A Semiotic Analysis of the Representation of Arctic Inuit in the National Geographic

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Abstract

This study examines representations of Inuit people in the photographic images of the *National Geographic* with the aim of analysing how they are portrayed in the photographs in which they appear. The theoretical framework consists of theories on representation with a focus on postcolonial theory, otherness and Eskimo Orientalism. The underlying methodological framework is constructivism while the method of semiotic approach as defined by Ronald Barthes is used to analyse the data. The researcher coded photographs of Inuit and examined how meanings are created through ‘the signs’ present in the images, before identifying the denotative and connotative meanings attached to the images. The main coding factors were look, appearance, activities, surroundings and use of technology. Conclusion is that portrayals of Inuit in the *National Geographic* from 1990 to 2010 have strong presence of stereotypes as well as myth but after that period the presence of stereotypes diminishes.

**Keywords:** Inuit, representation, photographs, semiotics, National Geographic
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1. Introduction

‘Native people live in a prison of images not of their own making’ (Don, 1986:45).

Our perceptions about the world and its people have been shaped through various types of media. One very influential visual means of representation is photography which can possibly influence the way we think about certain things. The focus of this thesis is on the visual representation of Inuit/Eskimo people in the National Geographic. As a long-term subscriber of National Geographic’s magazine I can say that the National Geographic’s visual images and reports have shaped my views about people, different cultures and places. For my thesis I had a clear idea that I wanted to explore the representation of Inuit people in visual media but struggled with the material choice until it came to me while reading the magazine that it would be interesting to explore how the National Geographic represents Inuit people, simply because it is so widespread, and accessible around the world.

Previous research on this topic has shed a light that throughout history, the visual representation of Arctic people has involved a colonial and stereotypical discourse where they have been seen as savages, primitive, exotic, and so forth. Explorers, missionaries, adventurers and scholars all have contributed to the creation of myths about Inuit. However the biggest contributor is visual media (television, print, digital media, etc). As media (in all forms) plays a huge role in our everyday lives, it is important to shed light on the issues of representations of Indigenous people because “in the absence of alternative portrayals and broadened coverage, one sided portrayals and news articles could easily become the reality in the minds of the audience” (Wilson and Gutierrez, in Mahtani, 2001:100).

Budd (2002) argues that any kind of representation is better than having none at all. Seen from this perspective the attention drawn towards any culture (in this case Inuit culture) might eventually evoke more familiarity and sensitivity in representation within the public. Therefore, even though the previous research has (to some extent) presented the way Inuit are portrayed in the visual media this particular phenomenon has not been extensively researched and my research embedded in this space will contribute (even if only slightly) to existing material in the field.
1.1 Aim and Research Questions

How certain groups are portrayed in the media has been a persistent concern of various studies. It is important that the media is regularly examined to see to what extent and in what way it represents different segments of society, since media can have different conditions (political, economic etc.) behind their choices to represent certain groups in certain ways.

The aim of this study is to examine the photographs of Arctic Inuit people in the *National Geographic*, to determine how they are being represented. To achieve this aim, the following research question will guide this study:

- How are the Arctic Inuit portrayed in *National Geographic* from 1990 to 2019?

1.2 Outline

This thesis begins with the introductory chapter which presents the research problem, the aim of the thesis and research question. Chapter two presents a short background of the Artic Inuit and the *National Geographic*. Chapter three focuses on previous research and scholars who have addressed the visual representation of Inuit in the media. Chapter four presents the theoretical framework of postcolonial theories, where the various types of othering are discussed. Chapter five describes the methodological framework and introduces the concept and the origin of the semiotic analysis and the material used in this thesis. Chapter six presents the analysis, starting with an introduction to articles on the Inuit in the *National Geographic*. After the introduction an analysis of images is performed. Lastly, chapter seven concludes the thesis.
2. Background

2.1 Inuit (Artic) background

Arctic people are the Indigenous people of the Artic who live in Alaska, Canada, Greenland and parts of Russia and they are approx. 152,000 (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami/The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, n.d.). They share the same cultural heritage, such as linguistics, myths and legends. In Canada, Greenland and Russia they are called Inuit (meaning ‘the people’), and in Alaska they are known as Eskimos (meaning ‘eaters of raw flesh’) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.; Houston, 2006). Even though they share the same cultural heritage, they are still quite distinct, with diverse histories (which will not be addressed in this thesis). They have no connection with Native Americans or with the Alaskan Athabaskan.

The modern Inuit are direct descendants of the so-called Thule culture and Alaskan Eskimos are ancestors of the Inuit. Thule culture developed over 2000 years ago, occupying territory in Greenland, eastern Canada, coastal Alaska, and Siberia, also known as the Artic region (Hoffecker, 2005; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami/The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, n.d.). It is important to make clear that in this thesis the term ‘Inuit’ will be used in a Greenlandic and/or Canadian context, because their Indigenous people prefer to define themselves as Inuit, whereas the term ‘Eskimo’ will be applied in an Alaskan context, since Alaskan Natives still identify with it (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Therefore, the term Eskimo is used with full awareness throughout this thesis, even though the term is in some places understood as carrying pejorative connotation. Alaskan Eskimo also branch into other Indigenous groups called Yupik and Inupiat, who are related to the Inuit and will be included in the analysis. These terms originate from a colonial context and were attached to Indigenous people in order to distinguish them from Europeans (Huhndorf, 2009).

The first proper contact between the Inuit and Europeans occurred in the seventeenth century in the context of the whaling industry. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Americans and the English expanded their whaling operations which exploited the Inuit’s traditional resources, but the Inuit still retained their traditional way of life until approx. 1945. With the American army being stationed all over the Arctic along with missionaries who started to appear with the goal of ‘Christianiz[ing] as well as civiliz[ing]’ (Anderson and Bonesteel, 2006:11) the Inuit, the Inuit’s traditional way of life was in jeopardy. Missionaries
used ‘education’ as a technique to acculturate and assimilate Indigenous people, subjecting them to baptisms and adopting new biblical names. In the eyes of colonizers these rapid cultural transformations were supposed to help and improve the living standards of Indigenous people but had reversed long term effects. The Inuit as well as other Indigenous people all over the world are today still dealing with the consequences of rapid cultural transformation. The process of colonisation, de-colonisation, globalisation and modernisation has left its mark on Indigenous communities. They are experiencing health-related and social traumas, e.g. economic hardship and disturbingly high suicide rates among young Inuit men. Today, even though some continue with traditional ways of life (e.g. hunting), the majority of Inuit households are wage earners (Anderson and Bonesteel, 2006; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami/The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, n.d.). There are no numbers available for those Inuit who continue to live the traditional Inuit life.

