

> “Filming Back” in Siberian Indigenous Cinema: Cinematographic Re-appropriation Strategies in the Work of Anastasia Lapsui and Markku Lehmuskallio

Abstract >

This paper examines the Siberian films by Anastasia Lapsui and Markku Lehmuskallio. It focuses on filmic means employed in order to “film back” to outsider cinema. Applying film analysis as a method, it demonstrates how film form can be as political as content when used to give voice to Siberian indigenous peoples and re-view earlier Soviet discourse of equality, integration and progress. It highlights two aesthetic strategies used by the filmmakers to “film back:” the re-appropriation of archival footage to rework the past and recredit indigenous individuals; and the creation of a plural pseudo-autobiographical voice to break the Soviet monologue and embody the shared indigenous experience. Finally, it argues that looking at formal aspects helps to rethink our understanding of such notions as “talking back” and “shooting back,” often used indifferently, with the addition of the “filming back” concept, reserved to filmic issues.

Caroline Damiens

**Associate professor in Film Studies
Université Paris Nanterre, France**

Keywords >

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Caroline Damiens

> caroline.damiens@parisnanterre.fr
Université Paris Nanterre, France

Introduction

This paper examines the Siberian films by Nenets Anastasia Lapsui and Finn Markku Lehmuskallio. Although their collaborative productions are often identified and classified either as Finnish or Nenets, their films of a transnational nationality are paradoxically deeply rooted in a clearly identified space-time: the world of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and more specifically of Soviet and post-Soviet era Siberia. This topic is still little studied as well as the growing body of Siberian indigenous cinemas. While Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's films have received international critical acclaim in both major and more local film festivals (BEUMERS, 2017; TOULOUZE, n. d.), they have surprisingly attracted few scholarly attention so far, with the notable exception of the book-length study by Finnish film critic Sakari Toiviainen (2009), unfortunately not yet translated in English. Authors who wrote on the duo's work have mostly focused on their content, particularly on the vital question of representations (OSGOOD, 2012). Their films have been discussed from a political point of view (WOOD, 2008, p. 142-145) or analysed as ecological ethnographic documents (KÄÄPÄ, 2014, p. 175-178). Although these questions are central to the issue of indigenous cinema, in this essay, I intend to draw the focus on the lesser-studied case of the film form, more specifically on Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's cinematographic strategies of self-image re-appropriation.



Beyond the narratives and the strict issue of representations, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's cinema uses more specifically filmic means for the purpose of "talking back" to outsider representations. I have renamed this practice "filming back"¹ in the sense that not only are the stories narrated in the films concerned, but also the filmic material or peculiar cinematic narrative strategies. I therefore seek to circumscribe formal filmic aspects that are located beyond "talking back" and "shooting back," two notions rarely distinguished or used synonymously. With the analysis of "filming back," I look at some aesthetic factors and cinematographic strategies in order to examine the "purely" filmic ways in which Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's films engage with outsider cinema focusing on Siberia indigenous people and create an original case for self-representation. By so doing, I do not imply that these strategies are (or should be) common to all indigenous filmmakers. On the contrary, scholarly literature from the film studies field has widely demonstrated that indigenous cinemas are diverse both in style and content, and that there is no such thing as a rigid and unified definition of indigenous cinema (WOOD, 2008; WILSON and STEWART, 2008; Gergaud and Herrmann, 2019). As a Western film scholar with no indigenous background, I am well aware of the risks and difficulties that come with writing about these issues (such as cultural appropriation). Therefore, in this essay, I will engage with aesthetics issues, thus re-inscribing indigenous films in the field of cinema art, yet without erasing its crucial political dimension. I will not examine issues such as reworking traditional forms or redeploying traditional narratives. But I will not either go as far as to mobilise *auteur* theory, which often has a tendency to depoliticise and de-contextualise film texts. The aim of this paper is to highlight the specific cinematographic ways Lapsui and Lehmuskallio have developed to "film back." Being limited to that issue, it certainly does not seek to discuss all the dimensions of their cinema.

To achieve this goal, I will focus on a few films of the couple, mainly their most easily accessible work, and use film analysis as a method in order to demonstrate how film form can be as political as content. Before going in depth into the aesthetic issue, in order to situate the films analysed in the scope of indigenous cinema and because their work is still little studied, I will begin with a presentation of Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's careers in the context of indigenous cinema and briefly outline a few traits of Nenets misrepresentations in Soviet outsider cinema. Then, I will give some examples of how their films talk back to these earlier narratives and engage with Soviet history. In a second phase, I will focus on questions of cinematic style and examine two different filmic strategies used by the filmmakers to "film back:" the re-appropriation and reinterpretation of archival footage of Siberia indigenous peoples, and the use of a pseudo-autobiographical plural voice so as to highlight a shared indigenous experience.

¹ Marlena Teitge (2011) has already used the concept of "filming back," although in a slightly different manner, in her film studies Master's thesis, which focused on transculturation patterns underlying contemporary "cinéma beur" and German-Turkish cinema.

