

The Inuit Style of Filmmaking

Content Areas

Social Studies, Language Arts, Art

Objective

Students will research the Inuit style of filmmaking and list key points involved in the process by reading selections written by the three founding members of Igloolik Isuma Productions, the makers of the films *Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. After discussing the components of making a film from an Inuit perspective and exploring www.sila.nu, a website dedicated to this process, groups of students will choose a film idea and imagine they are part of an Inuit team making a film. Students will write a diary entry documenting the process of producing their film from an Inuit perspective.

Materials

- *“The Public Art of Inuit Storytelling,”* by Zacharias Kunuk
– 1 per student in Group 1
- *“Interview with Paul Apak Angilirq...,”* by Nancy Wachowich
– 1 per student in Group 2
- *“The Art of Community-Based Filmmaking,”* by Norman Cohn
– 1 per student in Group 3
- **Internet access:**
 1. <http://www.learner.org/exhibits/cinema/> (teacher background)
 2. <http://www.sila.nu>

Activity

- 1 Ask students to name some favourite movies. List on the board.
- 2 Choose one of the listed films and circle it. Ask students how they think the movie progressed from someone’s idea on paper to an actual movie seen in the theatre. What are some of the components of making a Hollywood film?

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- 3 Discuss the components of making a Hollywood film. For teacher background, consult www.learner.org/exhibits/cinema/.
- 4 Explain that not all films are made in the same way. The Inuit style of filmmaking is quite different from the Hollywood style of filmmaking.
- 5 Write “Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ)” on the board. Remind students that IQ means doing things the Inuit way. “It means knowledge of Arctic environment, snow, ice, water, weather and the environment around us. It means being in harmony with people, land, living things, and worldview. It means life skills, alertness and the ability to train others to a strong healthy life.” (Nunavut Social Development Council, 1999) This principle underlies the Inuit way of life, including filmmaking.
- 6 Explain that in the Inuit culture, the importance of the group is stressed over the importance of the individual. People collaborate and work together for a common purpose. Ask students if they can think of examples in their lives where this concept is present.
- 7 Write ***Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner*** on the board. Explain that this is the first film written, directed and acted by Inuit in the ancient oral language of Inuktitut, and it was inspired by a traditional Inuit legend from Igloolik. Share the following quote with students. Explain that Zacharias Kunuk is one of the founding members of Igloolik Isuma Productions and the director of ***Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner***. “Atanarjuat wasn’t the only legend we heard but it was one of the best – once you get that picture into your head of that naked man running for his life across the ice, his hair flying, you never forget it. It had everything in it for a fantastic movie – love, jealousy, murder, revenge and at the same time, buried in this ancient Inuit ‘action thriller,’ were all these lessons we kids were supposed to learn about how if you break these taboos that kept our ancestors alive, you could be out there running for your life just like him.” (Zacharias Kunuk, ***Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner***, Coach House/Isuma, 2002, page 13)

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- 8 Explain that students are going to read selections from three founding members of Igloolik Isuma Productions, Zacharias Kunuk, Paul Apak Angilirq, and the non-Inuit member, Norman Cohn. Igloolik Isuma Productions has produced numerous documentaries and films on the Inuit of Arctic Canada, as well as two feature films ***Atanarjuat – The Fast Runner*** and ***The Journals of Knud Rasmussen***. As they read, students are to list references



made by the authors about the Inuit style of filmmaking – anything they feel is unique to this style. (See notes for examples)

- 9 Partner students and divide partners into three groups. Give one group of partners the selection by Kunuk, the second group Apak's interview, and the third group Cohn's selection. Allow students time to read and take notes.

Evaluation

- 1 Once students have finished, discuss their findings. As they share notes, list key concepts on board or overhead projector. Lead students in a discussion comparing the Inuit style of filmmaking with the Hollywood style of filmmaking. What are some of the similarities? Differences?
- 2 In pairs or small groups, have students imagine they are part of a small Inuit creative team producing a feature film. They are filming in a remote corner of the Canadian Arctic. Students are to write an entry from a production diary describing the process of producing their film. Their entry should reflect what they've learned about making a film

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from an Inuit perspective as well as information about life in Nunavut (weather, food, animals). As part of the film crew, what are the weather conditions on the day of the entry? What will the crew eat? Were there any animal sightings? How is the Inuit spirit of flexible cooperation and teamwork reflected in their day's work?