2.2 The National Geographic Society background

The National Geographic Society was founded in 1888 by a group of scientists, explorers and scholars with the aim of promoting geographic, historical, educational and cultural knowledge (National Geographic Society, n.d.). Today it consists of the print magazine (12 monthly issues published in 31 languages), books, school materials, TV channels and websites available all over the world. The magazine is all about geography, science, and world history (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.). One can easily recognise the magazine on newsstands by its yellow frame and often striking front covers. For anyone who has ever opened the National Geographic magazine it is obvious that the magazine is all about the visual presentation of nature, historical and cultural sights, archaeological findings, and people, accompanied by research texts and reports. At first the magazine was not successful but after they started incorporating articles of general interest together with photographs the magazine’s popularity grew overnight, and stunning photography became a trademark for the National Geographic (HISTORY, 2009). They founded many projects and scientific studies, one of them being the journey of Robert Peary (the American explorer) to the Arctic to study Inuit people in the nineteenth century. It is estimated that ca 280 million people around the world use at least one of the National Geographic Society’s outlets (New World Encyclopedia, n.d.).
3. Previous Research

Most research about the representation of the Inuit people in visual media revolves around the concept of stereotypes and othering (King, 2008; Langton, 1994; Ledwell, 2014; Mahtani, 2001; Bessire, 2003). Moreover, the majority of studies analysing the representation of the Arctic people and/or Indigenous people in general conclude that there is an overall negative weighting, as well as underrepresentation and/or misrepresentation, which can be interpreted as the continued oppression of minority groups in society (Mahtani, 2001).

John L. Steckley (2009), a Canadian scholar specialising in indigenous studies, addresses various aspects of portrayals of Inuit in films. He states that starting in the 1920s, films about Inuit have all presented unrealistic images of the Inuit and their culture. The filmmakers of these films constructed the Inuit culture as they thought it should appear, and not as it actually was. Often in films Inuit characters were played by actors with other nationalities (e.g. Greeks), and many non-Indigenous actors have even enhanced their career by pretending to be Inuit. Gorham (1999) calls this practice ‘racial myths’ and says that it is a form of a racial stereotype: ‘...the operationalization of racial myths as social reality beliefs concerning members of racial groups based on perceived group affiliations’ (Gorham, 1999: 233). The stereotypes rely on the myths for their grounding and they can influence our interpretation of media content in a way that supports these racial myths.

Boyd (2015), who examined Native Americans in films, as well as Augie Fleras (as cited in Mahtani, 2001), argues that Hollywood, the film industry and most of the visual media industry have unfairly represented Indigenous people for centuries. There are two pervasive representations of Indigenous people: the ‘bloodthirsty beast’ who eats raw meat and ‘the drunken Native’, or ‘the noble savage’ who is wise and exotic (Mahtani, 2001:5). Bissett Perea (2017) adds that occasionally differentiations have been made between Native Americans and Alaskan Eskimo. The Native American is portrayed as the ‘bad guy’, and the Alaskan Eskimo as the ‘good guy’ who is trying to survive in a harsh environment. In her opinion, both of these images are equally harmful, and do nothing to tell the audience what these Indigenous cultures are really like. Boyd (2015) builds on John L. Steckley’s views with the concept of ‘whitewashing’. Whitewashing concerns the visual aesthetics of films and refers to the phenomenon where instead of having indigenous people play themselves in films, the roles are given to white actors instead. It has to do with white cultural dominance.
and Anglo ethnocentrism, where ‘white’ has always been considered as more beautiful. Additionally, due to inaccurate representations Hollywood has blurred the lines between Indigenous cultures by doing a poor job of distinguishing between different tribes and mixing their names and traditions (Budd, 2002). Therefore, it is not only a matter of representation; it is also a matter of accurate representation.

Cassidy Glennie (2018) agrees that historically the representation of Indigenous peoples has been inaccurate. She examines how Inuit women make sense of popular music videos and mainstream Western media representation. The Inuit women in Glennie’s study were concerned with the way Western beauty standards influence women, but not minority women, who are left out. Their concern is that those who have power over media resources can decide whom to influence and whom to leave out, and thus maintain white privilege over ‘the Other’. The biggest concern they have is that there are no Inuit role models in popular culture for young people to look up to. Therefore, self-representation would be a good way to reduce the typical negative views in the media and provide accurate representations of the Inuit culture, such as in the case of missing and murdered Indigenous women. In their opinion, there is a difference even in the way the news reports crimes committed against Indigenous women. In the eyes of the media, being the victim of violent crime is a consequence of being Indigenous instead of structural violence. One of Glennie’s interviewees stated the following:

This way when they portray Inuit and aboriginal women especially on the news they say missing and murdered aboriginal women. I find that so hurtful because the other races see us – like she says we look illiterate, we look dumb, so that they can easily rape us or sexually abuse us. You know because they see us that way because we are every inferior to them in a way. (Glennie, 2018:109).

Furthermore, there is the matter of the cultural loss which the women attribute to the colonisation period and residential schools. They also think that Inuit people are being over-studied and used for academic research without any solutions being found to the many problems their people face. White privilege is visible in the way it allows for the research to be carried out with the expectation that the Inuit people should just accept it and go along with it (Glennie, 2018). Then there is also the matter of absence of representation, as in the Canadian case. The Canadian media has very little to no representation of women of colour,
or as Rita Deverell stated, ‘In Canada, we tend to sin by omission’ (as cited in Mahtani, 2001:103), meaning that the appearance of women of colour on Canadian television is rare (Mahtani, 2001).

Christopher Gittings’ (2002) analysis of Canadian cinema focuses on the visual representation of Indigenous communities in films. He takes it even further and argues that the stereotypical representation of Indigenous communities contributes towards the racist discourses and violence against them. Gittings analyses several films, discussing questions such as ‘who determines what is “Indian”, “too Indian” or “not Indian enough”’ (Gittings, 2002:215). Like Glennie (2018), he thinks the answer lies in ‘white privilege’, and white people’s visions and perceptions of Indigenous people’s lives. Gittings argues that filmmakers with ‘white privilege’ have the power to influence the way we look at the world, propagating a colonising and controlling way of seeing things, ‘determined by history, tradition, power, hierarchies, politics, economics’ and ‘…mythic or imaginary ideas about the nation’ and ‘national identity’ as well as ‘race, gender, and sexuality’ (Ann Kaplan as cited in Gittings, 2002:7).

Maegaard and Køhler Mortensen (2018) argue that many former colonisers have even gone so far as to engage in public debates on their former attacks. The example they use is the Denmark-Greenland case, where Denmark colonised Greenland for centuries (and still does economically, for instance), but still argues that this is a different type of colonialism, a so-called ‘Nordic exceptionalism’. Danish national television (which has a very high number of viewers) is obliged to include Greenland in its broadcasting content and use descriptions of Greenlandic Inuit and their culture as being ‘different’ from what is authentically Danish. Sexuality is one of the frequently used topics when describing the differences between the two nations. Maegaard and Køhler Mortensen (2018) draw on Foucault to argue that in colonial relations sexuality and power are connected. The sexual behaviour and practices of the colonised have been used by the colonisers as an instrument to preserve and accentuate the cultural ‘differences’ between ‘the Other’, and ‘us’. By examining Danish representations of Greenlandic Inuit in relation to the topic of sexuality, Maegaard and Køhler Mortensen (2018) find that a popular Danish TV series from 2015 represents Greenlanders as exotic and uncivilised. The so-called ‘wife-swap’ myth is a frequently used concept in reports even though there is no evidence to support that the ‘wife-swap’ was ever practised. This type of
representation perpetuates colonial power dynamics (Maegaard and Køhler Mortensen, 2018:23).

