Breaking the Celluloid Ceiling: Exploring the Unique Female Inuit Perspective in *Before Tomorrow* (Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu 2008)

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Abstract. While acknowledging the diverse designations and feminist perspectives associated with female directors in mainstream cinema, this paper explores the intricacies of female film directing in the context of mainstream cinema, which historically encountered significant challenges. Filmmaking faced notable difficulties before the 1980s, the exploration of female film directing becomes particularly complex, given the predominantly patriarchal nature of the film industry. The paper highlights Arnait Video Productions as a remarkable phenomenon, emphasizing its ability to convey a unique Indigenous female perspective through cinematic production, particularly in the film *Before Tomorrow* (2008), directed by Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu. The study aims to analyze and elucidate the nuances of this distinct female Indigenous collective filmmaking style, exploring its broader implications for the revitalization of Indigenous culture as portrayed in *Before Tomorrow*. The present article navigates the multifaceted discourse surrounding female film directors while focusing on the specific context of Indigenous cinema and the significance of Arnait Video Productions in preserving and mediating Indigenous culture through the medium of cinema.

Key Words. Female Inuit filmmaking, Arnait Video Productions, voicing a unique female Inuit perspective, preserving culture, reconstructing the past.

The elucidation of the precise contours of the discourse concerning the role of female film directors within the milieu of Hollywood or analogous filmic spheres proves to be a
formidable task. Within the purview of mainstream cinematic directing practice, the nomenclature employed to designate female film directors is often characterized by a multiplicity of designations, while a feminist perspective invariably permeates the discourse. It is not the principal intent of this exposition to undertake an exhaustive exegesis of feminist theories. Nonetheless, it becomes incumbent upon this discourse to broach several salient perspectives vis-à-vis female film directors. In a general sense, certain pivotal themes, such as absence (Hansen 2019: 33) disappearance, and resurgence, prominently figure in the discourse.

The complexity of the query pertaining to female film directors is further exacerbated when the focus shifts towards Native American cinema. The task of elucidating the import and the role of female film directing within this context, particularly within the northern regions of Canadian Indigenous communities, where Indigenous filmmaking itself encountered profound challenges prior to the 1980s, becomes an especially intricate endeavor. The very terminology of “female film directing” carries profound connotations, particularly considering the predominantly patriarchal rather than matriarchal underpinnings of the film industry.

Within this contextual milieu, Arnait Video Productions emerges as a noteworthy phenomenon. Its significance lies in its ability to articulate a unique Inuit female perspective within the realm of cinematic production, most notably in the 2008 film Before Tomorrow (Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu), the second installment of a trilogy. The present scholarly inquiry endeavors to scrutinize and elucidate the nuances of this distinct Inuit female collective filmmaking style, probing into its broader implications for the revitalization of Inuit culture in the production Before Tomorrow.

The Celluloid Ceiling: Challenges in Women’s Roles as Film Directors and Filmmakers

The concept known as the “celluloid ceiling” (Hankin 2007: 65), as coined by Marta Lauren, effectively encapsulates the role and position of female film directors. This term starkly highlights the prevailing reality within the film directing sphere, where men predominantly occupy positions of authority and creative control, while women often find themselves relegated to the outskirts of the cinematic landscape. It serves as a poignant reminder of the entrenched gender disparities in the film industry that continue to hinder the advancement of female directors into prominent roles.
Considering this pervasive gender imbalance, a multitude of relevant questions naturally emerge. Among these, a central inquiry pertains to the unique perspectives that female directors may bring to the art of filmmaking. Do their life experiences, worldviews, and artistic sensibilities imbue their work with distinctive qualities that deviate from the predominant male-centric paradigms? Additionally, the examination of how women navigate the predominantly male-dominated milieu of filmmaking prompts considerations about the dynamics of power, influence, and representation within the cinematic domain.

Moreover, it becomes crucial to deliberate on the significance and utility of framing film directing within the context of gender. Does it serve a meaningful purpose to persistently engage in discussions and analyses that emphasize the gendered aspects of this creative endeavor? Are there tangible benefits to exploring the intersection of filmmaking and gender, or does such an approach inadvertently confine directors to gender-specific categories, potentially overshadowing the broader artistic and thematic dimensions of their work?

In essence, the discourse surrounding female film directors, epitomized by the “celluloid ceiling,” calls upon us to confront a myriad of complex questions regarding representation, power structures, and artistic expression within the realm of cinema. These inquiries extend beyond mere gender considerations, prompting deeper reflections on the intricate interplay between identity, creativity, and the broader cinematic landscape.