1 A collaborative Siberian "Fourth Cinema"

Anastasia Timofeevna Lapsui was born in the Soviet Union in 1944 to a nomadic Nenets reindeer herding family in the Northern region of Yamal. As a child, she was forced to attend the Soviet residential school although she did not speak Russian. The event was so traumatic that she temporarily became blind (WOOD, 2008, p. 143). Back on the tundra, she spent these blind years listening to her grandmother's stories. She later rendered these indigenous tales on the air as a radio journalist and used some of the material in her films. After she completed her studies at the Salekhard Pedagogical Institute (1963-1966), Lapsui was the first indigenous radio journalist in Yamal in the 1970s, working for almost twenty years as a presenter (*diktör*) and as a reporter in the Nenets language (Figure 1). This position enabled her to work on specific topics such as traditional medicine or the biographies of the heroes of her people, as well as more classical news topics. She became famous at a local scale and even attracted the attention of the Soviet central radio and television magazine, *Sovetskoe radio i televidenie* (ARUTIUNOVA, 1970)². It has to be noted that such an indigenous radio broadcast was an exception in Siberia during the Soviet era: only the North-East region of Chukotka also had an indigenous television and radio station before the 1990s, which mark the beginning of indigenous medias in Siberia (DIATCHKOVA, 2008).



Figure 1 - Anastasia Lapsui working as a local radio *diktör* in Yamal. *Sovetskoe radio i televidenie*, n. 12, 1970. Russian State Library.

² Although the *Sovetskoe radio i televidenie* article introduces *Taisia Lapsui*, this is indeed Anastasia.

In 1989, Lapsui met Markku Lehmuskallio, a documentary filmmaker who had come from Finland to shoot a film in the Soviet Arctic. Born in 1938, Lehmuskallio's debuts in cinema were peculiar: working as a regional forester, he started to make instructional films in the 1970s to show farmers how to set out pine seedlings (OSGOOD, 2012, p. 72). He continued doing films with an ecological focus and developed an interest for indigenous people world-views, which took him across the Arctic (Scandinavia, Canada). The Glasnost politics allowed him to go and film the Arctic regions of the Soviet Union. There, he met Lapsui in the Yamal tundra. This encounter marked the beginning of an artistic collaboration and the union of their two destinies: they are now married and still make films together to this day.

Lehmuskallio introduced Lapsui to film editing with his films *I am (MINÄ OLEN, 1992)* and *Like a reindeer in the heavenly vault (Poron hahmossa pitkin taivaankaarta, 1993)*. She co-wrote the script, worked as a sound engineer and performed her own songs in the latter (SAMSON, 2017). Although their work encompasses several nationalities and ethnicities, such as Sami, Inuit, and even Belgian-Flemish (*The Shepherd [Paimen], 2001*), the majority of their films focus on the topic of the indigenous peoples of Northern Russia: the Nenets of course, but also the Chukchi, the Nganasan, or the Selkup. As Markku Lehmuskallio has stated in an interview: "We made almost all our films about the indigenous peoples of Siberia. We take the point of view of the people we film. It is possible thanks to Anastasia, who comes from a nomadic Nenets family and knows well the world that we were able to film." (DELAFONTAINE, 2013) Lapsui is therefore pivotal in their artistic collaboration, as one of their main objectives is to transmit Nenets and other indigenous cultures of the North to the rest of the world through the medium of film. Film is re-appropriated in the same way that radio broadcast was re-appropriated in the 1970s, when Lapsui used the medium to contribute to the preservation of her culture under the Soviet regime. Hudi, a Nenets born on the Yamal tundra in the 1960s, recalls in an interview: "Every morning, Anastasia's voice woke us up speaking the language of our parents, telling stories related to Nenets culture. Without her broadcasts, we would have gradually forgotten our culture as we moved to the city." (EHRET, 2010) In the same manner, Lapsui, collaboratively with Lehmuskallio, uses cinema as a conduit for cultural revitalisation. For example, in the behind-the-scenes film *The Voice of the Tundra (La voix de la toundra, EHRET, 2013)* made during the shooting of *Pudana, last of the line (Sukunsa viimeinen, 2010)*, the Nenets non-professional actor Grigori Anagurichi recalls how he realized that he had lost the faculty to express himself freely in his mother tongue when he had to play in Nenets language for the film. The shooting of the film helps revive the use of language. More broadly, the shooting of the film enables Nenets to re-take possession of some traditional gestures such as beating the shamanic drum, tanning a skin with traditional instruments or drying fish, that are rediscovered and transmitted both on-screen and off-screen.

Made collaboratively with already experienced filmmaker Lehmuskallio, Lapsui therefore "shoots back" (GINSBURG, 2004): she reverses the imperial gaze³ and uses the film medium to revitalise her indigenous culture. Her whole filmic work constitutes a re-appropriation of cinema te-

3 The imperial gaze refers to one of the symptoms of colonial neurosis, according to Franz Fanon: "the incapacity of the colonizer to identify with the colonized" (PONZANESI and WALLER, 2012, p. 5). My use of the expression emphasises the question of the point of view, of who is filming, as expressed in this quote by Ella Shohat (1997, p. 52): "Reproducing Western historiography, First World cinema narrates European penetration into the Third World through the figure of the 'discoverer'. In most Western films about the colonies [...] we accompany, quite literally, the explorer's



chnology to express her insider point of view. As a matter of fact, the pair's films have been viewed by many, who often put Lapsui's character at the forefront, as an integral part of the growing indigenous cinema corpus (DOWELL, 2006; WOOD, 2008), bringing together a variety of films seeking to give voice to indigenous peoples points of view. New Zealand filmmaker of Maori descent Barry Barclay (2003) labelled this new trend "Fourth Cinema". In its minimal definition, a Fourth Cinema film must have at least one indigenous person (who self-identifies as such) at one of the key creative positions: director, screenwriter or producer⁴. These criteria also shed light on one important aspect of indigenous cinema: the films classified in this category are rarely made by indigenous people only. They often are the result of artistic collaboration with non-indigenous people, but always give a key position in the creative process to indigenous individuals. On that matter, Lapsui and Mehmuskallio fit well in the definition. The denomination "Fourth Cinema" comes from Barclay's division of world cinema into four main categories: the First Cinema, which designates Hollywood as a global hegemonic production; the Second Cinema, which corresponds to European art cinema; the Third Cinema as Third World cinema (Barclay re-uses the "Third Cinema" category that has emerged in the 1960s); and finally the Fourth Cinema, the cinema of indigenous peoples.

