from afar who persuaded their women to have sex in exchange for steel needles. Ningiuq regards these stories as far-fetched, until she later connects this exchange to her people's mortal illness. After celebrating their reunion, the two families commence with living a communal life. At summer's end the hunters escort Ningiuq to a nearby island to dry their harvest of fish and meat on the island's wind-blown, sun-baked rocks. She is accompanied by her young grandson Maniq and her old friend Kutujuuk. Weeks pass. Kutujuuk dies of natural old age, as Ningiuq oversees her passing. When the hunters fail to collect them by first snowfall, she and Maniq paddle to the mainland to discover their people's smallpox-ridden corpses. She gleans what she can from the debris, including the accursed needles, and they retreat to the island. There, they take refuge in the cave where they have cached their food and where she installs her seal-oil lamp. In the theatre of its flame, she tells Maniq stories that enlighten his darkening apprehension of the future with cosmic wisdom. Winter comes, and their sense of vulnerability and isolation grows. Hunting for ptarmigan one day, Ningiuq is attacked by wolves and gravely injured. Maniq helps her return to the cave to treat her wounds, whereupon she recovers sufficiently to reassure him that they will somehow endure. After singing a song about "coming home" to put him to sleep, she calls again on the spirit of her dead husband, who reinforces her wisdom and courage to foresee that "no child can live alone." With anguished resolve, she pulls back the skins of the cave door and exposes the two of them to winter's mortifying cold.

But who is Ningiuq? Why does Arnait assign this particular character the role of primary storyteller? What presence and prescience does she bring to the story? How does her character perform survivance, and with what spectral aura?

Ningiuq: *sage-femme*, storyteller, shaman

Ningiuq, whose name means “old woman” in Inuktitut, is a strong, resourceful, insightful, and, at times, visionary elder. She is also an attentive and loving grandmother who cares deeply for her grandson. A *sage-femme* (‘midwife’), she oversees Maniq’s premature birth into adulthood as well as his pain-free passage into communal afterlife. A proverbial wise woman, she embodies the worldliness of her culture and its traditional lifeways.

Ningiuq’s character is the film’s narrative focalizer. The camera reveals her perspective on what is happening by closely tracking her actions, gestures, and expressions. In scenes where she is out on the land with Maniq, we see her move with open confidence and subtle foreboding (made overt by the wolf attack). In the lamplight, her presence looms larger than life. Above all, she radiates a master storyteller’s charisma. We see her search deliberately for stories that speak most powerfully to Maniq’s own searching and troubled soul. Furthermore, we see her draw out the story’s ancestral wisdom with meaningful immediacy. The cinematic form allows viewers to synchronize her seeing of spirits with theirs.

In her ability to call upon her dead husband’s spirit at crucial moments of her life story, Ningiuq appears to be something of a shaman. Furthermore, she quickly guesses that the cause of her people’s death is linked to their visitors’ contacts with strangers. With foresight she sees the cruel eventuality of Maniq struggling to survive all alone and, with wisdom that knows the necessity of community for survival, she oversees a suicidal rite of passage that will take their souls “home.” Madeline Ivalu lends great presence to Ningiuq’s character. A master storyteller and musician, as well as a key elder with Arnait since its founding in 1991, Ivalu performs Ningiuq’s part with characteristic virtuosity. Ivalu, it must be said, is the real-life grandmother of Paul-Dylan Ivalu, who plays Maniq. Projecting her actual, grandmotherly self into her virtual role and vice versa, she relives and enlivens the character of traditional life. Indeed, her uncanny ability to cross over virtual and actual dimensions gives her character, and the entire film, an aura of *double* presence.