The term “absence,” as previously alluded to, possesses a significant and nuanced presence within feminist theories and literature. It carries both explicit and extensive connotations that have been explored and dissected within the field. This concept finds its roots in the groundbreaking work of vision planner Laura Mulvey (Visual Pleasure) (Hankin 2007: 35-36), a seminal figure whose contributions date back to the 1970s. Mulvey’s influential writings have played a foundational role in shaping feminist film theory, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of absence in the cinematic context.

Within the broader landscape of feminist thought, it becomes apparent that “absence” serves as a rich and multifaceted concept. It extends far beyond a mere void or lack; rather, it encapsulates the systematic underrepresentation and marginalization of women in various aspects of filmmaking, including but not limited to directing. This pervasive absence is illuminated by a wealth of scholarly discourse, exemplifying the depth and breadth of feminist engagement with this phenomenon. Furthermore, the dichotomy between visibility and

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1 Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Ann Doane, E. Ann Kaplan, Pam Cook, Jacqueline Bobo - These scholars have made significant contributions to the understanding of how the absence of women, both in front of and behind the camera, has shaped cinematic narratives and representations.
invisibility emerges as a crucial point of contention and exploration in the context of female film directors. Questions regarding who gets to be seen and who remains hidden within the cinematic narrative underpin critical examinations of gender dynamics in filmmaking. This lens offers a vantage point from which to scrutinize how female directors are positioned, both literally and metaphorically, within the cinematic frame.

Remarkably, Franz Fanon and Homi Bhabha engage in discussions surrounding the concept of “absence” with differing approaches, as they underscore “the structural absence” as a pivotal term within their respective discourses. Consequently, it becomes imperative to reassess film theory from a more materialist perspective. This reevaluation may encompass an examination of how certain societal groups have historically enjoyed the prerogative of overt observation, while others have engaged in observation through less conventional means, as illustrated by Columpar (32). In the *Independent Female Filmmakers* series of interviews Dove-Viebahn concludes:

> …common (mis)representation of the media industry/ies as very male and very white… Tokenism and exceptionalism are high on the list of problems facing women and members of other marginalized communities in the media industry. Those tasked with hiring often hire people they have worked with before or know, and successful women and people of color tend to be branded as exceptional. The latter means that those preferential “exceptions” may be frequently hired and become tokens for the overall diversity of a production, when, in fact, they are only a select few. Some recent television and film productions have pushed back, working hard to diversify their writing rooms in terms of race and gender or even having all-female writing rooms, but these are still far from the norm. (Viebahn 2022: 253)

The quote concludes that despite common perceptions of the film, television, and digital media industries as predominantly male and white, there is a substantial presence of women in these fields. However, it also underscores two significant issues facing women and marginalized communities in these industries: tokenism and exceptionalism.

Tokenism refers to the practice of hiring a small number of individuals from underrepresented groups merely to create the appearance of diversity, without addressing deeper systemic problems. Exceptionalism occurs when successful women and people of color are seen as anomalies rather than part of a broader, diverse talent pool. Both practices can hinder genuine efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the media industry. It also
acknowledges that while some recent television and film productions have taken steps to diversify their writing teams in terms of race and gender, and even feature all-female writing rooms, these initiatives remain far from being the industry norm. This suggests that there is still much work to be done to tackle the challenges of tokenism and exceptionalism in these fields. From the series of interviews, there is a dire consequence of how women filmmakers are seen in the mainstream marginalized media:

I think it’s really important when we use the word “marginalized,” we realize that someone has been marginalizing them. There’s a subject to that sentence. Often, many of us as scholars think we’re not the ones marginalizing [women filmmakers] because we’re for equality. But when you really start to reflect on what you’re teaching and what you’re writing about, you might be shocked to discover that you’re more part of the problem than the solution. (Viebahn 2019)

The representation of female directors remains notably scarce when juxtaposed with their male counterparts within the expansive realm of cinema. The stark truth is that the presence of female directors in the vast world of cinema is significantly limited when compared to their male counterparts. This gender disparity continues to be a subject of rigorous academic inquiry, feminist scholarship, and critical discourse, underscoring the ongoing challenges and complexities faced by women in the world of film directing.