- 3 Before starting their entry, allow students the opportunity to visit www.sila.nu, an interactive website which includes an on-line production diary for *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. At this site, students will experience the process of making a film in the Canadian Arctic first-hand.
- 4 Once students have completed their diary entry, allow time for pairs to share their work.



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Teacher Notes

Zacharias Kunuk – “The Public Art of Inuit Storytelling”

- “work horizontally while the usual Hollywood film people work in a military style”
- “entire team would talk about how to shoot a particular scene”
- “everything was authentic, handmade”
- “went to actual location where the story happened”
- “takes lots of teamwork”
- “hired hunters to hunt for us so we could eat – no catering trucks in the Arctic”
- “put whole community to work – 2 million dollar budget and 1 million stayed with the people of Igloolik”
- “Inuit people are storytellers. For four thousand years we have been passing stories on to our youth. We saw other films being made about the north where you could see a woman’s seal oil lamp turned the wrong way around and the production people didn’t care or know better. It is important we tell our stories from an Inuit point of view.”



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Teacher Notes

Paul Apak Angilirq – *“Interview with Paul Apak Angilirq...”*

- “the money came around just at that time so then I started recording the elders, and from the recordings I started to track down the story”
- “it was written from elders speaking in Inuktitut, then into an English story, and then into an Inuktitut screenplay, and also into an English screenplay”
- “it tells a story, a legend, that is right at the deep roots of Inuit culture”
- “we need elders with us who speak in fluent old Inuktitut”
- “we get the meanings from the elders, and then we understand why. We learn the reasons why people acted that way. Then we work things out with the script”
- “what we are focusing on now is teaching people to be who they are in the role”
- “a lot of Inuit, a good number of people in the community are involved already at this stage where we are now”

Norman Cohn – *“The Art of Community-Based Filmmaking”*

- “We met every day for three months around a table either at the office in Igloolik or in a tent at Ham Bay”
- “We discussed every scene, every gesture, every line of dialogue, and wrote two scripts (English – Canadian film industry, Inuktitut – Actors) at the same time, arguing and acting things out around the table”



- “Apak consulted with other elders to make sure dialogue was right”
- “For four millennia Inuit have refined co-operation as a medium of production and survival, valuing consensus and continuity over individuality and conflict”
- “We implant these values – our collective process – in our filmmaking practice; community support and participation are qualities of production we make visible on the screen.”

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Zacharias Kunuk

“I first heard the story of Atanarjuat from my mother”

Zacharias Kunuk

I was born in 1957 in a sod house at Kapuivik, my family’s winter campsite in our life on the land. We were living happily like my ancestors waking up with frozen kamiks for a pillow. I first heard the story of Atanarjuat from my mother when I was a kid falling asleep side-by-side with my five brothers and sisters. We were still living on the land in the early 1960s, travelling from place to place just like our ancestors did in this region for 4000 years. Our father would wake up at the crack of dawn to go harness his dogteam and go out hunting for our family and our mother would put us to sleep at night with all these stories about our ancestors, how they lived and what would happen to us if we were like this one or that one when we grew up.

Atanarjuat wasn’t the only legend we heard but it was one of the best – once you get that picture into your head of that naked man running for his life across the ice, his hair flying, you never forget it. It had everything in it for a fantastic movie – love, jealousy, murder and revenge and at the same time, buried in this ancient Inuit ‘action thriller,’ were all these lessons we kids were supposed to learn about how if you break these taboos that kept our ancestors alive, you could be out there running for your life just like him!

In 1965 my parents were told by Government workers, ‘You should send your kids to school or you could lose your family allowance.’ I was nine years old getting ready to be like my father. The next summer I was on the boat to Igloolik with my brother. While my parents lived on the land I stayed in town and learned the English language. Most weeks they showed movies at the Community Hall. They cost a quarter to get in. That’s when I started carving soapstone to get money for the movies. I remember John Wayne in the West. He spearheads the US cavalry and kills some Indians at the fort. One time the scouts didn’t return, we go out where there’s arrows sticking out of dead soldiers and horses and

The Inuit Style of Filmmaking Zacharias Kunuk

one soldier says, 'What kind of Indians did this!' I was shocked too. That's what I learned in my education, to think like one of the soldiers.

When I began to see myself as an aboriginal person and a filmmaker I learned there are different ways to tell the same story. People in Igloodik learned through storytelling who we were and where we came from for 4000 years without a written language. Then foreign missionaries preached Paul's Epistles to my parents in Inuktitut saying, 'Turn away from your old way of life.'