Mahtani (2001) talks about the representation of minorities in the Canadian media (although her conclusions could be applied to the majority of visual media), insisting that the way the Canadian media portrays ethnic minority groups affects how they are seen in Canadian society. Media has the power to promote both tolerance and harmony as well as to create fear. Media workers have a big impact on representations, but the problem lies in the fact that they are often not aware themselves that they are misrepresenting certain ethnic minority groups. Subsequently, it is left to different academic researchers to try and find a way to inform media workers through various academic papers, reports and analyses.

Wheelersburg (2016) argues that by constantly emphasising in the media what in Western minds are ‘traditional’ cultural elements of Indigenous populations, stereotypes linger and become entrenched in the minds of the majority of Western society. In the US, Native Americans are the most stereotyped people of all time, whether in paintings, literature, magazines, educational materials, popular media, etc. Hollywood and its stereotypical Wild West films about Native Americans are the direct source of how we think and what we believe about Indigenous people. However, representations are not always negative but can also be positive. One positive fact is that early films used authentic natives as actors. Additionally, some films, particularly during the 1970s, turned the tables and represented white people as liars and thieves whereas Native Americans were presented as honourable and honest.

Lastly, Indigenous people working in the media play a very important role in combating stereotypical views of their people in visual media, even though (in contrast to non-Indigenous filmmakers) they face many obstacles in the process. Gittings (2002) uses the Inuit-owned Isuma Production company as an example. It took Isuma Production a long time to produce the movie Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner for several reasons, the two main reasons being: scarce funding – the film is thought to be a ‘victim of a two-tiered race-based funding structure’; and ‘aboriginal language’ (Gittings, 2002:216), which is an obstacle for all films that use Indigenous languages instead of either English or French. However, Indigenous people working in the media have been slowly taking back power and control over their portrayals and by doing so, they are fostering much needed alternative images of their culture.
and traditions in order to produce social change and achieve greater representation (Boyd, 2015).

The literature review in this chapter has shed light on the portrayals of Indigenous people in various types of media as well as on the potential impact of these portrayals. According to the scholars that have been mentioned, there are various issues with the representation of Indigenous people that can be identified in society. Most works have identified the fact that stereotypes still exist in various types of media, that the portrayals are typically negative, and carry implications for Indigenous people and their lives. When they are constantly repeated in the media stereotypes reinforce and validate the concept of ‘the Other’.

4. Theoretical Framework and Concepts

4.1 Postcolonial theory and otherness

Postcolonial theory, which emerged at the end of the 1970s, looks among other things at the topics of the colonisers, the colonised, the power relations between the colonisers and colonised, race, gender, history, languages, class, identity issues, culture and representation (Ponzanesi, 2018). Some of the most influential figures in postcolonial criticism are: Edward Said, with his book Orientalism, Homi K. Bhabha, and Stuart Hall (Ponzanesi, 2018).

The role of postcolonial theory is to uncover dominant power relations and processes in visual material, and examine representations of ‘the Other’, stereotypes and cultural differences in order to critically evaluate and deconstruct them. It tries to challenge the process of othering in order to show that stereotyping is carried out due to unequal power relations. Cinematic material produced by colonisers contributes towards the particular ways in which colonised Indigenous people are seen in visual media (as savages, primitive and uncivilised). In his book Orientalism, Edward Said discusses the concept of ‘the Other’ as a product of modernity where representations of other cultures (more specifically the Orient) from the Western point of view are shown to be ‘exotic’ and ‘different’. This allows the West to continue to be a dominant culture, i.e. it has the constant need to possess and control (Ponzanesi, 2018). As Said explained in a 1998 interview on Orientalism, the superior West perceives the inferior Orient as all the same, regardless of where people are or what they do, which develops an image of the Orient as timeless; unlike the West the Orient never develops (Said and Jhally, 1998).
According to Staszak (2009), ‘the Other’ is based on two groups, one that is the norm (Us, here) with a valued identity and the other (Them, over there far away) that is in some way different. The West has stigmatized the Other as ‘Savages’, ‘Barbarians’ and ‘Coloured People’ in order to emphasise the difference between the Self and the Other, where the Self is something to look up to and to be valued. The process of colonisation is what has allowed the West to impose their values onto the Other with their operations of cultural integration (Staszak, 2009).

Browne, Smye and Varcoe (2005) claim that otherness is not even based on the actual identity of the Other but is based on a stereotypical identity which has been projected onto particular groups as assumed identity or cultural characteristics.

Browne, Smye and Varcoe (2005), argue that the colonialism continues to linger internally through institutions, social policies, restrictions to self-government, land claims, restrictions in economic developments and so on (ibid.). Anthropologist Robert Petersen (1995), gives an example of continued internal ‘unofficial colonialism’ in Greenland where Danish workers demand better privileges than are offered to the Inuit and might therefore still be labelled colonisers and consider themselves as superior to the Inuit. They express that they are there to ‘help Greenland’ and know what is ‘good’ for Greenland. This is another example of the forms internal colonialism and othering take today (ibid).

Today, ‘the other’ is no longer geographically confined; ‘the other’ has come to live among us, prompting the West to start implementing discriminatory policies towards the Other, where negative results are visible in a form of segregation. This serves a purpose for the West by preventing the Other from mixing with white people, often Christians, and using the Other’s poverty and hardships as an example of a ‘specific culture’, in order to maintain its dominance and superiority over the Other. The Other’s visible misery is used against them to continue this exclusion and as a tool for the constant reinforcement of otherness (Staszak, 2009). Browne, Smye and Varcoe (2005) say that even today in Canada it is not unusual for non-Indigenous people to associate the culture of Indigenous people with adjectives such as poor, dirty, drunk, and dependent i.e. living off the government. They term this type of otherness as ‘cultural stereotypes’.

While cultural stereotypes are not necessarily either good or bad they are very resistant to change and can be influential, as in our emotional reactions to different groups. Professor Lehtonen (n.d.) at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) explains that cultural stereotypes are
descriptive and prescriptive, where specific characteristics and beliefs are prescribed to a targeted group; for example, Indigenous people are described as leeches living off taxpayers’ work. (Lehtonen, n.d.). Another example is exoticism. Exoticism is the main geographical form of otherness where the term ‘exotic’ is not meant as an exotic person, place or object, but has the symbolic meaning of something foreign and far away. It is a word that is strongly associated with colonialism, signalling curiosity towards the ‘primitive’ or ‘noble savage’ in the 19th century (Staszak, 2009).

Stuart Hall (1997) also talks about the representation of media and says that language and culture are key issues when it comes to representation. Language works in a way that produces meaning through social characteristics and culture is something that gives meaning to people and things. Culture can be used in the sense of the ‘way of life, of a people, community, nation or social group’ (Hall, 1997:2), as well as the ‘shared values of a group or of society’ (ibid.:2). Also, the language of the culture can be used as the exchange of meaning between different groups or the society, feelings, sense of belonging, and the way of ‘… “making sense” of the world’ (ibid.:2), in an abstract way. What Hall means is the way people create practices through their everyday interactions. Meaning is not constructed by the things themselves; meaning is constructed through our use of language and the way we convey meaning. As he explains, ‘Things don’t mean: we construct meaning, using representational system-concepts and signs’ (ibid.:25); and he calls this approach the constructivist/constructionist approach. Therefore, representation is ‘…the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning’ (ibid.:61) and meaning depends on language (Culler as cited in Hall, 1997:31) and signs such as “Sounds, images, written words, paintings, photographs..” function as signs within language only when they serve to express or communicate ideas’ (Hall, 1997:31).