Not rigorous on a strictly cinema history point of view, Barclay's division does not take into account Soviet cinema as a dominant discourse and should, at first sight, be discarded when examining Siberian indigenous cinema. However, Fourth Cinema concept is useful as it is an insider category, which draws on Third Cinema with its cultural decolonisation project, and most of all, because it relies upon the broader concept of the Fourth World, which refers to colonialism and the legacy of empire (Wilson and Stewart, 2008). Fourth Cinema must therefore be envisaged first and foremost in the activist process of controlling one's own image (GLOWCZEWSKI, 2007) and considered within the broader dialogue with outsider (i.e. non-indigenous) cinemas. Fourth Cinema's birth opened a dialogue that broke the too long monologue of outsider film tradition. Many scholars have argued that indigenous cinema can be seen as a filmic reply to earlier misrepresentations and silencing of indigenous peoples, coming from marginalised groups who "talk back" to the dominant colonial culture and the imperial centre (SCHWENINGER, 2013) in order to achieve "visual sovereignty" (RAHEJA, 2010).

The Arctic zone is one of the privileged sites of Fourth Cinema. Among the most outstanding examples are *The Pathfinder* (Ofelaš, 1987, Norway) by Sami director Nils Gaup or the internationally successful *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (2001, Canada) by Inuk Zacharias Kunuk, the first feature film written, directed and performed entirely in Inuktitut. Siberia has also become an important location for indigenous cinema in the 2000s, partly because of the demise of the Soviet Union and the increasing availability of digital filmmaking. Several single-handed film directors or regional

perspective. A simple shift in focalization to that of the 'natives' [...], where the camera is placed on land with the 'natives' rather than on ship with the Europeans, reveals the illusory and intrusive nature of the 'discovery.'"

⁴ This minimum definition is often required to be selected in the growing number of indigenous film festivals, the most important being Toronto ImagineNative Film Festival. Available at: <<http://www.imagenative.org>>. Accessed on: July 20, 2021.

cinema industries have appeared in the different ethno-territorial entities of the Russian Federation: Buryatia, Khakassia, Tuva, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Altai, Chukotka or Chuvashia (DAMIENS, 2014; DOBRYNIN, 2015; ANASHKIN, 2019; SARKISOVA, 2019). Within the Siberian space, the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) certainly has the most developed cinema industry characterized by an enthusiastic "domestic" Sakha audience (DAMIENS, 2015; ANASHKIN, SAVVINA and PARK, 2017). Within this ensemble, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio occupy a peculiar place. They produce all their films in Finland, while most of their work focus on Nenets and other Siberia Northern indigenous cultures. Consequently, their films must be apprehended as part of the Siberian indigenous cinemas talking back to earlier outsider representations.

2 Talking back to earlier representations

When Lapsui and Lehmuskallio began their film work in the 1990s, there already existed a long tradition of filming and representing Nenets and other Northern indigenous peoples in the cinema, as well as there was a history of Finnish filmmakers filming the Russian North and its inhabitants. From the earliest days of cinema, the North has always constituted an exotic and popular destination, both for film operators and Western audiences. Several films featuring "Samoyeds" (as the Nenets were called at the time)⁵ or other Northern peoples of Siberia were made during the silent film era, using an ethnographic and/or exploratory pattern, such as *On the coast of deserted waves (Na beregu pustynnykh voln)*, a Pathé production of 1913, *Novaya Zemlya and its inhabitants (Novaia zemlia i ee obitateli)*, another 1913 production by Gaumont, or *Life of the North (Zhizn' severa)*, a 1914 production by Khanjonkov. On the Finnish side, the archaeologist and anthropologist Sakari Pälsi shot film footage to complement his ethnographic observations during a long trip in North-East Siberia, up to the Bering Strait, in the Anadyr and Kamchatka between 1917 and 1919, at a time when Finland gained independence from the Russian empire⁶. All these more or less scientific films were the continuation of photographic expeditions sponsored by scientific institutions, such as Geographical Societies, from the end of the 19th century (see ANDERSON and CAMPBELL, 2009). More broadly, they were part of a longer tradition that goes back to the 18th century early exhibitions of Siberian natives to satisfy the curiosity of the Russian nobility in the St-Petersburg court (*Mémoires*, 1725, p. 33-38).

During the Soviet era, filmmakers continued this long tradition of "ethnographic spectacle" (Rony, 1996), adopting either fictional, documentary, or propaganda styles. During a two-year expedition in 1929-1931, the couple of ethnographers Grigori and Ekaterina Prokofiev filmed Nenets in an early visual anthropological intention (ARZYUTOV, 2016)⁷. In a different fashion, Nenets were one of the many ethnicities staged in *The Sixth Part*

5 In Russian, the term *Samoyed* has an anthropophagic and negative dimension, roughly meaning "self-eater". It is rejected by Nenets and no longer used. The origin of the word is more probably the Sami word *saam-edne*, meaning "land of the people" (GOLOVNEV and OSHERENKO, 1999, p. 2).