That an elder, female character should be the focalizer of the film’s revisionary history is in keeping with Arnait’s mandate to bring the presence and perspective of Inuit women to the fore. Arnait, which means “women” in Inuktitut, dedicates itself to researching the central role of women in everyday, past, and present Inuit life. Above all, it explores the creative sagacity with which women have forever been adapting tradition for present enlightenment. For this reason, it takes *ikuma*, the flame of the *qulliq* (women’s seal-oil lamp) as its iconic trademark. Just as Isuma’s debut film *Atanarjuat* (2002) of the *The Fast Runner Trilogy* features the trials and struggles of the legendary male hero Atanarjuat, *Before Tomorrow* features those of an exceptional, if unrenowned, female elder.³

3. Isuma’s second film, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), features the historic trials and struggles of famed Igloodik shaman Awa and those also of Awa’s less-remembered daughter.

Stories to live by in the face of extinction

Ningiuq selects stories from her repertoire of collective wisdom for Maniq to learn from and live by, as they struggle to survive alone. She tells him traditional stories, or *unikkaaqtuaq*, which, passed down over generations, have acquired universal value and various protocols. Unlike the story of what happened to her people that she tells her dead husband and which belongs to the literary genre of “life stories,” or *inuusirmingnik unikkaat*, traditional stories “require (or allow) storytellers to deviate from the strict relaying of their own, personal experience” (Martin 2012: 112). In telling her life story Ningiuq rigorously relates the truth of her experience, which is what she must do if she is to enlighten herself and seek understanding from her husband/helping-spirit. But for Maniq’s sake, she tells traditional stories with creative flare to ignite his wonder while dampening his despair.

After the opening credits, the film shows scenes of Ningiuq telling Maniq a traditional story involving a raven, a girl, and an oil lamp. In the first of these scenes, we see Ningiuq and Maniq walking along a snow-covered beach. As they walk, Maniq pleads: “Grandmother [...] tell me another story” and Ningiuq promptly responds: “One time, a raven flew over the beach. Suddenly a bowhead whale surfaced and swallowed it whole. Inside the whale [...] it was very dark! Like a cave. In the distance the raven saw the flickering light of an oil lamp.” The scene shifts to inside the island cave, where Ningiuq and Maniq have taken refuge for the winter. In its dark recesses, the lamp illuminates Ningiuq’s face as she tells her story, and when she pauses to see if Maniq is following, the camera shows his face aglow with reflection. Slowly and attentively, she reaches the crux: the raven tampers with the lamp, contrary to the girl’s instructions, and when the flame is extinguished so are the lives of the girl and the raven.

Ningiuq adapts this well-known story to teach Maniq about the lamp’s vital importance to their survival, and how it should be treated with utmost care. The way that she tells it not only speaks vividly to Maniq but also demonstrates to contemporary audiences how traditional storytelling works. Here is what we see Ningiuq do: first, she waits for Maniq’s cue for her to tell a story, in keeping with the non-authoritarian way that Inuit elders speak to children and in respect for the autonomy of their *isuma* (‘consciousness, thought, reason, memory, will’). Second, she chooses to tell a story that relates concretely and practically, as well as morally and spiritually, to her and Maniq’s present (they and the story’s characters share the same setting—a beach, a cave—and exigencies—keeping the flame going in the darkness). Third, she chooses a story whose characters clearly represent their metaphorical selves (Maniq is the unwittingly misbehaving raven, Ningiuq is the girl/guardian of the lamp, the lamp is the vital source of heat, light, and enlightenment, and the whale is the dark, enveloping animus of an unpredictable universe).

The first of the film’s storytelling scenes takes place in midwinter, weeks after Ningiuq and Maniq discover that their people have all died. Time passes. Other storytelling scenes appear, including those that feature Maniq as the teller.