4.2. Eskimo/Arctic Orientalism

The process where Western knowledge about the Inuit people is based on common perceptions of either the ‘drunken Native’ or ‘noble savage’ is the form of Orientalism which Ann Fienup-Riordan calls ‘Eskimo/Arctic Orientalism’ (Ann Fienup-Riordan ,1994). It is the concept of the representations of Alaskan Eskimo in American visual material such as cinema/documentaries. Eskimo were represented as ‘naturally peaceful’ but have changed
when they began to drink alcohol and were corrupted by civilisation and modernisation. In her opinion this type of perception of Eskimo has had drastic consequences, where Eskimo start to see themselves with the same eyes as the documentaries; therefore, it is of utmost importance to reconsider our ideas about them because ‘…our ideas about Eskimos help create the framework they are forced to reside in’ (Fienup-Riordan, 1994:124). She argues that with the right knowledge of Eskimo culture one can fight false and stereotypical representations and form a realistic one (whatever that might be) which is supported by evidence (ibid. 1994).

To sum up, the theories introduced are all different creations of ‘the Other’ which have sometimes positive and sometimes negative consequences and in this day and age are brought to us by the media. The way ‘the Other’ is represented to us depends on historical, institutional, and social contexts (to name a few). My analysis of the representation of Inuit in the National Geographic will refer to the theories and notion of ‘the Other’ introduced above.
5. Methodology and Method

5.1. Semiotics

The aim of this thesis is to uncover the portrayal of Inuit in the *National Geographic* by analysing and interpreting photographic images in order to see how they construct knowledge through different representational practices. From the time photography was introduced to the world in 1839 it has ‘played a central role in representing the major changes that have taken place in society throughout the modern age’ (Wright, 2004:3).

The underlying methodological framework in this thesis is constructivism, which advocates that ‘…knowledge is contextualized: history, society, ideas and language influence the patterns we use to explain and understand social phenomena’ (Moses and Knutsen, 2007:165). Moses and Knutsen (2007), also say that the analysis of visual materials such as books, films, photographs etc. can tell us about the basic concerns, norms, values of the society we live in. Rose (2001) points out that many scholars who are tackling these issues argue that ‘…the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies’ (Rose, 2001:6). Therefore, images of Inuit people in the *National Geographic* can be seen as representation of reality in people’s minds and may have an influence on how and what we think about others.

In our daily lives we are constantly surrounded by all sorts of images which help us to visualise the world we live in. The world is composed of signs/the meaning of which can be anything and everything (Rose, 2001). One way to understand the meaning of these signs is with the help of semiotic analysis, which is the method of choice in this thesis. It has a qualitative approach whose main purpose is to uncover the process of meaning making/the content/the underlying meaning of various forms of information (in this case visual images of Inuit in the *National Geographic*) and the messages they convey. In semiotics, while looking for meanings we should not take a representation of something as a done deal but rather as a reflection of reality and we should look out for whose reality it is, what is hidden and what has not been presented (Chandler, 2007). Bryman refers to semiotic analysis as the study of ‘system[s] of signs’:
'The study/science of signs. As an approach to the analysis of documents, and other phenomena that emphasizes the importance of seeking out the deeper meaning of those phenomena.' (2012:291).

We interpret things or ‘signs’ without even being aware that we are doing so, and simultaneously connect them to our everyday lives (Chandler, 2007). There are two main theoretical notions of semiotics, the Saussurean term *semiology* (with a focus on linguistics) and the Peircean *semiotics* (with a focus closely related to logic), but today it is known as just semiotics and includes the whole field of how signs generate meaning (ibid.:3). The Saussurean model is focused on two elements: the signifier (the sound, image, i.e. physical appearance) and the signified (the concept/idea) which produce the arbitrary combination called the ‘sign’. For example, the tree represents the concept/meaning of what we think when we hear the word ‘tree’ (the signified), and the sound of the word ‘tree’ or seeing it in an image brings the mental image of a ‘tree’ (the signifier) (Hall, 1997:21). Their relationship, which is ontologically arbitrary (unnatural, no physical connection), is called signification. Peirce’s clarification has similar roots; we think in signs, we make meaning through our interpretation of signs, and the signs can be anything, but are nothing until we give them meaning, or until they are interpreted as standing for something (Chandler, 2007). Pierce divided his signs into three parts: symbol, icon and index (Chandler, 2007:37) and he did not think that the sign meaning was arbitrary but that there must be some ‘physical connection’ between the sign and the object it represents (Chandler, 2007:43).

A third leading theorist of semiotics is Roland Barthes, whose semiotic analysis approach is used in this thesis. He further expanded the development of semiotics by including the study of visual signs and made it an important method for cultural studies (Chandler, 2007). He believed that culture can be studied in the same way as language and in his essay collection *Mythologies* he used semiotics to ‘read’ popular culture (Hall, 1997:35). Semiotic analysis of contemporary media is accredited to Barthes, who also claimed that images have both *denotative* and *connotative* meanings. The denotative (primary) meaning of an image refers to an obvious/descriptive level while the connotative (secondary) meaning refers to a more culturally specific meaning (Berger, 2018:18-20; Bignell, 2002:16). Bignell (2018:16) uses the Rolls-Royce as an example where the Rolls-Royce denotes a specific type of car and the associations attached with the name, such as expensiveness and luxury, connote these
different attachments to the sign, i.e. they attach cultural meaning to it (expensive, luxurious). Hence, connotation can have various meanings attached to the word. After the identification of denotative and connotative meaning, what he calls ‘second order of signification’, or a myth starts (Hall, 1997:39), where ‘…a sign in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second’ (ibid.:68). Examples of myths are ‘masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, Englishness’ etc. (Chandler: 2007:144). However, since these myths are historically formulated they are not fixed and are subjected to change or can disappear altogether (Barthes, 1993:119). Further, in other forms of semiological systems meanings are hidden and one must uncover them, which is not the case with myth, since ‘myth hides nothing’ (ibid.:120).

The following table is Berger’s (2018:20) comparison of connotation and denotation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.5</th>
<th>Comparison of Connotation and Denotation</th>
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<td><strong>Connotation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Denotation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figurative</td>
<td>Literal</td>
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<td>Signified(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inferred</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggests meanings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Realm of myth</td>
<td>Realm of existence</td>
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5.2 Weaknesses, strengths and threats to validity

The use of this method has both strengths and weaknesses. A weakness is that there is no step by step guidance in how to interpret the signs since they can mean different things to different people, so that analysis is quite dependent on the interpreter and interpretations can vary according to the socio-cultural values of a person; therefore, meaning cannot be universal. Interpretations are related to the social codes which one acquires while growing up, influenced by culture and society (Chandler, 2007:77) (in this case European cultural codes). Chandler also says (ibid.:187) that in order to understand the meaning of materials being interpreted, one must adopt an ‘ideological identity’, meaning that the interpreter must put himself in the position of the consumer of the particular product. Stuart Hall argues that ‘…people who belong to the same culture must share a broadly similar conceptual map, so
they must also share the same way of interpreting the signs of language’ (Hall, 1997:19). Therefore, I will assume that people who share my (Western) European background share similar visual signs, cultural codes and meanings as myself and would have similar interpretations.

Furthermore, semiotic analysis requires a somewhat skilled analyst for the results to be richer, deeper, more precise and more reliable (Chandler, 2007:221). I had no familiarity with semiotics prior to conducting this research but have studied the material to the best of my ability in order to understand it and attempt to apply it in my thesis. Additionally, for my research to be valid I will try to be as objective as possible while interpreting the photographs within the contexts they appear in and present them as objective facts. The main strength of using this method lies in the fact that the use of it is part of a representation process, which means according to Chandler “…looking behind or beneath the surface of the observed […] searching for what is hidden beneath the obvious can lead to fruitful insights” (Chandler, 2007:215) and is well adapted to exploring connotative meanings (ibid.).

5.3 Method of Analysis

The purpose of this research is to look at the way the Inuit are represented in the National Geographic through the analysis of images in the articles about the Inuit, Eskimo, Yupik and Inupiat Eskimo. I am particularly interested in photographs of Inuit people, the way they are portrayed in these photographs, and what the captions say. Therefore, I will not analyse the National Geographic’s marketing strategies, distribution/production conditions, photographers’ position towards the photographed object, audience response to the articles, or the text in the articles.

My analysis, which is governed by the semiotic approach outlined by Roland Barthes, is based on 7 articles (where one of them is accompanied with photo reportage) published between Jan 1990 and Dec 2018 and containing between 4 and 15 images. At first I intended to use only the last 10-15 years, but the quantity was scarce, so I had to extend the time period to 1990. The reason why the year 1990 was chosen is because of the research done by Robert P. Wheelersburg (2017), called National Geographic magazine and the Eskimo stereotype: a photographic analysis, 1949-1990. He tested his hypothesis about National Geographic magazine’s continuous contribution to stereotypes of Eskimos, and his
hypothesis were confirmed. However, I will not compare his study with my own study, but merely I will refer to it. Additionally, while sampling the material for the analysis for the year 1990-2019 there were three more articles which I decided to abandon due to the limited scope of this thesis, and due to the fact that it had two to three images showing only a man and a dead animal (like the images in the article published in October 1992).

I will analyse the photographs by going through them using the coding process developed by Ferdinand Saussure and Roland Barthes:

- **Signifier**: what is seen at first glance in photographic representation (image, i.e. physical appearance)
- **Signified**: the mental concept/idea/meaning
- **Denotation**: the literal meaning of the image
- **Connotation**: secondary meaning of the photographic message (can be personal or societal)
- **Myth**: obvious thing, without contradiction (e.g. masculinity)

Firstly, the context surrounding the articles containing the photographs of Inuit will be described to serve as an introduction to the analysis. Subsequently, the analysis moves onto the first level of signification, which Barthes distinguishes as denotation, composed of signifier and signified, and is about what the images show. Here I am interested in following aspects of the photographs: the way Inuit look into the camera, clothes they wear, activities they are involved in, their surroundings, and the use of technology. Then it continues onto the second level, which is connotation and is concerned with how images show something, and what is the abstract/underlying meaning that constructs the representation. Here the images will be accompanied with captions which can according to Barthes serve as anchorage to the reading of photographs, meaning that captioned photographs create meaning by combining visual signs with linguistic elements (Chandler, 2007:204). Lastly, I will look for myths which are to be discovered by the first stage of my analysis, then deserted and new meaning formed in order to see if there are any myths of Indigenous people presented.

**Analysis**

6.1 Introduction to Inuit articles analysis and context surrounding them

Analysis was performed on 68 images (7 articles), where most of the images are of Alaska, i.e. 29 images, Canada 14, Greenland 6, Alaska-Canada 14 and Alaska-Greenland 5. According to Lutz and Collins (1993:119-120), between 1950 and 1986 the *National Geographic* covered almost every nation in the world; however, some areas received a lot more attention than others due to their population sizes as well as their popularity at various periods in time. When it comes to covering people of particular areas, some are overrepresented while others are underrepresented, and the frequency of representation depends on the international relations of the particular country with the United States and its political leaders (ibid.:123). In the mentioned period 35 percent of all articles were on Asia whereas Polar regions only received 6 percent of coverage. From my gathered samples of articles about the Arctic region, Alaska, Canada and Greenland are covered but there is not one single article on the Yupik Eskimos in Siberia/Russia.

When it comes to coverage of people in this region from 1990 to 2019 it is evident that this group of people are not extensively covered, and when they appear in articles it is mainly in connection with rapid climate change. Five of the gathered articles are on nature, more specifically on challenges relating to whaling, fishing and hunting in Alaska as a consequence of climate change. Two are on social issues, where the first is about Nunavut’s residents and their joy and challenges of being in charge of the Nunavut territory, and the second is about an Indigenous photographer showing different sides of the Inuit in order to combat the typical weather/hunting images of his people. Another article is on Greenlandic adaption to climate change and farming. Last article published in November of 2018 is the only article where the Indigenous person is both the photographer and the author of the article, portraying the Inuit people from an Indigenous perspective. It illustrates the shift towards the approach of allowing Indigenous people to represent their own nations and history in the *National*
Geographic. This introduction of the articles on Inuit people is necessary for the reader of this thesis to follow and gain familiarity with the context of the analysed images.
6.2 Analysis of images as part of a narrative

As a long-term subscriber and reader of the *National Geographic Magazine* I can say that more often than not the reader pays more attention to the images in the Magazine than to the actual text. John Berger (1972:29) says that photographs placed together in a fixed row become the story on their own, i.e. ‘the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it’: this statement fits the images in the *National Geographic*, where the images are fixed in a series, accompanied by captions to make the reader ‘read’ them in a particular way, especially if one does not concentrate on the written text of the article. I will now analyse the images.

6.2.1 August 1990: Changing Images of the Northwest Passage, (Eskimos pull together for a whale harvest)
The article opens with a two-page close up, showing two middle-aged men smiling at the camera, both dressed in a type of jacket with a hood with fur around it, also known as a parka and most often associated with the Inuit as their traditional clothing. The opening image, featuring parkas, a rifle (ostensibly for hunting mammals), and subjects smiling into the camera, strongly evokes ideas of the ‘happy Eskimo’, as Wheelersburg (2016) terms it. His research found that this is the typical National Geographic representation of the Inuit people throughout the magazine’s history, where the focus has been on Inuit’s traditional cultural elements and activities. Not much is happening in the second photo; the men seem to be
waiting for the hunt. The next picture shows a man looking into the distance with a dreamy look on his face. Beside him is a canoe and further away is a hunting/fishing lodge. Everything else is open space, without any action, lifeless. The caption tells us that he is nostalgic for the Inuit traditional lifestyle and culture which are slowly disappearing. The next four pictures show just how harsh the lifestyle of Arctic hunters can be. There is a battle with the sea as well as with modern technology when their snowmobile falls into the deep water because of the disappearing ice, connoting climate change. However, the use of a snowmobile indicates elements of high technology and development, but at the same time the pictures create suspense and danger associated with the Inuit lifestyle. Moreover, the photograph where the snowmobile is taken apart to be examined after falling in the water indicates helplessness and an inability to cope with modern technology. The fishermen are exhausted, eyes closed, sleeping, their faces weather-beaten. On the other side of the ice we see polar bears and people around them; an image that often appears when covering the Inuit culture together with climate change. Without the caption it is hard to read what is happening in the photograph. The caption tells us that these are biologists who have tranquillised bears in order to put ear tags and collars on them in order to trace hunting quotas. The following photographs are of people in their canoes, pushing the ice in order to get ahead in the water. Then they work as a team to pull the whale out of the water. It evokes the sense of a community working together towards a common goal: providing meat for their families. However, the next picture, where one can see blood on the white snow and the parts of a dead animal in the background while people are pulling the meat behind them, depicts a different kind of operation. On one hand it balances previous images and on the other hand it evokes strong dislike as soon as we read the caption beside the photo. It explains that the female bowhead was carrying an unborn calf which was cut out and left on the ice but will be taken to a laboratory for analysis. The caption is shocking and connotes savagery. On the same page is a photograph of two children holding the raw meat of the animal their parents just killed, about to eat and looking happy. This image strengthens the historically stereotypical view of the Inuit as happy-go-lucky raw meat eaters. The next three images are also of children but show a complete transition from the previous image. The sequence starts with an image of five boys all wearing ‘Western’ clothing – denim jackets over t-shirts of their idols, and baseball caps. Their facial expressions, clothing and the radio they carry indicate that they are trying to be cool. The two images that come after indicate the same; one is of a
young family in Western clothing, and the second is of two girls eating French fries while drinking soda, which shows the relationship between the photographed object and the Western world, where it is hard to resist the influence of Western culture. The last photo is a full-face photo of an older lady whose face tells us that she has led a hard life, but whose facial expression indicates a state of contentment.

This photo series of ‘Changing Images of the Northwest Passage (Whale Harvest)’ tell the viewer a story about the far-reaching problem which we are all familiar with today – rapid climate change. On the one hand the typical portrayal of Inuit and their activities in the photographs is intended to show that they are involved in as well as affected by environmental problems. On the other hand, it is meant to show how their traditional cultural activities are on the brink of extinction due to a combination of climate change and external cultural forces, where it is hard to hold onto traditions and resist succumbing to Western influences. There are a few recognisable stereotypical signs which have followed the Inuit for a long time, such as: people wearing parkas, mammal hunting, eating raw meat right after a hunt, and polar bears. The images of the article correspond with Wheelersburg’s (2016) findings that the National Geographic reports on the Arctic region in a stereotypical way, focusing on the topic of climate change and the challenges of tradition vs modernity.

6.2.1 October 1992: Hard Harvest on the Bering Sea

This article opens similarly to the previous one, with a close shot of an older man in a traditional Inuit piece of clothing, the parka. His facial expression and sad distant eyes tell us that life has had an impact on him. However, the caption informs us that he is a captain on a whaling boat, and that he is happy that the Inuit have freezers to store their food in. The second photograph shows men on a boat throwing a harpoon, indicating whale fishing. The caption states the same thing, adding that the Alaskan Eskimo whaling community is only allowed six harpoon hits per year and since they missed three they only had three whales to
harvest. The last photo shows a couple of families gathered around a dead walrus. We see an axe lying on the top of the dead animal whose stomach is cut open and two men standing close to the carcass, implying that they are butchering it. In this image, no one is wearing traditional Eskimo clothing and when you read the caption it says that they are Yupik Eskimo from Sireniki (Russia) and they hunt around 400 walruses per year.

This is the only image where Russian Eskimo are depicted. The image narratives in this article do not evoke any special feeling and the story is common when it comes to covering the Arctic region and Eskimo. However, the function of the last photo of a dead walrus being butchered and the caption that they hunt 400 animals per year is to emphasise the extent of the phenomenon, connoting that savagery is still present in this community.

6.2.3 January 1995: Perilous Journey: Three Years across the Arctic

As the title says, the article is about someone’s perilous journey across the Arctic, which automatically evokes curiosity in the reader. The first image (as many are when reporting on the Arctic) is a two-page spread of a man on a dog sled using a whip to make the dogs go faster across the ice, with another set of sled dogs following him. He is surrounded by fog, ice and icy mountains, with shadows on the ground, evoking feelings of danger. The caption informs us that the man is Ramon Hernando De Larramendi, a Spanish adventurer; he and his friends travelled by kayak and dog sled from Greenland to Alaska. He has a stopover in the second image to unload his kayak while the locals gather around to look at him, but without
invading his personal space. They keep their distance, while children hang out in very close proximity to him. Even though the locals are keeping at a distance their body language shows friendliness, as does the environment, which also evokes a warm and welcoming feeling. The following photo shows De Larramendi in the early morning continuing on his journey, while the next image appears to be an image he took himself of Inuit men butchering a narwhal. The caption tells us that all the parts of the animal are used; even the tusks are exchanged for other necessary goods connoting the Inuit spiritual believes that dead animal can come back to take revenge if the right ritual in taking care of the body is not properly performed. The last picture shows two men, dressed in traditional Inuit clothing from head to toe. The one on the left is Inuk and the one on the right is a Spanish traveller. They smile and look directly into the camera, facing the photographer, which can be ‘read’ in two ways according to Lutz and Collins (1993:204-205). Firstly, this type of pose shows that the author was there in person, which brings more validity and authenticity to the photographs, and secondly, this positioning can be used to dramatize intercultural/colonial relations. In this case the intention is to show that the author was there, since the subject and the author stand at eye level with each other, unlike in the example image from 1960 presented by Lutz and Collins (1993:205), where two western women look down at an African man, encoding social colonial relations. Additionally, the picture is pleasant, and the body language of the men as well as their facial expressions indicates that a friendship has been formed.

In summary, the story’s photographs represent the usual challenges of the Artic region, except in this case the photographer and author of the article is present in the photographs. The story is constructed to show the author confronting the harsh Arctic nature. It starts with a dangerous journey and finishes with a newly formed friendship. Even though there are a few recognisable and stereotypical signs such as dog sleds, animal butchering and so forth, the story still manages to evoke a warm feeling and leaves the viewer with a sense of fair and balanced reporting.
6.2.4 September 1997: A Dream Called Nunavut
This article consists of 14 photographs of people engaged in various activities and opens with a powerful image that grabs the attention of the viewer. It is an image of a man cutting up meat and a woman looking up to the sky with one arm raised up high and the other raised halfway. Her tense body posture and crying facial expression connotes praying; however, the caption says that she is dancing with snowflakes, a dance combining new and old ways of dancing; therefore, there is a connotation of celebration. The caption also informs us that her reason for dancing is that the Inuit will finally be in charge of their own territory, Nunavut. The hand raised halfway is bloody; she holds a small knife which connotes primitiveness, but her western style of clothing evokes a contradictory feeling. On one hand she wants to hold onto her community’s traditions and on the other hand she embraces the western world. The type of western clothing matters. She wears a t-shirt with sweatpants and wellington boots, indicating casual dressing, poverty, or that she does not care about her appearance. The man is also dressed in western clothes. The environment is stereotypical of images of Inuit: all white surroundings, river or sea, ice, snow, and so forth. There are two cabins and two snowmobiles across the sea, implying adaptation to technological progress. The next image is of fishermen in their boat holding a fish. The caption informs us that fishing is slowly starting to be an additional source of community support, thus implying economic progress. The third image is a shot of a town depicting houses and people walking around. There are visible elements of technology such as a few pickup trucks driving along the road and one parked car. The parked vehicle looks like one owned by the authorities. In one of the pickups there are three people sitting together on the front seat. The road seems like a simple village road. Generally, the town looks clean; however, all the signs in this image connote underdevelopment. The caption only tells us that this town has 4,400 inhabitants and 2,500 vehicles on the 15-mile road, as well as only one hospital with 34 beds. In the fourth image three men are presented. Two are police officers with guns attached to their belts, bending over a person lying on a mattress, and in handcuffs. There is a small metal toilet in the background, indicating that this is a prison/jail and the caption tells us that this is an Inuit teen suicide watch where the officers work to save at-risk teenagers from themselves. The image evokes both anxiety and compassion. The next picture is of a woman giving birth. The picture does not say much more, but the caption tells us that the doctor had to be flown 190 miles from Ontario to deliver this baby, which only strengthens the previous connotation of economic underdevelopment and a problematic future. The next eight photographs are
stereotypical presentations of Inuit lifestyle, their hunting challenges, igloo houses, eating raw meat, wearing traditional clothing, ice, snow, etc. There is an image of a man on a snowmobile pointing his rifle at a polar bear and we can see from the bear’s expression that it is in agony. The photo evokes anger in the viewer even though the typical background setting of all white connotes peace, calmness, and coldness. The signs in the last three images connote both modernisation and traditionalism. The first one presents the same dancing lady at the beginning of the series wearing a similar type of clothing. The interior of the living room is western; however, her act of sewing a seal skin to make traditional clothing indicates her embracement of both new and old things in life and making the best of it. The same is the case with the picture that follows of two older people in western clothes eating raw meat.

To sum up, this series contains many stereotypical signs of a well-known problem, not just when it comes to the Inuit people but to all Indigenous people in the world. It is mainly about their poor living standards, misuse of alcohol, high suicide rates (especially among young males), and limited social services, to name a few.

6.2.5 July 1998: The Untamed Yukon River

The first image in this series is a spread on two pages and shows a man on his boat on a river, holding a harpoon and just about to throw it to kill an unseen animal. Denoting elements in
this image create suspense as well as anger to some extent, due to our suspicion of what will happen next. The second image shows a girl in western clothing holding a skin. The caption does not tell us much more than that it is the skin of a wolf. The image evokes the feeling of living in the wilderness. The third image is similar to the first one but evokes a stronger feeling in the viewer. The expression on the man’s face, his posture and the weapon, as well as the caption that says ‘We all love seal hunting’, add to the feeling of savagery. The last photo is an evening shot of a man, situated in a rural setting on the side of the river, with a cottage behind him evoking a sense of hardship and poverty.

The narrative of the images in this article tells the story of a man confronting the natural world on which his survival depends. Or as Bissett Perea (2017) said in the previous research chapter, ‘the Alaskan Eskimo is a “good guy”’ trying to survive in a harsh environment. The Inuit activities, their hunting tools, and the way they use them to hunt, as well as an absence of any signs of technological advancement, stress their backwardness, create binary oppositions such as civilisation vs savagery, and connote primitiveness.

6.2.6 June 2010: The Changing Face of Greenland: True Colours and Viking Weather

As the title suggests, the article is about weather changes and their effect on the Greenlandic community. The opening image is of children bathing and the caption tells us the reservoir is filled with melting ice. In the background we can see houses and people relaxing on the rocks by the water. The image is playful, evoking joyful feelings, as does the next image, which is
of a fan cheering for his team. He is dressed in western clothing like the rest of people in this image. Their clothing, as well as the type of activity, football, connotes westernisation. The next image is of a mother with a toddler and two other children playing in a field. Behind them are bales of grass and a man on a big tractor with a grass baler machine attached to it and another man operating this machine. The caption informs us that because of global warming this family will most likely have enough grass for their 700 sheep. This image opposes ‘backwardness’ and connotes progress. The image after this one is of a western-looking hunter and Inuk child where the signs indicate that they are back from hunting and the caption tells us that the man is a mentor of the foster child and that they have killed a caribou as hunting is a common practice among Greenlanders. Next is an image of men working in a fish factory, connoting product export as this is common practice for countries like Greenland and Iceland where fishing is a dominant industry. The last photo of the series depicts three people harvesting potatoes while the background of the photo indicates climate change as one can see that the ice is scarce and there is very little snow on the top of the mountains. This image illustrates very vividly the extent of the changing weather.

To summarise, these six images perfectly illustrate the story of rapid climate change and its effects on the Greenlandic community. Additionally it is a warning to all inhabitants on this Earth, which is evident in the theme of the images where every image is bright and sunny. It differs greatly from previously analysed articles due to the fact that that there are no connotations of coldness or tranquillity; on the contrary we should all be alert to what is happening to the planet.
6.2.7 November 2018: Revealing pictures shine a new light on Inuit culture
The last article of this thesis’ semiotic analysis of photographs in the *National Geographic* is from the year 2018 and contains 15 images. The title of the article already informs us what it is about, and that it will show us the Inuit culture in a new light, with a subtitle informing us that the photographer is Indigenous himself. The first image starts with a young man in western clothing, but not casual everyday clothing, more like an entertainer type of outfit. He resembles Elvis Presley and he holds a guitar in his hands, which tells us that he is a musician. The stretched ear lobe and the type of earring strengthen the image, connoting that he is a fan of rock music. The background in this photo is blurred so that the viewer’s attention is purely on this man. The next image is similar; the woman in it is dressed in a very colourful, modern type of parka imitation. Her face projects happiness. The background is partly blurred but we can see the lights above her head indicating that it is Christmas time. The caption tells us that she is also a musician and activist whose focus in her songs is on Indigenous traumas and the environment. The third image is of either a man or a woman in western clothing, while the background shows some type of business and the caption informs us that it is a bed and breakfast. The fourth image is of a woman wearing a shirt and hat. She wears jewellery and makeup, and her eyebrows are shaped, indicating that she is a modern and sophisticated woman. The caption confirms that she works as a graphic designer at Nike. The fifth image shows a child dressed in both modern and traditional clothing. The background is also blurred but one can see that it is most likely a school sports hall or some other type of exercise area, which is confirmed by the caption by saying that the child is a dancer. The next picture does not show any people, but it is of importance. It shows towels and kitchen cloths hanging outside on a cord to dry. It indicates that the Inuit do not live in igloo houses, do not eat raw meat, and that they do wash. The seventh photo is of a woman in a denim shirt. The photo has a blurred background, so the focus is exclusively on the woman. She is smiling and her face is tattooed with a traditional Inuit facial tattoo. This image evokes a strong feeling of pride in one’s culture and traditions in the form of a very visible sign, a facial tattoo. The image following this one is of a man, a hunter in a hunting jacket holding a rifle, connoting that Inuit hunters are not always wrapped up in traditional Inuit hunting gear. The rest of the images are similar to the previous ones: a baby in a modern parka jacket, an old lady who used to be a teacher, a hunter again with modern machinery in front of his house, a few men relaxing in a sauna after a long day’s work, an older couple sitting on a sofa with their family memories behind them hanging on the wall, and a final image of a man
using electrical tools to build something. The backgrounds are mostly blurred, sending the viewers a clear message that they should focus and really look, and not imagine, what is presented in in these photographs.

The narrative in this story is very clear, firstly, Indigenous people are fully capable to be whatever they choose to be, and secondly, asserting the importance of Indigenous people in visual media and the fact that they have the authority to research and present their own history. As Gittings (2002), Bessire (2003), and Boyd (2015) stressed in their research, alternative images of Indigenous cultures are necessary in order to produce social change and fair representation.

6.3 Overview of the analysed images

I have analysed 7 articles containing 68 images of Inuit people published between 1990 and 2019. There are many common characteristics presented. The majority of the images in one way or another revolve around the problem of rapid climate change in the Artic region. What is most striking in the coverage of Inuit people from 1990 until 1998 is how often the images depict snow, ice, water, hunters and killed animals. In his photographic analysis of stereotypes of Eskimo in the National Geographic from 1949 to 1990, Wheelersburg (2016), concluded that the National Geographic does contribute to stereotypes by constantly emphasising the presumed traditional elements of Indigenous cultures. My analysis reveals similar results. All the articles printed from August 1990 until June 2010 show the hardship and challenges that Inuit people in this region deal with. Another set of repeated images is of people dressed in parka clothing. Clothing is important in analyses of photographs, as well as in visual media as a whole. It connotes our cultural background; for example, the clothing I wear connotes a Western background. There are many pictures presenting Inuit wearing parka, indicating the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The photos showing Inuit wearing western types of clothing, as in the images in the last articles of 2010 and 2018, connote members of a society in transition.

Hunting in canoes out on the sea, butchering sea mammals or killing polar bears are also often repeated images. In the issue of September 1997 all these elements are presented, and additionally topped with other well-known problems associated with Indigenous people, such
as alcoholism and suicide. This only intensifies the stereotypical way of presenting them, and with that the analysis confirms that there was no balance in the representation of Inuit at this particular point in time. While decoding these images one gets the impression that there is not much else going on in this part of the world and that the subjects’ lives only revolve around traveling across ice, carrying different hunting tools and killing different animals. However, group hunting images connote strength, a sense of community, a sense of belonging, and of people living in harmony and solidarity which is missing from the western world, where the focus is on individualism without a real sense of belonging.

Only two articles present narratives where the focus is more on the social elements and not on climate change. One is about the residents of Nunavut and the second is an article where the Inuit are photographed by an Indigenous photographer. In the case of the first article on Nunavut (September 1997 issue), stereotypical reportage is manifest. Even though the article is focused on social elements, it seems one cannot escape images of hunting. There is only one image with an urban type of setting in the whole analysis, but it looks underdeveloped and segregated. The majority of the inhabitants of Nunavut are Inuit; as Staszak (2009) argues, having ‘the Other’ all in one place serves a purpose by preventing ‘the Other’ from mixing with white people and keeping the Other’s poverty and hardships as an example of a ‘specific culture’, so as to maintain Western superiority, functioning as another tool of exclusion. The images where people smile innocently at the camera make them look simple, kind, and somewhat childish, further strengthening stereotypical notions of the Other as the ‘happy Eskimo’.

For the same period (1990-2010) the type of activities, or the lack of activities, is also fostered in postcolonial process of representation and cultural differences. The activities the Inuit are involved in almost all revolve around physical labour. There is no leisure time; they never seem to go anywhere, they have no ambitions, no education. There is not one single image of an Inuk person in a high position such as a lawyer. The doctor in the story narrative of Nunavut is western. There are signs of an uncivilised community due to the images where the subjects’ bloody hands indicate that they have just consumed raw meat. There is never any cutlery accompanying the images of Inuit eating. They are not shown inside their home cooking food, walking a dog, clearing the snow outside their homes, and so forth. This lack of domestic activities only adds to their primitiveness. This is what Fienup-Riordan (1994)
classifies as Arctic Orientalism, where our ideas about Eskimo help create the framework they are forced to reside in and cannot get out of until accurate knowledge of the Eskimo culture is presented: only then can one perhaps form more understanding representations. It can also be classified as the notion of exoticism, which is the constant curiosity of the West towards the ‘primitive’ (Staszak, 2009).

In the analysed images there is one image where the presence of technology opposes the rest of the images of Inuit when it comes to using technology and not simple tools or snowmobiles. It is an image where we see a tractor and grass bailer, indicating advanced technology and development, contradicting what Professor Lehtonen (n.d.) in the theoretical chapter calls cultural stereotypes and beliefs such as that Indigenous people are leeches on the taxpayer’s money. What is interesting in the Greenland narrative is that the National Geographic is stepping away from their stereotypical way of reporting on Inuit people, and the last article from the Indigenous photographer’s point of view confirms this.

Lastly, I want to check if there are any detectable myths about the Inuit in the National Geographic. In the articles from 1990 to 1998 there are detectable myths produced by repeatedly using the same visual themes while reporting on particular countries or nations. In the case of the Inuit they are presented as being uncivilised, uneducated, only living in rural areas and only eating sea mammals which they have caught themselves; therefore, they are stuck in a state of primitivism. However, in the last two articles no myths are detectable. Furthermore, it is important to mention that last year the National Geographic acknowledged that their past coverage was racist and while not having a lot of interest in black people, they did have tremendous interest in reporting on ‘…“natives” elsewhere as exotics, famously and frequently unclothed, happy hunters, noble savages—every type of cliché’ (Goldberg, 2018).
6. Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis looks at how the Inuit are represented in the *National Geographic* through the semiotic analysis of the photographs featured in the articles of the magazine. Historically, media representations of Indigenous people have mostly been about social and cultural hardships and problems. This is evident in the writings of previous researchers. In the case of the Inuit rapid climate change can be added to these hardships. The focus of the study was on the period from 1990 to 2019. The study chose to use material going back to 1990 because without such a broad scope, there would not have been sufficient material for analysis. Therefore, my conclusion is that in the *National Geographic* the Inuit are underrepresented, where in the last 29 years fewer than 15 articles on Inuit have been published. Another common characteristic of media representation of Inuit is the strong presence of stereotypes until 2010. The published articles stereotype the Inuit as culturally backwards, with a general myth of primitivism underlying the photographs. In the period of 1990 to 2010, even though the representation revolves mainly around climate change, there is still a hint of distinction between the colonised and the coloniser. Moreover, until 2010, Inuit activities such as hunting are portrayed within tropes of savagery and primitivism and with a sense of differentiation between ‘the West’ and ‘the Other’. Luckily, Indigenous photographers and other media workers are presenting another side of the Inuit, as typical urban residents, not only hunters accompanied by starving polar bears and poverty due to climate change.

Recommendations for other researchers would be to use different magazines, newspapers or fiction films as their material for semiotic analysis, as well as applying semiotic analysis to assess the objectivity of newspapers, for instance. Additionally, researchers could use methods of critical discourse analysis on *National Geographic* and/or other influential media outlets in order to see how meaning is constructed through the use of headlines, oppositions, lead paragraphs and other techniques.
7. References