6 Film director Kira Jääskeläinen returned on Pälsi's footsteps a hundred years after. Her film *Northern Travelogues (Pohjankävijäin merkintöjä)*, 2019) combines Pälsi's footage with new one.

7 Following the discovery in 2014 of the Prokofiev footage in the archives of the Museum of Anthropology in St-Petersburg (Kunstkamera), anthropologist Dmitri Arzytov decided to edit it and

of the World (*Shestaia chast mira*, 1926) by avant-garde director Dziga Vertov. The result of several cinema expeditions through the newly formed Soviet Union, Vertov’s film takes the form of a catalogue of Soviet ethnic diversity and focuses on geographical and cultural contrasts. To represent the Nenets, the film adapts a famous scene from *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922), where Nanook (played by Inuk Allakariallak) is supposed to discover the modern technology brought by the white man in the form of a gramophone (Figure 2). The juxtaposition of the technological object to the indigenous character was used to demonstrate the otherness and backwardness assigned to indigenous peoples (RONY, 1996). In the Soviet case, what is at stake is not so much the supposed astonishment of the natives in front of technology for the purpose of opposing the “civilised” to the “primitive.” On the contrary, the technology motif is used to incorporate the indigenous peoples into the socialist project in accordance with the nationalities policy of the new State, which proclaims the equality between the different national components of the large Soviet family.



Figure 2 - *The Sixth Part of the World* (1926). Screenshot.

made the film *Samoyedic Diary* (*Samodiiskii dnevnik* [in Russian]; *Samoed’ida’ padar’* [in Nenets], 2016).

More broadly, Soviet film narratives including Nenets (and more generally the Northern indigenous peoples) stage the struggle of (Soviet) “progress” against (indigenous) “tradition”, the latter being always depicted as rigid and frozen in the past, as a way to celebrate Soviet modernity. This is the case in the animation short *Samoyed Boy* (*Samoedskii mal'chik*, Nikolai Khodataev *et al.*, 1928). The cartoon depicts the destiny of a Nenets boy who reveals the tricks the mean shaman uses to impress and fool the people. After this deed, he is chased away by the shaman and leaves the tundra to study in Leningrad at the Workers' University. There, now an educated proletarian (Figure 3), he returns to the North to enlighten his people. Focusing on the issue of school, *Samoyed Boy* creates a contrast between rational modern knowledge (in the way of the school) and indigenous traditional knowledge (in the way of the trickster shaman), a knowledge that has been discarded by the authorities as “backward”.



Figure 3. *Samoyed Boy* (1928). Screenshot.

power that only fulfills their wishes. By so doing, the film depicts reality not as it is, but as it should be, following the principles of Socialist Realism, the official doctrine for the arts in Stalinist Soviet Union.



Figure 4 - *The Romantics* (1941). Screenshot.

Several films by Lapsui and Lehmuskallio re-examine the issue of school: *Anna* (1997), *Seven Songs from the Tundra* (*Seitsemän laulua tundralta*, 1999) and, above all, *Pudana, last of the line*. This latter film narrates the first days of Neko, a Nenets girl, at the residential school. Neko is immediately renamed with the Russian name Nadia, because the (Russian) teacher thinks hers is "not pretty." The film then shows how Neko has to sleep like the Russians (i.e. taking off her clothes), must eat like the Russians (porridge instead of fish as she is used to), must learn to count without anything to count (whereas her father had taught her to count with fish). Those different moments of the film address the painful issue of "Russification." In Soviet ethnic politics, everyone had to keep their national gloss over one Soviet citizenship. Soviet policies, where citizenship and nationality (i.e. ethnicity) are never confused, officially allowed all nationalities to express themselves in their own ways only to the extent that it does not infringe upon communist ideology (according to the Stalinist slogan "National by the form, communist/proletarian by the content"). In reality, the situation was less ideal: national cultures of non-Russian peoples were being promoted while at the same time a programme of modernization, acculturation, and integration was supposed to homogenize the Soviet nation through socialism (SUNY, 2012).

All the above examples show the ways in which Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's narratives talk back to outsider cinema misrepresentations. Soviet "progress" is depicted from an indigenous point of view that reassesses Soviet modernity narratives. But it has to be noted that Lapsui and Lehmuskallio do not give an idealized image of Nenets society. On the opposite, disturbing situations can be portrayed, as is the case in *Seven Songs from the Tundra*. The first feature-length film by the duo in 1999 consists of seven short films (the seven "songs") with independent narratives. The song No. 2, "The Bride," depicts the miserable destiny of a Nenets woman rejected by her family for having followed her love inclination against her mother's wishes. The man she finally marries despises her and abuses her. He ends up selling her to a Russian man as a servant. Although harsh stories like this one can be staged in their films, a large part of Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's cinema re-examines Soviet earlier narratives, most particularly about the painful issue of Soviet residential schools, in line with the Fourth Cinema trend of re-appropriation of indigenous peoples history and self-image.

3 Filmic archive re-appropriation and reinterpretation

Beyond the strict issues of narratives and representations discussed above, I wish to draw the focus on the ways Lapsui and Lehmuskallio "film back", on how they use specifically cinematographic ways to re-appropriate filmic self-expression. One of these "filming back" strategies is the re-use of outsider footage (of Russian, Soviet or other origin) and the juxtaposition of this footage with new images that adopt, as Lehmuskallio says, the "point of view of the people filmed". Re-use of archival footage can be found in several of their films: for example, in *Fata Morgana* (2004) or *Seven Songs from the Tundra*. In the latter, each song opens or closes with a few shots of Soviet archival footage that are positioned in the montage



next to the new footage shot by Lapsui and Lehmuskallio. Through this cinematographic process, the entire film holds the status of a filmic reply to earlier Soviet images so as to give their side of the story. For example, the song No. 6, “Siako”, begins with a few shots from a Soviet newsreel showing indigenous children of the North at a residential school while the soundtrack resonates with a lively Soviet children choral song (Figure 5). Following this archival footage, the rest of the “song” shows the reverse side of Soviet schooling. It depicts the Nenets girl Siako praying to the spirits of her people to make her tent invisible so that the Russians will not find it. Her prayers are not heard as the Russian officials come to her home and we see how the child is finally torn away from her parents by force to be taken to school (Figure 6).