The challenges faced by female filmmakers within the film industry are widely recognized and constitute a pervasive and well-documented aspect of the profession. In an industry historically dominated by men, women in film grapple with a diverse array of practical hurdles that span multiple dimensions of their careers. This text delves into these challenges, commencing with the formidable task of securing funding (Hankin 2007:76) for their projects, an obstacle exacerbated by a prevalent gender bias that permeates the investment landscape. Moreover, the establishment of professional networks, crucial for career advancement, can be hindered by limited access to male-dominated spheres of influence. Gender bias manifests not only in funding and networking but also in the persistence of stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes that erode the credibility and creative autonomy of female filmmakers.

Stereotypes are also present with other minorities of North America. Hispanic-Americans, for instance did not have their own movie makers female or other, and they were often depicted by Anglo movie makers in a rather negative way: “The Mexicans join these (...) arch enemies as drug dealers in the street, or other small-time criminals, or they are the banditos malditos in the desert, stinking of sweat, ready to kill, but rarely face to face”
Since the Hispanics did not have their own movie makers, they were at the mercy of Anglo film makers, who did not care to address deeper systemic problems. Furthermore, the scarcity of opportunities for women to share their stories, both on and off-screen, underscores the ongoing struggle for representation and gender parity in the industry. Balancing familial responsibilities with the demands of a filmmaking career poses another practical challenge, disproportionately affecting women. Additionally, access to technical training and education in film production may be constrained, limiting opportunities for women in technical roles. Cultural and regional disparities further compound these difficulties, with societal norms and expectations acting as formidable barriers to women’s participation in the industry. Age discrimination exacerbates gender disparities, with older women facing additional hurdles in securing funding and opportunities.

Marketplace bias also significantly impacts the distribution and promotion of films made by women, resulting in disparities in marketing and distribution support when compared to their male counterparts. Despite these multifaceted practical challenges, numerous women filmmakers have displayed resilience, making substantial contributions to the industry and catalyzing initiatives aimed at promoting diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunities for women across all facets of filmmaking.

Arnait – The Beginning of a New Era

Before delving into the specifics of the chosen film, it is imperative to ascertain and elucidate whether Inuit female filmmaking aligns with the male-dominated marginalized filmmaking paradigm or represents an entirely distinct domain. I conceive of Arnait not as a solitary pioneering approach, but rather as an entity profoundly entrenched and interlinked with the Isuma Corporation, founded by Zacharias Kunuk. These two entities exhibit a notable degree of interconnectedness, further compounded by their shared approach to filmmaking in the Northern context.

In the 1990s, the Quebecois filmmaker Marie-Hélène Cousineau ("Arctic Museum") initiated a workshop in video production for women residing in Igloolik. This marked the inception of Arnait Video Productions, which started as an informal collective of women sharing their perspectives on various traditional Inuit representations and cultural values. “This agreement (broadcasting) took cultural productions into their own hands and resulted in the creation of Isuma and the second Iglooiik-based video collective, Arnait Video Production; when it was incorporated in 1990 Isuma created a non-profit video equipment...
facility called Tariagsuk which sponsored a women’s video workshop in 1991 and eventually led to the creation of Arnait” (Wilson, Stewart 2008:76). Subsequently, in 1991, Arnait Video Productions\(^2\) was formally established in the Qikiqtani Region of Arctic Canada. During those formative years, the group encountered numerous challenges, such as a lack of funding, limited access to the internet, low-tech communication, absence of cable stations, among others. However, they remained steadfast in their commitment to highlighting the female perspective, as Cousineau explained in her interview:

> I realized that in Igloolik the men were on one side and the women were on another side. I thought that maybe some of the women would want to learn how to make film, but if I just made a general call they might not come. So, I did a particular call to women. Four or five women came and we did our first video which was called *Survey for a Woman’s Video Workshop* (1991). (McGough 2019.)

Their profound commitment, however, of representing their oral culture through the medium of new media was of paramount significance. This enabled them to share their language and culture both within their community and beyond its boundaries. I believe it is crucial to consider that *Before Tomorrow* is not the sole production from Arnait Video Productions. While it certainly encapsulates a unique female perspective, it is essential to acknowledge that there are several other feature-length films in their repertoire. One of the more recent additions is *Restless River* from 2019. However, the scope extends beyond feature films to encompass medium-length films, short films, and animations dating back to 1992. The entirety of their filmography showcases a rich tapestry of storytelling within the Inuit community.\(^3\)

The AVP underscores the distinct cultural qualities of Igloolik women, shedding light on their global importance concerning matters such as motherhood, authority, and the potential of women. Additionally, it recognizes their active role in passing down and revitalizing traditional knowledge (Bertrand 2017: 37).