Despite his young age, Maniq must mature quickly into a hunter if they are to survive. Ningiuq expedites the process by encouraging him to repeat and take heart in such stories as how he harpooned his first seal. But with the lengthening of winter's night and their intensifying sense of isolation, Maniq grows increasingly dispirited. As his enthusiasm for stories begins to wane, Ningiuq herself gives him the cue: "Are you going to keep asking me to tell you more stories?" One especially dark evening, when Maniq broods over a future he imagines will be plagued by malign foreigners, she distracts him by holding a flake of bone to the light and asking if he can see in it a ptarmigan's shape. Successfully arousing his curiosity, she commences to tell a traditional bedtime story about a ptarmigan and adds the characters of a grandmother and a grandson who, like themselves, are very alone in the world. She uses dramatic ceremony to spirit Maniq's imagination into the grandmother's story-world, where ptarmigan chicks like featherless "baby lemmings" magically sprout wings. The grandson, so moved by the idea of this metamorphosis, takes fright and flight in the shape of a freshly fledged snow bunting. Ningiuq then mimes the shape-shifting antics of the grandmother who, while searching for her grandson, turns herself into a ptarmigan and flies after him into the sky. As Maniq ponders the grandson and grandmother's transfiguration, Ningiuq stresses how the two take flight into the stratosphere *together*. She encourages his faith, if not in the probability that they will survive in this world, then in the possibility of their living on *together* in the next, in another form.

Ningiuq adapts the last of her stories—the ptarmigan story—to prepare Maniq for life after life and *before* the advent of a future such as Maniq imagines. She embeds these stories-to-live-by in her life story that is also the story of her people's extinction. Ningiuq's life story should not be understood as autobiography but as history lived like a story. Ningiuq tells her life story from a communal, not individual, point of view. She voices a critical moment in the life of her people in the storytelling style of oral history. I have noted that life stories or histories require the teller to stick to the truth of experience, whereas traditional stories require (or allow) a degree of creative adaptation. But Ningiuq's life story/history is, in fact, an adaptation for the screen, one that, since it re-enacts real storytelling ways, is more true to the spirit of Inuit history-telling than the original, novelistic script from which it was derived.

Screenplay co-writers Susan Avingaq, Marie-Hélène Cousineau, and Madeline Ivalu adapted Ningiuq's life story from *Før Morgendagen* (1975), by Danish novelist Jørn Riel. In his novel, Riel uses fiction to imagine what became of the old woman and young boy whose solitary bones he found in an island cave off the coast of Greenland during an expedition in the 1960s. Arnait's filmmakers chose this story for their screen adaptation because it spoke to their sense of what could have happened in their own past, and they liked Riel's perspective of a "kind, strong, strong-willed and clever" female elder (Riel in Cousineau 2005). Their adaptation moves the setting from northeast Greenland to northwest Ungava (Nunavik) and from the 1960s to the 1840s, when explorers and whalers

began to trade with local Inuit and transmitted contagious diseases. For Riel, the film's most remarkable adaptation is its making Ningiuq come to life to "tell her version of the world: that of the last humans on earth" (Riel 2008: 7, my translation). In adapting Riel's story, the film does what written fiction cannot do: make the dead virtually reappear to tell their version of history *as lived* and in the style of oral tradition that *lives on* in Ningiuq's spirited telling.

By telling a life history that ends in the death of "the last two humans on earth," Ningiuq offers us a likely, realistic portrayal of a nomadic way of life. To limp along in the Arctic wilderness, bereft of one's community, is no way to live for Inuit who thrive as a society. When Ningiuq sees she is no longer fit to join Maniq in their struggle, and that young Maniq will not survive on his own, staging their death through exposure to the cold offers the only escape from an unpeopled landscape to a communal afterlife. The camera tracks her anguished, final deliberations in keeping with the Inuit worldview.

Cinematic survivance

Before Tomorrow embeds Ningiuq's life story/history in the cosmic realm of ancestral eternity, of which we catch glimpses in the film's abyssal opening and closing frames. These are not the only devices that the film uses to capture the spectral world that hovers about its storytelling scenes. The primary storytelling site, the refuge-cave, is staged and videoed so that it acquires a theatrical, communal, and even cosmological, aura. Placed at centre stage, Ningiuq's lamp illuminates Maniq's face, where we see the enlightening and spellbinding effects of her storytelling. As well, it outlines the dark recesses where the shades of the dead reside. It is from out of the dark that we hear her dead husband voice his haunting, communal wisdom that "no child can live alone."

The camera's abrupt shift from outdoors to indoors is transporting. By switching the storytelling scene from the too bright light of winter's sun to the warm, soft glow of the cave's lamplit interior, the film depicts a passage from a too brutal reality to the inhabitable haunts of literary surrealism. In other words, the lamp's natural lighting brings out the supernatural dimensions of Ningiuq's storytelling. Outside in the daylight, we see Ningiuq and Maniq exposed to bone-chilling winds and preyed upon by wolves, whereas inside, in the cave's lamplit theatre, we see them spirited away by benevolent stories about ptarmigans and snow buntings.

Moreover, the camera enters the space of communion between Ningiuq and Maniq. Unlike the immobile staging of studio cinema or the computer-generated imagery of high-tech film fantasy, Arnait's video is mobile: the actors' movements are tracked from outdoors in the vastly indifferent, ice-bound tundra to indoors with profound proximity. Close-ups of Ningiuq and Maniq's lamplit faces show warm sensations of trust, conveying the intensity of the intimacy that transpires between grandmother and grandson as Ningiuq tells her stories.

A palpable sense of relief is framed and conjured even in the scene leading to their death. In this scene, by far the longest, the camera follows Ningiuq closely as she meditatively sets the stage for her and Maniq's final act. We see her move achingly after the day's wolf attack, and then taking great pains to adapt a traditional homecoming song to lull Maniq to sleep. Ceremoniously, she sets their few precious things in order to charm their passage from this world to the next. Then, she removes the skins from the door of the cave and exposes the two of them to winter's killing cold. Finally, she dampens the flame of her lamp. But it is not cold and darkness that the scene conveys. Rather, the dimming of the light tempers the atmospheric morbidity with soulful sagacity. The screen gradually fades into total darkness. After a momentary blackout, the film cuts to the closing frames wherein the characters all reappear as they were *before* the end of the world.

Re-enacting and activating Inuit traditional lifeways

All of the film's actors are descendants of those Inuit who survived contact with Westerners and colonization. They are also agents of survivance. They represent those who did *not* survive with "active presence," as opposed to the "absence, nihility and victimry" that characterize colonial representations of Aboriginal life. Key to Arnait's cinematic survivance is its style of re-enactment. Ivalu re-enacts Ningiuq's storytelling with virtuosity and charisma but she is not the only re-enactor of traditional lifeways; nor is storytelling the only tradition to be re-enacted. Arnait uses its entire cast and crew to design, stage, and perform scenes of everyday, nomadic life. Under the auspices of elders, they set about learning and reviving a constellation of practices, including umiak and kayak building and handling, bow hunting, spearfishing, trap making, game playing, facial tattooing, fur and hide curing, and garment making. Actor Zebedee Nungak reports having performed "the real thing, not just according to white people's imagination and stereotypes of Inuit, but as we, Inuit, see it" (Dubois 2006: 36). Re-enactment entails the *activation* of traditional knowledge. As Sylvie Jansen explains,

More than an effort to re-create the semblance of an original, reenactment is understood here as a mode of transmitting knowledge, one that extends beyond the performances on-screen to encompass a range of "behind-the-scenes" activities that constitute the film's production, including building sets, sewing costumes, and applying make-up. The field of *making* becomes a site where knowledge is *activated* and put into practice, whereby the past is remembered, repeated, taught, and learned through its reenactment. As that which takes place both on-and-offscreen, reenactment constitutes an *event*—a dynamic process of continuing the past in the present rather than a static and totalizing depiction of a historical occurrence. (Jansen 2013: 4).

Arnait's style of re-enactment should be understood as an *activist* practice that brings consultant elders together with younger cast and crew to cultivate collective memory and traditional life to resist the assimilative trends and forces of colonization, modernization, and globalization.

At the same time, Arnait's style of re-enactment should be distinguished from cinematic practices that attempt to document "authentic" Aboriginal life for archival posterity. *Before Tomorrow* marks a radical departure from the tradition of ethnographic realism initiated by Robert J. Flaherty's classic example, *Nanook of the North* (1922). Flaherty has been roundly criticized for misrepresenting Inuit as specimens of primitive anthropology, and most particularly for directing local actors to perform nomadic skills they no longer used with exotic exaggeration for the greater entertainment of global audiences (Ruby 1980). In contrast, Arnait's cast and crew re-enact nomadic traditions to (re)educate Inuit audiences and to revision the historic aftermath of Euro-American contact as one of outstanding and ongoing cultural resilience. *Before Tomorrow* should further be appreciated for its dramatic refuting of Flaherty's "ethnographic theory" that "you could [not] make a good film of the love affairs of an Eskimo [...] because they never show much feeling in their faces, but you could make a very good film of Eskimos spearing a walrus" (Flaherty in Ruby 1980: 448). Indeed, when *Before Tomorrow* features a scene of Maniq harpooning a seal, it focuses on his loving grandmother's jubilant face.

After *Before Tomorrow*: *Uvanga* and *Sol*

Arnait's most recent feature films *Uvanga* and *Sol* likewise deploy spectral cinema to give the dead "active presence" and to reveal the triumphant afterlife of suppressed traditions. *Uvanga* presents a fictional story about a mother and son's return to Igloodik, an Inuit hamlet in Nunavut, and their struggle to reintegrate into the community. Anna, who had left Igloodik before the now 14-year-old Tomas was born, battles regret and estrangement with help from the family of her ex-partner, Tomas's deceased Inuk father. Coming from Montreal, where he had previously lived his whole life with his Qallunaaq mother, Tomas feels out of place in his father's landscape. To make matters more complicated, no one knows for sure how his father died, and rumours of his suicide plague the village. Tracking Tomas closely as he broods over his situation, the film relates how he resents his father's inexplicable absence even as he feels haunted by his father's uncanny presence. Gradually, as Tomas becomes more actively, and interactively, acquainted with this land and its people, he begins to see them as *his* people and a place he might fit into. His father's ghost appears, prompted by Anna and Tomas's agitated soul-searching. He returns in fragmentary flashbacks that eventually clarify what really happened to him and subsequently clear his name. We see him rise from the land where the elders say his spirit lives on forever, and he reveals himself to be less a haunting than a guiding,

helping spirit. Gradually, Tomas' relationship to this landscape undergoes a reversal, and Igloolik and its surroundings become part of *uwanga* ("I, me, mine" in Inuktitut). *Uwanga* resolves a contemporary northern enigma in the luminous aura of ancient Inuit cosmology.

The 2014 documentary *Sol*, at once commemorative and forensic, recasts the tragic demise of Solomon Tapatia Uyarasuk (1986-2012), who was a gifted, young, Inuk circus performer, poet, and musician, found mysteriously dead in an Igloolik RCMP⁴ station. The film deploys a battery of spectral and speculative techniques that review passages of Solomon's brief life in light of his Inuit ancestry and Nunavut's colonial history, and it reopens his case for further investigation with provocative sensitivity. By splicing video clips of live circus performances together with home-movie rough cuts, it captures Solomon's personable charisma even as it probes the murky circumstances of his death. His presence, moreover, looms brightly over the film's concurrent inquiry into Nunavut's darkening suicide epidemic. Like the candlelight vigil held for Solomon outside the RCMP station a year after his death, *Sol* throws a vigilant light on the unsolved mystery of his passing. Making an independent inquest of its own, the film does not reveal how Solomon died so much as speculate why someone so youthful and bright—a star of his generation—should have been so destroyed. *Sol* holds a candle to that brilliance with an act of enlightening protest and artful survivance. For these reasons, I examine the film in further detail.

The film title underscores its focal character's radiant persona, punning on the resonance between Solomon's nickname "Sol" and *soleil*, the French word for sun. Clips of his performances and of circus testimonials evidence Solomon's having been a luminary of Artcirc, a northern counterpart of Cirque du Soleil. *Sol* also resonates with "soul" by tracking his life of inspired-cum-despondent soul-searching, as well as the wake of effects that move and mobilize his surviving friends and kin. Recording and arranging interviews with loved ones in a montage of mourning, the film captures a constellation of remembrances as it rises among the living. In other words, the film recovers Solomon's image from traumatic memory to haunt the community as a ghost of possibility and as the "Sol"/soul of resistance.