4000 years of oral history silenced by fifty years of priests, schools and cable TV? This death of history is happening in my lifetime. How were shamans tied? Where do suicides go? What will I answer when I'm an elder and don't know anything about it? Will I have anything to say? Lately I want to write to the Bishop and say 'Let my people go!'



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Zacharias Kunuk

In the 1970s Igloolik voted twice against TV from the south since there was nothing in Inuktitut, nothing in it for us. But I noticed when my father and his friends came back from hunting they would always sit down with tea and tell the story of their hunt. And I thought it would be great to film hunting trips so you wouldn't have to tell it, just show it. In 1981 I sold some carvings and bought a video camera. When I watched my videos I noticed kids outside were glued to my window looking in to see the TV. That was how special it was at the beginning.

In 1985 I received my first Canada Council grant to produce an independent video, *From Inuk Point of View*, on my summer holiday. I was director, Paul Apak editor, Pauloosie Qulitalik the cultural narrator, and Norman Cohn, cameraman. This became our Isuma team.

Can Inuit bring storytelling into the new millennium? Can we listen to our elders before they all pass away? Can producing community TV in Igloolik make our community, region and country stronger? Is there room in Canadian filmmaking for our way of seeing ourselves?

To try to answer these questions we want to show how our ancestors survived by the strength of their community and their wits, and how new ways of storytelling today can help our community survive another thousand years.

Our name Isuma means "to think," as in Thinking Productions. Our building in the centre of Igloolik has a big sign on the front in Inuktitut that says 'Isuma.' Think! Young and old work together to keep our ancestors' knowledge alive. We create traditional artifacts, digital multimedia and desperately needed jobs in the same activity. Our productions give an artist's view for all to see where we came from: what Inuit were able to do then and what we are able to do now.

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Paul Apak Angilirq

“Interview with Paul Apak Angilirq and Nancy Wachowich”

Nancy Wachowich: How did you first hear about the legend of Atanarjuat?

Paul Apak: Well, Inuit, they tell legends. They tell stories. That is how I first heard it, from some of the elders when I was young, but I didn't pay too much attention to it until later on. When I was at IBC (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation), I started thinking about this legend again so I asked some elders during a language workshop to tell this legend. So that is when I really got myself into it and got interested in writing a movie script.

When I left IBC I started working with Zach Kunuk at Igloodik Isuma Productions. That is when I talked to them about this legend to make it into a movie. Well, the money came around just at that time so then I started recording the elders, and from the recordings I started to track down the story. That is how it started.

NW How many people did you interview?

PA Maybe about eight to ten elders.

NW So then you wrote a script from those interviews?

PA Yes.

NW Are you writing it in English or Inuktitut?

PA The story (treatment), I wrote it in English. And when I started writing the script, I wrote it in Inuktitut.

NW So it was written from elders speaking in Inuktitut, then into an English story, and then into an Inuktitut screenplay, and also into an English screenplay. Wow.

PA Yes, that is the system that we had to use in order to get money. Because, like Canada Council and other places where we could get money, they don't read Inuktitut. They have to have something in writing in English. So that is why I wrote the story in English first, in order to get some funding to go ahead and continue with it.

NW Do you think film is a good way to show these types of legends and to maintain Inuit traditions?

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Paul Apak Angilirq

PA Oh yes. I think that it has been really working for this one so far because there are a lot of people involved in it. For instance, we will need about 35 actors in all for our film. Beyond that, it tells a story, a legend, that is right at the deep roots of Inuit culture. It is working to preserve both the knowledge and the traditions. We try to go back as far as possible with the language, using the old language. So the thing about learning the culture is what makes this film go really far beyond what we expected. We really preserve a lot of things that we wouldn't be able to get at if it wasn't for this legend, this screenplay. We go to the elders and ask information about the old ways, about religion, things that a lot of people don't have an idea of now.

NW What made you become interested in working with film?

PA I guess that was part of what I was doing when I worked for IBC. I was producing programs, regional programs, and also the news. But I wasn't satisfied. I wanted something that would be real, something bigger than what I had been doing.

NW You went straight from IBC to working solely on *Atanarjuat*?

PA Yeah, pretty well. But I have also done some work with Isuma, for Zach Kunuk, doing some editing for him. I was the Chief Editor for the Nunavut series.

NW I saw the posters about the Qitdlarssuaq Expedition,* and I read a book about it. You were part of that right? Could you tell me about it?