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\(^2\) I extend my sincere appreciation to Marie-Hélène Cousineau, a dedicated Producer, Writer, Director, and Curator, for her invaluable contributions to the world of Inuit filmmaking and cultural preservation. Her pioneering work, alongside Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, in establishing the Tarriaksuk Video Centre and founding Arnait Video Productions, has had a profound impact on the empowerment of women in Igloolik and the broader realm of Indigenous cinema. I also want to express our heartfelt gratitude for Marie-Hélène Cousineau’s assistance during my research. Her expertise and insights have been instrumental in shaping my understanding of Inuit filmmaking and culture. Her willingness to share her knowledge and experiences has made a significant difference in my work, and I am truly appreciative of her generosity.

\(^3\) Full list of movies is available at https://arnaitvideo.ca/films/.
A Unique Female Inuit Perspective in *Before Tomorrow*

*Sisters in the Cinema*, directed by Yvonne Welbon, is a documentary film that offers an insightful exploration of the historical significance of African American women within the realm of cinema. These cinematic works place particular emphasis on their multifaceted roles as filmmakers, actors, and social activists. It meticulously examines the challenges they encountered, their notable accomplishments, and the profound influence they wielded over American cinema and broader society. Significantly, the documentary illuminates the often overlooked and underappreciated contributions of African American women in shaping the cinematic landscape, while concurrently highlighting their crucial role in advocating for meaningful societal change through their artistic endeavors. It is worth noting that in this context, Yvonne Welbon not only assumes the role of the film’s director but also becomes a subject within the documentary, that adds depth and complexity to the narrative. “Yvonne Welbon appears not just as the director of the film but as a documentary subject” (Hankin 2007:78).

The essence of Inuit women’s filmmaking, particularly as exemplified by the endeavors of Arnait Video Productions, can be best summarized by the previously cited quote. Female directors, who are the driving forces behind Arnait Video Productions, embark on the significant task of portraying the Inuit community and simultaneously contributing to the revival of Inuit culture through the medium of film. Initially, their films serve as platforms for self-expression and self-representation, allowing Inuit women to convey their experiences, heritage, and aspirations within their community. These cinematic works become vehicles for the authentic storytelling of their lives, providing a means to share their narratives, challenges, and achievements.

These filmmakers, however, delve deeper into their cinematic pursuits, a broader and more profound purpose comes to the forefront. Beyond the confines of their community, their films are created with a deliberate objective: not only to educate their fellow Inuit and preserve ancient customs and traditions but also to serve as conduits connecting their culture with the wider societal landscape. While it might be argued that their efforts approach the realm of exaggeration, it is crucial to recognize the crucial nature of their mission. In a world where Indigenous cultures, customs, and traditions often face the risk of being overshadowed or marginalized by dominant mainstream culture, these filmmakers adopt the role of cultural ambassadors. Their films function as vessels for cultural preservation and transmission, conveying the core of Inuit culture, its customs, and its traditions to a broader audience.
Through their work, they aim to promote understanding, appreciation, and possibly even a sense of shared humanity among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Here again, it is easy to discover similarities with other minorities: In the 20th century, similarly to the Irish living in the British Empire, more and more Chicana/o authors recognized that using English as a medium will make their works accessible to a much larger audience, making these works at the same time more difficult for literary scholars to ignore (Vrauko 2022: 65).

Arnait Productions embraces a collaborative filmmaking approach, involving community members, elders, and cultural experts. This approach ensures authenticity and community engagement in the storytelling process. The involvement of female directors, writers, and producers within Arnait Productions brings a unique sensibility to their films. Female filmmakers bring their own experiences and insights to the storytelling, further enriching the female perspective presented in their works.