I would stress that the spirit prevailing over the course of the film is a *fighting* spirit. We see Sol rise to circus stardom while his community rises up against suicide becoming the norm.⁵ The film links scenes of Sol striving for artistic expression with scenes of a community struggling to overcome self-destruction. These two movements come together in a video clip of young Igloolik musicians discussing and recording their suicide-protest song "The

4. RCMP stands for Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

5. I use the name "Sol" to refer to the filmic persona, keeping in mind that Sol is Arnait's mediated version of Solomon Uyarasuk, the film's referential subject, who may well be remembered differently by diverse members of his community.

Struggle.” The film plays the sound track of “The Struggle” over TV newscasts about Sol’s death, thereby sounding a spirit of rebellion in communion with the dead. The film also speculates that what happened on the night of Sol’s fatal altercation with the RCMP officer was not just any struggle between federal authorities and Inuit youth but *the* struggle of which Sol’s story is a most singular expression. The film reports what everyone attests to be true: that Sol was intoxicated and violent when arrested and incarcerated, and that the police responded with force. But its follow-up investigation into Sol’s death in prison resists pointing simply at the possibility of murder. Instead, it implicates colonialism’s genocidal history and the intensifying after-effects that compel Inuit youth to take their own lives. It raises the spectre of Sol’s suicide as an act of extraordinary resistance (the ability to take his life by hanging himself a few inches off the floor in the five minutes that he was allegedly left alone), leaving viewers to wonder what Sol could have become in a truly postcolonial universe.

Sol conjures Sol’s active, posthumous presence by appropriating archival footage of his emerging circus artistry. Drawing from Artcirq and IsumaTV archives, Arnait filmmakers splice together videos of Sol apprenticing and eventually mastering original routines with Inuit verve and skill. We witness him hone a mixed repertoire of traditional sports and innovative circus acts as he embodies a virtual comeback of the Inuit arts. By framing this footage alongside videos and photographs of a younger Sol playing under his grandmother’s watch out on the land, the film prompts us to see this elder presence as his original source of inspiration. From an interview with Sol’s brother, we learn that Rachel Uyarasak raised Sol from the time he was born and that he owed his adaptive creativity to his seminomadic upbringing. We also learn that, shortly after her death, Sol began to “act out” as if momentarily losing his way without her guiding light.

Arnait’s filmmakers capture Sol’s affective afterlife not just by recording but also by directly participating in the mourning process. One of the bereaved, co-director Susan Avingaq, joins family members in a ceremonial healing circle out on the land. The camera follows her and other mourners as they gather to evoke Sol’s memory and to call home his restless spirit. The camera also tracks Avingaq’s remote communication with co-director Marie-Hélène Cousineau, whose ghostly face appears from Montreal over Face-Time. This phantom communication between distant worlds echoes the spectral passage between Sol’s past life and afterlife at the same time that it reveals how the film’s digitally enhanced field of view extends the space of mourning.

Ultimately, the mystery of Solomon’s death remains unsolved and Nunavut’s suicide rate continues to rise, yet *Sol* intervenes in national and global media’s casting of his case as “absence, nihilty, and victimry.” Solomon is dead, yet his fighting spirit and vital presence are far from extinguished. Through Arnait’s specular mediation, he makes a virtual comeback as “Sol,” the still-burning star of a transgenerational life story that begins with a resilient Inuk grandmother.

Like Madeline Ivalu and Paul-Dylan Ivalu, the real-life grandmother-grandson pair of *Before Tomorrow*, Solomon and Rachel Uyarasuk, live on in Arnait's latest film to help spirit the critical struggle to perpetuate Inuit culture.

Conclusion

Arnait Video Productions deploys cinema's spectral capability to create a new, cinematic, form of survivance. All three of Arnait's feature films *haunt* contemporary audiences with spectres of Inuit life that resist being ghosted by the colonial archive. At the same time, they *revive* traditional culture so that it endures in collective memory and contemporary culture with visionary prospects of renewal. Arnait rediscovers deceased people and vanishing traditions, and then brings them to life in a revisionary light that illuminates their vital ingenuity. It thereby contributes significantly to the work of revitalization that elders and artists have been doing throughout the history of contact and colonization.

By extending Vizenor's use of the concept of "survivance" to film analysis, I have been able to investigate how Arnait captures the thriving afterlife of a spirit and a culture that imperious campaigns of enlightenment have failed to assimilate and suppress. Moreover, by using survivance without abandoning the idea of a phantom "return of the repressed," I am able to show how Arnait deploys spectral cinema with a doubly uncanny effect. Arnait's most original innovation is to mediate the reappearance of the dead in scenes wherein the dead, themselves, are seen adapting traditional lifeways in acts of cultural survival and renewal, even in the face of epidemic disease and suicide wrought in the wake of contact and colonization. With regard to *Before Tomorrow*, I have shown how Arnait's style of re-enactment mediates a comeback of nomadic life for Inuit actors who relive their history and traditions as they learn their parts. With regard to *Sol*, I have shown how Arnait restores archival clips of Sol's live performances so that his survivors can both celebrate and grieve a rising star's premature death. I further show how Arnait's juxtaposing of spectral images of Sol's brilliance with speculations about his suicide inspires mourning to become militant.

Against the reified idea that humanity can never go back to its nomadic or seminomadic past, Arnait's filmmakers mediate a comeback of that past in revivifying spectres. Ningiuq, Maniq, Sol, and their community of souls appear before local and global audiences with the luminosity of helping spirits. Arnait's inventive spectrality throws light on the capacity of traditional ingenuity to outlast the blackouts of colonial history.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Keavy Martin and Renée Hulan for their helpful readings of earlier drafts of this article, as well as Anne-Hélène Kerbiriou for her translation of the abstract.

References

COUSINEAU, Marie-Hélène

2005 Interview with Jørn Riel, author of *Før Morgendagen* (Before Tomorrow), Arnait Video Productions (online at: <https://www.isuma.tv/arnaitvideo/interview-jorn-riel-author-morgendagen-tomorrow>).

2008 Ningiuq et Maniq, in Marie-Hélène Cousineau (ed.), *Ikuma: carnet de tournage*, Igloolik, Arnait Video Productions and Montreal, Mémoire d'Encrier: 9.

COUSINEAU, Marie-Hélène and Madeline IVALU (directors)

2009 *Before Tomorrow*, film, 93 minutes, Igloolik, Arnait Video Productions and Igloolik Isuma Productions.

2013 *Uvanga*, film, 86 minutes, Igloolik, Arnait Video Productions and Cohn Kunuk Productions.

COUSINEAU, Marie-Hélène and Susan AVINGAQ (directors)

2014 *Sol*, documentary, 76 minutes, Igloolik, Arnait Video Productions.

DERRIDA, Jacques

1996 *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

DUBOIS, Isabelle

2006 On the Set of *Before Tomorrow*: Nunavut and Nunavik Bond Together to Bring the Past to Life, *Inuktitut Magazine*, 101: 30-38.

JANSEN, Sylvie

2013 The Archive and Reenactment: Performing Knowledge in the Making of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 71: 3-14.

LEEDER, Murray

2015 Introduction, in Murray Leeder (ed.), *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic: 1-15.

MARTIN, Keavy

2012 *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press.

RIEL, Jørn

2008 Lettre, in Marie-Hélène Cousineau (ed.), *Ikuma: carnet de tournage*, Igloolik, Arnait Video Productions and Montreal, Mémoire d'Encrier: 7.

RUBY, Jay

1980 A Re-examination of the Early Career of Robert J. Flaherty, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 5(4): 431-457.

TURCOTTE, Gerry

2008 Spectrality in Indigenous Women's Cinema: Tracey Moffatt and Beck Cole, *Commonwealth Literature*, 4(3): 7-21.

VIZENOR, Gerald

2008 Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice, in Gerald Vizenor (ed.), *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press: 1-23.