PA Again, it was started with my interests with my culture. Since I was part of a new generation of ideas, I never had a chance to really see myself, to really see who I am. So when I heard about this expedition, about retracing Qitdlarssuaq's migration route from this area to Greenland, since I had those interests in our culture, I got myself into it. And also I was driving dog team full-time at that time and I worked for IBC. That is how I got involved in this expedition to Greenland by dog sled.

NW That was in 1987. What about the other one? Didn't you go to Siberia?

* In 1987, Paul Apak and three travelling companions took part in an arctic expedition retracing the route taken during an epic mid-Nineteenth century polar migration when a shaman, Qitlaq, led more than forty Inuit from the North Baffin region across Smith Sound to Greenland. Paul Apak brought his camera along during this dogteam and sled expedition as well as during his trip three years later from Alaska across the Bering Strait to Siberia in a walrus skin boat. He produced three films from these expeditions that were aired on IBC.

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Paul Apak Angilirq

PA Yes, after this trip. After we got back from our expedition to Greenland, that was, what year? I think 1990. Anyway, I got a call from John MacDonald asking if I would be interested in taking part in an expedition in Siberia, an open-boat walrus skin expedition from Siberia to Alaska for the summer. So I did. I like getting myself into situations where I think ‘What am I doing here?’ I get excited by that. It didn’t take long for me to decide. It was almost right after the phone-call that I said yes. That is how excited I was. That is how I got myself into taking part in the Siberian expedition.

NW How many elders do you have working with you, trying to decide how people should talk to each other and what people did back then?

PA We have two elders. They are our cultural advisors or consultants. They are working on our script with us, like helping us write down what people say, how the dialogue would have been. So we need elders with us who speak in fluent old Inuktitut. Yes, that is important. We have two elders with us when we are writing. There are four of us writing: myself, Zach Kunuk, Hervé Paniaq, and Pauloosie Qulitalik.

NW So they decide how people act in the movie?

PA Yeah, that is how it works. Myself, and Zach, we are able to speak Inuktitut, but we speak baby talk compared to the elders. But for the movie, we want people speaking real Inuktitut. So that is why it is important to have the elders with us.

NW Would people act differently back then? Would husband and wives act differently with one another?

PA Oh yes, like for example, working with Paniaq or Qulitalik, when we are writing the script, they might jump in and say, ‘Oh, we wouldn’t say such a word to our in-law! We wouldn’t say anything to our brother’s wives! It was against the law.’ So there were these things that went on back then that today we don’t know the meaning. We get the meanings from the elders, and then we understand why. We learn the reasons why people acted that way. Then we work things out with the script.

NW What do the actors have to learn?

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Paul Apak Angilirq

PA If they are going to be an actor, they have to know the whole script. If they know the whole script, then they know that they are going to be able to go as far as the script-person did in the old culture. They are learning new words and learning songs that represent what they did. And also they are learning about how people went about life at that time. That is how much they will be assimilating from Inuit tradition. They will have to learn this besides being an actor. They will have to know more than just acting. What we are focusing on right now is teaching people to be who they are in the role.

NW So how many people do you think will be involved with the movie, and what sort of involvement will people in the community have?

PA Well, there is a whole lot of involvement besides the actors. We will need costumes made for us. It will take a lot of women to do that. Also there is the mechanical side, which we will have to get from the south. Also there is so much we will need besides the actors. A lot of people will be involved. A lot of Inuit, a good number of people in the community are involved already at this stage where we are now.

NW Do you think this kind of project will help promote traditions in Igloolik?

PA Yeah, some of it. In our script, there are a lot of things that have never been brought out to people. There are things that are very new to most of the younger people, like the information and research into the old ways that we are putting into that movie. So I am sure that this movie will help promote the culture.

NW What kind of audience are you directing the movie towards?

PA Well, anybody, no matter who they are and where they are from. The same audiences that would see movies from the south – you know the movies with movie stars or whatever – anyone who watches movies.

NW How do you think *Atanarjuat* will be different from other films about Inuit? Like *Shadow of the Wolf*, or other films about Inuit shown in the south.

PA There are a number of differences between what we are doing and other movies that have been produced regarding our Inuit culture. This movie will be based on an Inuit legend and also it is all going to be in Inuktitut, in the first place. And also, all of the actors will have to be

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Paul Apak Angilirq

Inuk. No Japanese or whoever who pretend to be Inuit. You know. It will be done the Inuit way. We want it to be like the way things happened in real life. That is what we are going to do.

NW Do you have any more ideas about new projects besides *Atanarjuat*?

PA Yeah, I do. I have something that I cannot talk about right now because right now I have to concentrate about what I am doing with this movie, writing this movie script. I have other interests that I want to get into later on.