What is truly intriguing in innovative filmmaking, in comparison to other mainstream filmmaking styles and techniques, is the absence of hegemony in the process. In the case of making a movie, there are no power relations, notably no hierarchy involving directors versus actors, or scriptwriters versus cinematographers. Instead, it adopts a vertical approach to filmmaking, which is distinct from the conventional horizontal structure. In the context of Inuit filmmakers, with a focus on Isuma and Arnait Productions, this vertical approach allows for a more equitable participation by everyone involved in the production. In the case of *Before Tomorrow*, for instance, female voices hold equal sway, with each contributor having the right to influence the script and the narrative. As previously mentioned, sets and props are painstakingly recreated and vetted by the community’s Elders. In this regard, Arnait Productions represents a novel paradigm for understanding filmmaking, one that diverges significantly from the more prevalent Western or Southern filmmaking conventions. Contrary to this belief “Robert Flaherty is generally regarded as the ‘Father’ of the documentary” in conventional filmmaking (Kodó 2023: 3). Within Arnait Productions, female directors, writers, and producers bring their unique sensibility to their craft, infusing their own experiences and insights into the storytelling process. *Before Tomorrow*, for instance, focuses on an elderly woman who shares her profound life experiences, including those of life and death. The film’s opening sequence is particularly attention-grabbing, emphasizing the importance of the phrase “why must we die.” Through the cultural preservation efforts and the elevation of Indigenous voices championed by Arnait Productions, we witness the transformative power of Arctic cinema. As it is summarized by their webpage:
alternating interviews and scripted portions offer different approaches for exploring our chosen subjects. The originality of Arnait Video Productions’ works is due to the efforts undertaken to create a production process that is in harmony with the lives of the women involved in each project. Our production values reflect the cultural values of the participants: respect for community events, for Elders, for hunting and fishing seasons, for certain traditions belonging to particular families, among others (Arnait Video Webpage).

In essence, Inuit women filmmakers and Arnait Video Productions exemplify how cinema transcends mere entertainment to become a potent instrument for cultural rejuvenation and intercultural dialogue. Their efforts underscore the transformative potential of filmmaking in safeguarding cultural heritage and bridging the divides between cultures, while honoring the individuality and authenticity of their own narrative voices.

*Before Tomorrow: the “Celluloid Ceiling” Cracker*

The film *Before Tomorrow* effectively breaks down the so-called celluloid ceiling, a notable accomplishment that is clearly visible throughout the movie. This achievement can be attributed to the extensive and prominent portrayal of the female Inuit perspective, which is richly represented in various aspects of the story. This accomplishment is particularly significant as it exemplifies the shattering of traditional gender-related barriers that have historically limited the visibility and impact of female viewpoints in the realm of cinema. The vivid and authentic depiction of the female Inuit perspective becomes an integral and indispensable component of the film, apparent in numerous elements, including character development, storytelling, and the exploration of cultural and societal themes.

The unmistakable presence of the female Inuit perspective not only underscores the film’s commitment to challenging the celluloid ceiling but also emphasizes the importance of diverse and underrepresented voices in cinematic storytelling. By prominently featuring this perspective, *Before Tomorrow* contributes to a broader conversation on inclusivity, gender equality, and cultural representation within the film industry, highlighting the transformative potential of cinema as a medium for exploring and disseminating a wide range of perspectives.

The story is based on the novel by Danish writer Jorn Riel, but all the sets and props had to be reconstructed in accordance with Inuit traditions.
When we arrived in Puvirnituq – and Susan and Madeline and I went there often to look for actors and to look for costumes – we realized that the women there did not know how to make traditional clothing anymore, so we had to have all of the clothing from Atanarjuat and from Igloolik brought into Puvirnituq! It was really an exchange between these two communities, and it was really fun for both communities. (McGough 2019.)

The entire movie is set in the past, yet it simultaneously alludes to the characters’ present. *Before Tomorrow* serves as a cynical reflection of their contemporary reality, making it, in my view, the most relevant film for our discourse in understanding the precise concept of collective reality. Therefore, I embark on an exploration of collective memory, seeking to grasp its essence. My objective is to illustrate the distinctiveness of Inuit filmmaking within the framework of a so-called shared reality, while being attentive to the task of highlighting both commonalities and differences when compared to the concept of collective memory. Within each section, I endeavor to support my theoretical framework with instances from the film, thereby aiming to apply my theoretical perspective in a practical context.

*Before Tomorrow* stands as a unique example of what is often termed collective reality.⁴ This is primarily because the entire story is set in approximately 1840, a time when the characters had no contact with White man. We are presented with an exceptional instance of the present firmly rooted in the past, utilizing a modern medium that is not typically employed in cultures where storytelling serves as the primary means of passing down knowledge to the next generation. The portrayal of a historical setting and way of life represents a collective reality of Inuit culture, which is a part of their collective memory. In this context, the film serves as a medium for preserving and sharing their collective memory and cultural heritage, even though it uses a modern medium, filmmaking, which is not traditionally employed for this purpose in Inuit culture. With the aid of this contemporary medium, the characters explore their past (collective memory) to convey to the present generation the struggle for survival (reality). The movie convincingly portrays this as an authentic battle, as the storyline revolves around two isolated families and their eventual reunion.

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⁴ Collective memory is a concept that has been widely used in academic research, particularly in the fields of sociology, psychology, history, and cultural studies. Some notable scholars and researchers who have utilized the concept of collective memory in their work include: Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann among many others. The movie genuinely depicts the challenges of survival by involving the audience in the narrative of two separate families and their eventual coming together.
The movie genuinely depicts the challenges of survival by involving the audience in the narrative of two separate families and their eventual coming together. This cinematic approach not only bridges the gap between the past (collective memory) and the present generation’s understanding but also underscores the enduring importance of storytelling within Inuit culture. By using film, a relatively new medium in this context, *Before Tomorrow* demonstrates the adaptability of Inuit traditions and their commitment to preserving and sharing their collective memory with audiences worldwide.

However, there are no additional individuals present. In an unfathomable and horrifying dream, all have perished, their contorted bodies wracked by agony and marred by blisters. Next to their swollen remains, Ningiuq discovers items that are recognized as belonging to the white foreigners, such as a steel needle and a tin cup. Astonished, Ningiuq and Maniq return to the relative security of their island. Now faced with solitude, they ponder the essence of survival in a world seemingly devoid of others. Drawing upon her profound spirituality and honed survival instincts, Ningiuq earnestly and optimistically endeavours to shield Maniq from the profound isolation of being humanity's last vestige on Earth. Then, one winter day, amidst the darkness, she feels the impending approach of her own demise. At this juncture, she grapples with what actions to take. (“Film synopsis”)

*Before Tomorrow* explores themes that are highly significant from the perspective of Inuit lifestyle. I highlight some of the features that constitute their collective reality, setting them apart from White mainstream culture and binding them together as a distinct community. While some of these characteristics may appear universal, such as the importance of family, I intend to demonstrate that the Inuit hold unique perspectives on these issues compared to Whites. These distinctive themes include family dynamics, hunting practices, and food-sharing traditions.

Due to the harsh conditions of the North, there were only a few children depicted in the film, and each child was unique. Boys were given special attention, making gender dynamics a noteworthy aspect. Inuit society regarded men as more vital for survival, and young boys often emulated their elders to acquire essential skills like hunting and toolmaking. However, women also had their own gender-specific skills, including crafting clothing and preparing animal skins. Both men and women were encouraged to observe and, in some cases, participate in adult activities, often mimicking them through their play.

In the long term, the family played a pivotal role in the Inuit community, serving as the primary environment where children could acquire essential skills for their future lives. It was
their initial opportunity to learn self-sufficiency and independence. “It was a common practice among the Inuit in earlier times not to boast about their successful catches as they believed the spirits of the animals were attentive listeners” (Benett 2008:50). Upon further reflection, hunting in the challenging environment of Igloolik is indeed a complex endeavor. Each region exhibits unique characteristics, necessitating the acquisition of new methods and techniques. As mentioned earlier, Inuit children learned the art of hunting from their elders, and they held a deep respect for animals, striving to minimize any suffering. The guiding principle was simple: dispatch the animal swiftly to prevent undue suffering. This constituted an unspoken rule, and those Inuit who adhered to these principles were known as “kulawak.”

Another vital regulation pertained to the timing of hunts; elders passed down knowledge that different species should be hunted in accordance with the seasons. For instance, caribou were suitable for hunting only in the summer when they were at their heaviest and their hides were ideal for clothing. Other animals, such as narwhals, walrus, polar bears, foxes, and wolves, were also pursued based on the seasons. Among these, seals held particular significance. Inuit believed that seal meat was highly nutritious, and consuming it invigorated their blood circulation, providing a warming effect. Moreover, seals served a dual purpose by providing both sustenance and fuel for lighting. Hunting significantly influenced various aspects of daily life, including clothing, illumination, and ritual practices.

The onset of a time of scarcity is unpredictable, which is why hunters continued to hunt even when food was sufficient. They did so with an eye on the future and the need for storage. Inuit were aware that while they had plenty, others might be hungry. The principle of food sharing extended beyond local communities, as neighboring camps would send supplies to each other if they heard of shortages. Thus, this principle operated not only within individual communities but also across the entire Inuit way of life.

Despite this remarkable social network, starvation remained a significant crisis. At times, hunters had to traverse hundreds of miles in the hope of finding game. Shocking scenes of starvation occasionally unfolded, making it conceivable that families would watch their children slowly waste away due to lack of sustenance. Unfortunately, such instances were not uncommon in Inuit life. During times of famine, people would travel across nearly the entire region, as described by James Muckpah: “In this time of hunger, all seals that were caught were shared right down to the last bone and skin. There was no one among the camp members who was denied some. These hard times made everyone cautious, as no one wanted starvation to occur” (Muckpah 35-6). The family, hunting, and food sharing are three closely intertwined components that serve as the cornerstones of Inuit community life. This interconnectedness is
essential for survival, often requiring individuals to make significant sacrifices when necessary. In the cinematic narrative of *Before Tomorrow* the Inuit practice of food sharing, hunger, and the ever-present threat of starvation take center stage. The film skillfully portrays the significance of these elements within the Inuit way of life, highlighting the delicate balance between sustenance and survival in the harsh Arctic environment. Through the lens of this poignant story, we are reminded of the profound cultural importance of collective well-being, as depicted by the characters who share not only their food but also their resilience, fortitude, and unwavering care for one another. *Before Tomorrow* masterfully encapsulates the essence of the Inuit tradition, where the act of hunting transcends mere sustenance; it becomes a powerful symbol of cultural continuity and the enduring strength of a community united in the face of adversity.

This film holds great significance for the relatively young Inuit community, which officially joined the Canadian Confederacy on April 1, 1999. They grapple with various challenges, including unemployment, subpar housing, and a declining way of life. The uniqueness of the film lies in the fact that all sets and props are authentic, requiring practical Inuit knowledge and expertise. Furthermore, it had a low budget of 3.5 million (“Isuma TV”), which is significantly lower than that of the Hollywood blockbusters. The film’s significance is not determined by its budget but, more precisely, by its ability to bring the past to life, representing a collective reality. As Zebedee Nungak pointed out:

> The openness between the two Inuit communities working together also contributed to the film’s authenticity. For Puvirnituq actor Qalingo Tookalak, who also played in *Agaguk*, a production directed…and for which props were made …this time around it was the real thing, not just according to the white people’s imagination and stereotypes of Inuit but as we, Inuit, see it. It was amazing … It felt like we were back in those days, before the white man came. (“Isuma TV”)

This quotation expresses the Inuit desire to move away from their marginalized position. They wish to break free from the images, prejudices, and stereotypes that have been attached to them. They seek to defy the stigmas imposed by White mainstream culture by reflecting on their past in the present. The Inuit share much in common in both their historical and contemporary experiences. Their collective memory continues to thrive in their collective reality, which is rooted in authenticity. Every scene is meticulously crafted. For the adventurous, it is possible to visit the entire territory of Nunavut and identify the locations used in the movie. Nothing in this film lacks originality. You can run where the children ran,
and you can sit on the same rock where the actresses sat. This is why *Before Tomorrow* presents an exceptionally authentic and artistic portrayal of Inuit life.

The entire movie revolves around themes that define their collective memory and identity. This is perhaps the most significant revelation and opportunity for a nation to discover its uniqueness. This film aids our comprehension of an entirely different culture and community. This film was not the first in this regard, as Zacharias Kunuk directed two other films: *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* in 2001 and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* in 2006. However, for *Before Tomorrow* Kunuk stepped back, allowing the Arnait Women to take the helm. They express their goals and objectives in the following:

The goal of Arnait Video Productions (Women’s Video Workshop of Igloolik) is to value the voices of Inuit women in debates of interest to all Canadians. How does one experience the dawning of the third millennium in a small Inuit community that is in the midst of political and social change? Since its beginnings in 1991, Arnait Video Productions (AVP) has traced a trajectory revealing the originality of its producers, the context of their work and lives, as well as their strong desire to express cultural values unique in Canada; [...] the sheer endurance required on the part of the women in Arnait to produce these video documents testifies to the importance of the project in their lives... While the video works situate themselves in the specificity of their production, they are universal in their motivation for expression. (‘‘Arnait History’’)

Arnait Video Productions wish not only to show but also draw our attention to their fight for survival by highlighting their cultural differences in the context of 21st-century multicultural Canada. The Arnait Women emphasize the importance of their traditions, their customs, and, overall, their way of life in Canada as they strive to integrate their identity into Canadian culture. This movie underscores the notion that every ethnic group has the right to challenge stereotypes, especially the Inuit, who remain a relatively unknown nation. Many people today still refer to them as Eskimos, often unaware that this term is pejorative. In Inuit culture, every name and place carry symbolic significance. *Before Tomorrow* serves as an excellent example to illustrate the quest for identity, as a people who seek to find their place in Canada.

Most filmmakers dwell in the realm of fantasy, crafting films to meet audience expectations. *Before Tomorrow* however defies this theory, and the film’s success underscores the director’s correctness. It demonstrates that the world of fantasy and audience preferences can successfully align, highlighting that the past and the present cannot be rigidly separated—collective memory and collective reality are interconnected. In addition to forging a connection between collective memory and collective reality, the image of the past must be
meticulously constructed. The director, actors, and actresses face the challenge of reconstructing a fading past, with the aim of showcasing and preserving the unique facets of Inuit life.

Not only did the Nunavut and Nunavik actors work well together but the exchange in terms of prop-making, costume and set designs was also tremendous. Everything was done with precision, using only organic material from the women’s ulu knives and qulliq (soapstone sea-oil lamp) to the kakivak (fish spear), bow and arrows made with intricately laced and sinew, and even the elaborate facial tattoos, jewelry and beautiful hair ornaments worn by the film’s characters, not to mention the magnificent caribou hide and sealskin garments. In many ways, the film like other Isuma productions, played a significant role in maintaining these traditions as living knowledge for the future generation of Inuit.

This production serves as both a reflection on the past, namely Inuit traditions, and an expression of contemporary Inuit narratives, utilizing the modern medium of film. Through this medium, they rediscover their past, which is then reconstructed in the present; thus, Before Tomorrow becomes a manifestation of today.

Conclusion

Inuit cinema represents an invaluable reservoir of cultural expression and storytelling, marked by a distinctive narrative thread that transcends the confines of conventional cinematic boundaries. One of its most striking facets is the remarkable success achieved by female directors, effectively dismantling the metaphorical “celluloid ceiling” that has historically limited the contributions of women in the broader film industry. Within Inuit cinematic sphere, gender-based disparities seem to have given way to a spirit of inclusivity, wherein female voices are not only heard but are also celebrated for their unique contributions.

The emergence of Arnait Video Productions serves as a quintessential case in point, symbolizing the enduring triumph of Inuit cinema. In their cinematic endeavors, these directors have undertaken the profound task of preserving and sharing Inuit traditions, both as a form of intergenerational communication within their communities and as a bridge to the outside world. In this endeavor, they have consistently exhibited a deep commitment to voicing a unique female perspective, one that illuminates the complexities of Inuit culture, unearths hitherto concealed truths, and harmonizes the age-old with the contemporary.

What distinguishes Inuit cinema is its remarkable synthesis of tradition and innovation, carried forth by the tenacity of female filmmakers. Their cinematic narratives
have become a vibrant crossroads where ancestral wisdom converges with modern storytelling techniques, creating a space for cultural rejuvenation and cross-cultural dialogue. Inuit cinema stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling, reiterating the resilience of Indigenous cultures, and forging a lasting legacy that stretches far beyond the borders of time and geography. This is a testament to the boundless potential of cinema as a medium for cultural preservation and transformation.

What sets Inuit cinema apart, and Before Tomorrow in particular, is its remarkable ability to challenge and transcend the traditional boundaries of filmmaking. It effectively breaks through the so-called “celluloid ceiling,” a concept not rooted in hierarchy but instead a linear progression. This is evident in Arnait’s commitment to voicing a unique Inuit perspective, one that has often been marginalized or overlooked in mainstream cinema. Through their storytelling, Arnait Productions preserve and mediate their culture through the innovative means of cinema, ushering it into the modern era while respecting its deep-rooted traditions.

In this cinematic journey, women occupy a central and empowered position. They not only contribute significantly to the storytelling process but also serve as torchbearers of Inuit culture. Their narratives reflect a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation, where ancestral wisdom harmonizes with contemporary storytelling techniques. This synthesis creates a cultural space for rejuvenation and cross-cultural dialogue, fostering a deeper understanding of Inuit heritage.

In essence, Inuit cinema, exemplified by Before Tomorrow, stands as a powerful testament to the enduring vitality of storytelling and the resilience of Indigenous cultures. It is a testament to the boundless potential of cinema as a medium for cultural preservation, transformation, and the promotion of voices that have long been silenced or marginalized. It reminds us that the legacy of cinema extends far beyond mere entertainment, reaching into the heart of cultural identity and the enduring spirit of human expression.

Work Cited


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