Figure 5 - *Seven Songs from the Tundra* (1999). Screenshot.

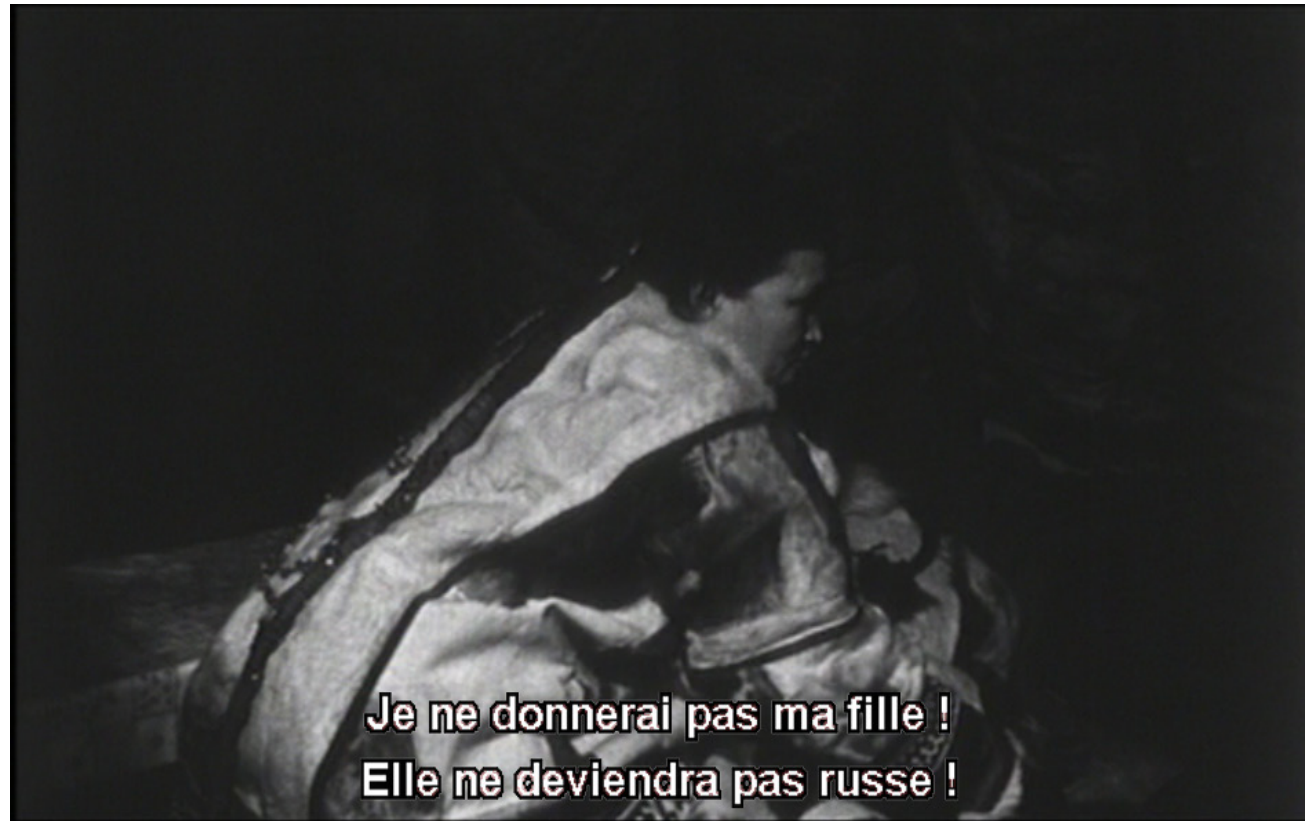


Figure 6 - *Seven Songs from the Tundra* (1999). Screenshot.

The filmic response using archival re-appropriation and re-interpretation constitutes the whole argument of the documentary film *Anna*. The film begins with a 1954 Soviet documentary footage displaying Nganasan, one of the peoples of Northern Russia, living in the Taimyr Peninsula. After a very brief introduction depicting Nganasan way of life (in their traditional dwelling), we see cheerful Nganasan kids in their residential school (they make their beds, do cutting-out in class, brush their teeth), serious Nganasan students with microscopes and a Nganasan reindeer herder

using his lasso, in a Soviet perfect vision of "modernised" indigenous peoples (educated, doing Western-style sciences), yet still able to bear their traditional traits (catching reindeer with a lasso).

Following this archival footage, the camera takes us to contemporary Taimyr forty-two years after to meet one of the little girls who appeared in the Soviet film: Anna Alekseevna Mombe. She has never seen the Soviet documentary. The film then shows Anastasia Lapsui showing the footage to Anna Mombe and her family (Figure 7). Staging indigenous film watching marks the signal of filmic discourse re-appropriation through critical re-viewing of Soviet footage. Then, the larger part of the film is a long interview of Anna. As a result, *Anna* constitutes a sort of indigenous *mise en abyme* of the Soviet images, which does justice to Anna, the little girl in the Soviet documentary, filmed in a close-up brushing her teeth and wearing a broad smile but remaining mute (Figure 8). In the new film, she is finally allowed to speak out. It should be pointed out that the fact that she brushes her teeth is not insignificant considering the importance of Soviet hygienist discourse in the case of indigenous peoples. At the same time, her mouth being busy with the Soviet sanitary practice, she could not express herself. In *Anna*, Anna Mombe speaks, and that sole fact is the object and the title of the film. The film then takes us to the village of Novinki, where Anna Mombe used to work as a local secretary of the Communist Party. She returns to the places where she grew up: the school and the Party building. There, she recalls how she was convinced by Soviet ideology and realized her mistake only when the USSR collapsed. She tells how indigenous people were deprived of their traditional way of life, without having received anything in return. In front of Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's camera, Anna recounts the dispossession, the loss of meaning, the waves of suicide affecting the young people of her people. She tells how she got drunk for the first time. The still camera interview device highlights her speech, previously silenced in the 1954 film, where a Russian authoritative voice-over narrated the silent images. To the Soviet images of indigenous children light-heartedly integrated into a new progressive culture, the film *Anna* responds with the image of the same person (Anna Mombe) disillusioned in the ruins of the half-destroyed building of the local Communist Party (Figure 9).





Figure 7 - *Anna* (1997). Screenshot.

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Figure 8 - *Anna* (1997). Screenshot.



Figure 9 - *Anna* (1997). Screenshot.

Only an extra in the archival footage, a child amongst other indigenous children, Anna is a full first-person subject in the new film. By so doing, the film "recredits" Anna, who was one of many anonymous Nganasan in the Soviet newsreel (although Anna is briefly named in the 1954 documentary, she is just one name among others). The process of recrediting and footage repatriation is common to many indigenous films, often combining archival footage and images of Indigenous spectatorship as a way to claim older media images. Identification of unnamed indigenous persons in outsider footage (be it fictional, documentary or amateur) is crucial in the context of the systemic, historical practices of renaming or refusal to name indigenous individuals in outsider film credits (HEARNE, 2012). Consequently, recrediting is a heavily politicized practice. As Joanna Hearne

(2012, p. 207) has argued about Native American films: "The recrediting or recaptioning also functions, like film credits, to ascribe aesthetic and titular rights through the acknowledgement of the origins of the image." It is therefore both a cinematic way to revise dominant history and to re-claim film footage. In the recent years, the moving image issue has been at the centre of memory claims: access to film archives, particularly to ethnographic visual documents preserved in the West, is demanded by indigenous peoples in a multidimensional process: to re-appropriate parts of their culture, criticize outsider scientific interpretations or prove the continuity of tradition and occupation of the land (BULANE-HOPA, 2011; PETERSON, 2013).

However, the re-use of archival footage can also be a double-edged process. Using the juxtaposition of archival Soviet footage and newly fictional images, *Seven Songs from the Tundra* is entirely shot in grainy black and white, which, it must be stressed, is an exception rather than the rule in 1990s cinema. This aesthetic choice can be read as a way to create "new" historical photographs (WOOD, 2008, p. 143), but also as a way to integrate the Soviet past, in the form of film material, into the present of the indigenous people of the Russian North. In *Seven Songs from the Tundra*, the materiality of the black and white archival footage "contaminates" the entire film. As a matter of fact, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's work does not intend to erase the past. On the contrary, it must also be read as a product of Soviet history. This latter aspect is mostly reflected in the narratives, which often revisit the Soviet historical period and its consequences for indigenous peoples in the present, as noted earlier with the examples of *Pudana, last of the line* and *Anna*. But it can also be reflected in more formal aspects like the black and white in *Seven Songs from the Tundra*, or with the use of the biographical narrative.

4 A hybrid narrative for a plural (pseudo-)autobiographical voice

Like several other indigenous films, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio use first-person narrative as a way to express an insider point of view. The narratives often draw on elements from Anastasia Lapsui's biography. This choice has implications on their cinematic style, which pays a great deal of attention to self-expression and (pseudo-)interview device, and therefore blurs the filmic categories of documentary and fiction. Film scholars and critics have had trouble describing the style of Lapsui and Lehmuskallio. Quite often, their films are classified as documentaries. Even when they are obvious fictions like *Pudana, last of the line* or *Bride of the Seventh Heaven (Jumalan morsian, 2003)*, they can be branded "ethnographic ecodocumentaries" (KÄÄPÄ, 2014, p. 174). This label is a consequence of the close association of the documentary style both with indigenous peo-



ples and the Arctic. Documentary cinema was used in the majority of films made by, in, and about the region, and appears to be one of the most influential conduits in the construction of an Arctic imaginary (KAGANOVSKY and WESTERSTAHL STENPORT, 2019). Furthermore, in film history, non-fiction is often seen as the privileged form to record peoples perceived by outsiders as primitive (PIAULT, 2000). Although this idea is incorrect in view of the history of cinema and the recent rediscovery of indigenous people's participation to early fiction cinema (RAHEJA, 2010; HEARNE, 2012), it is persistent. As a result, indigenous peoples, perceived as "natural peoples", are visually imagined according to a cinematic regime that locks them up into the supposed "natural" genre of film, leaving all the room for fiction to the "cultural peoples". This reinterpretation of the Western culturally constructed opposition between Nature and Culture applied to cinema circumscribes and limits the possibility of indigeneity within a certain restricted semiotic field, often materialised in ethnographic or documentary cinema. Finally, the documentary label also refers to Westerners lack of knowledge of indigenous cultures. When watching indigenous films, non-indigenous viewers tend to focus their attention on cultural or "exotic" aspects to learn information unknown to them, thus seeing documentary images even in clearly established fictions.

In an attempt to move beyond this simplistic duality, another label is even more often used to describe Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's style: poetic (OSWOOD, 2012). In my opinion, this label is sometimes too swiftly used precisely to express the impossibility to define their cinematic style and therefore has to be questioned. Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's cinematic style definitely dodges the classical narrative form. One of their particular style figures is the interview. As discussed above, the interview creates the conditions for first-person narration, an issue that is vital in the historical context of the silencing of indigenous people in outsider cinema, as in the case of the documentary *Anna*. By so doing, the interview device is used according to the classical aesthetic codes of documentary. But a characteristic of Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's work is that their use of the interview device is not limited to documentaries, but also integrated to their fictions.

This is the case in *Pudana, last of the line*, which combines classical fictional narrative aesthetics with pseudo-interviews. To tell the story of Neko, the narrative goes back and forth between the 1960s, when the little girl is taken to the residential school, and the present, when Neko, now an adult, looks back on her past. The film, which makes clear reference to Lapsui's life, constantly oscillates between fiction and documentary aesthetics, disrupting filmic categories. The scenes where Neko is an adult are fictional images (with an actress saying her lines), but are filmed in non-fiction style, reproducing the interview device (the actress impersonating Neko speaking alone to the camera in front of her) (Figure 10). At first sight, this blurring of the two main cinematographic modes seems to correspond to the two space-times of the narrative: one set in the past (school time) treated in the fiction mode; and the other set in the present (interviews and life story) in the documentary mode. But it turns out that the blurring of the two cinematic modes spreads out to the entire film. At some chosen moments, the classic fictional narrative is interrupted and, without any transition, turns into an interview. This is the case in the sequence where Neko's mother returns to the tundra after a long absence: in the middle of the scene, the actress, who was interacting with the other characters, turns to the camera, looks at the spectators straight in the eye



and starts to tell her story (Figure 11). As a result, the narrative switches from classical fiction regime (where the spectator is carefully left outside the narrative) to a direct address to the spectator. When she has finished, the story resumes as if it has never interrupted and the film goes back to classical fiction narrative style again. With this narrative strategy, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio emphasize the vital importance to give voice to all indigenous characters.



Figure 10. *Pudana, last of the line* (2010). Screenshot.



Figure 11. *Pudana, last of the line* (2010). Screenshot.

While their films blur the fragile frontier between fiction and documentary, other cinematic modes can be added. For example, the film *Fata Morgana*, which focuses on the Chukchi people, combines several types of images in the narrative: documentary images (here again with an interview), archival footage (in the process of re-viewing earlier cinematic images) and volume animation (to visually create the Chukchi mythical world). By so doing, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's films invent a composite filmic language that can be seen as the reproduction of the communication between the two of them. When Lapsui and Lehmuskallio started to collaborate, they first had to find a common language. As Lehmuskallio has declared:



"When we met more than 20 years ago, we had no common language, we only had gestures. Anastasia didn't speak English at all. In the beginning, we spoke Russian, which I knew a little. Over time, our communication developed in a language that mixes Nenets, Russian, Finnish and English" (DELAFONTAINE, 2013). In the same way that their collaboration required the invention of a composite language, their films integrate several cinematographic modes that are interwoven with each other with great freedom.

In this composite film language, the transversal use of the interview device is significant. Moving between fiction and non-fiction, the interview puts indigenous individual speech at the centre of attention. Yet, it has to be noted that, during the Soviet era, this narrative style was one of the key elements put forward by Soviet power in the creation of an indigenous intelligentsia literature. The autobiographical, pseudo-autobiographical or para-autobiographical theme, intermingled with the description of revolutionary changes, was an essential part of the nascent Soviet indigenous literary canons encouraged by the regime (TOULOUZE, 1998). Re-using this autobiographical form, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's work demonstrates a stylistic continuity with Soviet-era stylistic principles. Numerous autobiographical elements from Anastasia Lapsui's life are scattered throughout their films. This is the case with the above-discussed theme of school, but other autobiographical elements can be found. For example, *Bride of the Seventh Heaven*, the duo's second feature-length fiction film, tells the story of a blind little Nenets girl who lives with her grandmother. Knowing Lapsui's story and the fact that she lost eyesight as a child, it is easy to trace the origin of the script. Of course, it must be underlined that the films, while they adopt some formal aspects of Soviet indigenous literature, differ considerably from these narratives when we look at their content. Whereas Soviet indigenous texts celebrated the October Revolution and the many changes it implied for indigenous ways of life, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio use the autobiographical interviews as a means to talk back to the former power from another point of view. As a result, their films are hybrid narratives. They coalesce documentary and fictional styles with the use of the interview device, but this emphasis on self-expression can also be seen as the mark of Soviet aesthetics. Interweaving real features from Lapsui's life to fiction but also the biographies and life stories of other indigenous individuals, their films create pseudo-autobiographical narratives.

This collective autobiographical film form resonates with the plurality of indigenous voices staged in their films. Of course, the Nenets are at the centre of many of their films: *Seven Songs from the Tundra*, *Bride of the Seventh Heaven* and *Pudana, last of the line*. But several films address the cultural worlds and histories of other Northern indigenous peoples. *Fata Morgana* is based on Chukchi legends. *Anna* focuses on the Nganasan, a people who live in the Taimyr Peninsula in Northern Siberia. *Sacrifice—a film about a forest (Uhri—elokuva metsästä, 1998)* tells the story of a Selkup clan's life along the Taz River in Siberia. *Sami (Sápmelas – Saamelainen, 2006)* is about the Sami, a people living in the North of Scandinavia and Russia. Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's plural voice is put at the service of different indigenous peoples. By so doing, their films are a conduit for self-expression of diverse indigenous peoples who share the common traumatic experience of "disruptions in cultural knowledge, historical memory and identity between generations due to the tragic but familiar litany of assaults" (GINSBURG, 1991, p. 104).



This plural style must be linked to the concept of "visual sovereignty" created by Michelle Raheja (2010) in relation to indigenous Native American cinema, and that she defines as the act of self-representation through indigenous media, in a variety of political, economic and cultural contexts, but where contemporary media practices enter into dialogue with the past and enable indigenous cultural consolidation. Visual sovereignty implies that indigenous people cease to be the "objects" of the film to become "subjects" and therefore use the filmic medium in their own terms in a first-person self-expression mode. It is important to bear in mind that this first-person expression can be individual, collective, or plural. In the case studied here, the plural pseudo-autobiographical voice used in Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's work embodies the ruptures in time and history, cultural dispossession, traumatic abuses, and loss of identity shared by all Siberia indigenous peoples who have made it through the Soviet period. In addition, this plural voice counters the soliloquy of Soviet outsider cinema (such as the Russian authoritative voice-over silencing indigenous individuals in *Anna*), which tells only one side of history.

Conclusion: Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's "filming back"

Anchored in Fourth Cinema, which marks the re-appropriation of the moving image by indigenous peoples, the Siberian films of Anastasia Lapsui and Markku Lehmuskallio constitute a filmic response to outsider representations. Deeply inscribed in the space of (post-) Soviet Russia, these films offer specific aesthetic and narrative perspectives that engage with Soviet heritage. As a result, they can be viewed as hybrid objects, both from the Soviet era and products of the post-Soviet openly asserted refusal to disappear as a culture. They give voice to Siberia indigenous peoples as a means to re-view earlier Soviet discourse of equality, integration, and progress. In terms of formal aspects, the filmmakers use two main aesthetic strategies. The first one is the re-use of Soviet archival footage that enables to rework the past, reclaim images, and recredit indigenous individuals who were just one of many anonymous indigenous people in outsider cinema. The second strategy consists in the creation of a plural voice, echoing the shared experience of the peoples of the North and expressed in a wide variety of cinematic modes. That plural and pseudo-autobiographical voice both breaks the long Soviet monologue and opens a dialogue across indigenous communities in a way that does justice to cultures deprived of their own speech in dominant cinema. Analysing Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's specific aesthetic and narrative strategies of re-appropriation makes it possible to demonstrate that formal issues can be as political as content or as the reverse of the gaze can be.

More broadly, looking at formal aspects of indigenous films may help us rethink and refine our understanding of such notions as "talking back" and "shooting back" that are often used indifferently. Reserving the notion of "filming back" to strictly filmic formal and aesthetic issues gives us the means to propose a division with and between the two former notions. Within that new grid, "talking back" issues, which focus primarily on re-



presentations and indigenous replies to earlier outsider misrepresentations, and "shooting back" processes, which engages with strategies of film production and the reverse of the gaze, would have to be differentiated from "filming back" concerns, which concentrate on cinematic strategies of re-appropriation and re-interpretation in order to invent their own self-expression style. In the case of Lapsui and Lehmuskallio, their films "talk back" to earlier representations and Soviet discourse in order to give the indigenous side of the story. As a collaborative work, which reverses the imperial gaze, they are exemplary of "shooting back" strategies of production. Adding the concept of "filming back" enables to move beyond the strict issues of text content and point of view to concentrate more on style and aesthetics within the larger framework of an intertextual dialogue with outsider cinema. On that matter, Lapsui and Lehmuskallio's cinema, with their original-but-difficult-to-describe film style, gives us a powerful example of what "filming back" could mean.

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"Filmar de volta" no Cinema Indígena da Sibéria: Estratégias de Re-apropriação Cinematográfica no Trabalho de Anastasia Lapsui e Markku Lehmuskallio

Resumo: Este ensaio explora os filmes siberianos de Anastasia Lapsui e Markku Lehmuskallio. Concentra-se nos meios fílmicos empregues para "filmar de volta" (*film back*) o cinema dominante. Recorrendo ao método da análise fílmica, demonstra como a forma do filme pode ser tão política quanto os conteúdos que veicula, nomeadamente quando mobilizada para dar voz aos povos autóctones da Sibéria e para revisitar discursos prévios soviéticos em torno da igualdade, da integração e do progresso. O ensaio chama a atenção para duas estratégias formais usadas pelos realizadores para "filmar de volta": a re-apropriação das imagens de arquivo para retrabalhar o passado e valorar indivíduos indígenas; e a criação duma voz plural pseudo-autobiográfica capaz de romper o monólogo soviético e de encarnar a experiência partilhada indígena. Enfim, o artigo argumenta que considerar aspetos formais nos ajuda a rep-



ensar noções como *talking back* e *shooting back*, tantas vezes usadas de forma indiferente, bem como o conceito de "filmar de volta" (reservado a questões fílmicas).

Palavras-chave: Cinema Autóctone da Sibéria; Re-apropriação Fílmica; Estética Cinematográfica; Anastasia Lapsui; Markku Lehmuskallio.

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