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Norman Cohn

The Art of Community-based Filmmaking

Norman Cohn

One image I'll never forget was this – we radioed back to town for someone to bring a fresh computer battery down to the tent at Ham Bay. We could hear the Honda ATV winding down the rough road from town. It stopped outside the door, the tent flap opened and as we all looked up we saw the startled look on our messenger's face. There we were, Paul Apak typing away at his lap top computer, me typing away at mine, Zach drawing a scene on a large piece of newsprint, these two older guys discussing in Inuktitut how it would look, all around this makeshift table with rifles on the floor and a coleman stove boiling water for tea, out in the middle of a sunny arctic night writing a script that would become ***Atanarjuat –The Fast Runner***.

We had put together a five-man scriptwriting team – Apak, Zach, Qulitalik, Paniak and I – to turn Apak's treatment, based on eight elders' story versions, into a 115 page screenplay. These Inuit legends are like riddles, or poems, with a few key details but not much character development. To make ***Atanarjuat*** into a believable movie, as if real people had lived through these events, Apak had to imagine characters, emotions and motivations that were not in the original legend. If a man ran naked for his life across the ice chased by people trying to kill him, who were these people and why would they be doing this? When Apak tried to imagine these events happening, he realized it must have been a love story, a triangle of jealousy and revenge, with some evil shamanic force behind it, so that's the story he wrote.

We met every day for three months around a table either at the office in Igloolik, or in a tent a few miles out of town at a place we called Ham Bay, where we could write and hunt seals at the same time. We discussed every scene, every gesture, every line of dialogue, and wrote two scripts at the same time, arguing and acting things out around the table. Apak wrote the scenes down on one laptop in the old Inuktitut

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Norman Cohn

font we got from the school, while I wrote the same scenes in English on our second laptop, from the same discussions. We had to do this. The actors would learn their characters and lines from the Inuktitut script, but we had to finance the film from the English script, since no one in the Canadian film industry could read Inuktitut or think like Inuit.

Apak and I would go home at night and each work on our scenes, trying to fix them up, and then the next day we would make sure they fit together and go on to the next ones. At the same time Apak consulted with other elders, like Emile Immaroitok, a language specialist, or George Aggiak, who knew a lot about shamanism, to make sure the dialogue was right, especially for the olden times when Inuit spoke a more formal, poetic and complex Inuktitut than today. And I consulted in the evenings by telephone with our script editor, Anne Frank, 3000 miles away in Toronto, who was helping us shape the screenplay to work as a film. This whole process was amazing and as I write about it here I can hardly believe how we did it.

I am Isuma's fourth and only non-Inuit partner. I came to Igloolik in the mid-80s to meet Zach and Apak, whose early videos I had seen by accident in Montréal. I was looking for a context to work that was more serious than the self-referential world of contemporary video art. I found partners with similar vision and shared goals despite wide cultural differences. I stayed to live and co-found Igloolik Isuma Productions.

As a marriage of art and politics, Isuma's videomaking synthesizes several related themes in a new way. First, Inuit oral storytelling is a sophisticated mix of fact, fiction, performance, improvisation, past and future which has maintained Inuit culture successfully through art from stone age to information age. Second, being colonized offers artists a fertile reality for original progressive self-expression. Third, the invention of low-cost video at the end of the 1960s enabled people from Harlem to the Arctic to use TV as a tool for political and social change in local communities. And finally, after thirty years on the margins, video, reincarnated as 'digital filmmaking,' finally moved to the mainstream

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as techniques pioneered by guerilla video groups like Ant Farm, TVTV and Vidéographe, and experimental filmmakers like John Cassavetes and Peter Watkins, show up in the 1990s as shaky-camera bank commercials, and as the leading edge of the new Twenty-First Century 'digital' film industry.

For four millennia Inuit have refined cooperation as a medium of production and survival, valuing consensus and continuity over individuality and conflict. As a collective Igloolik Isuma Productions arrives at the millennium practicing respectful cooperation as a formal element of our media art. We implant these values – our collective process – in our filmmaking practice; community support and participation are qualities of production we make visible on the screen. We extend these same values to cross-cultural collaboration. As artists bridging the past and future we practice a third way, different from either the Inuit way or the White way, both solitudes separated by centuries of fear and mistrust since Columbus and Frobisher 'discovered' the New World. Inuit skills of working together join with southern ideas of community videomaking in a new model of professional production that can expand film and television in Canada and around the world.

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Notes:
