The Inuit Elegiac: *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*

Russell J. A. Kilbourn, Wilfrid Laurier University

IN HIS JANUARY 2017 *National Post* review, Chris Knight remarked that if John Ford's "*The Searchers* was a western, [the] Inuit film *Maliglutit* is a northern" (n.p.). Following this line, one might say that Zacharias Kunuk's latest feature, *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk*, is the Inuit *High Noon*. As the latest 'northern,' however, *One Day* is not a remake, re-telling or adaptation of Fred Zinneman's 1952 western in the same way that *Maliglutit* (2016), beginning with its title, translates the basic story of *The Searchers* (1956) into a thoroughly northern, Arctic, Inuit context. *High Noon* is recalled in the new film in a fundamental structural sense, in the formally and thematically central confrontation between two men—gender is no accident here—at the high point of this typical Arctic spring day (the same time of year as the actual occurrence on which the film is based): the long central scene of a showdown between two men, one of whom ends up getting the better of the other, but only in the short term. The long-term ramifications of this victory—the future to the film's 1961 setting—are precisely the conditions Canada's Inuit are living in right now. Therefore Piugattuk's small victory over the government agent is Pyrrhic, and the retroactive irony of this tragic inversion is the source of what I call the 'Inuit elegiac.'

This categorization is exemplified in the *Fast Runner* trilogy, which, with *One Day*, is now a suite of four films. After *Atanarjuat* (2001), which is in a sense the most affirmative of the feature-length films[1], one need only look to the ending of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006), in which Avva (Pakak Innuksuk) must disavow his spirit helpers and thus his shamanistic powers in order to ensure that his family does not starve to death. Or the quietly apocalyptic conclusion to *Before Tomorrow* (2008), in which a grandmother (Madeline Ivalu) must shelter her grandson (Paul-Dylan Ivalu) from the knowledge that they are the last of their clan. In these films and in other works one finds an elegiac tonality, tinged with melancholy for what has been or will be lost—since these stories are all set in a past time—kept in check by a gently ironic humour. And, although it may sound contradictory, the elegiac modality in this Inuit context is also always politically charged. (This is just one way in which *One Day* intertextualizes Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1963), which is set in a 1950s Stalinist Gulag in the Siberian Arctic. Where Denisovich and his fellow-prisoners have adapted to survive under extremely arduous conditions that they hope one day to escape, Piugattuk and his family are in the very inverse position: the Arctic is their home and the comforts of southern civilization a prison that awaits them.)

Political activism in action has been an essential feature of the Isuma/Kingulliit canon since the company's inception[2]. From its beginnings in 1990 Isuma has been a politically motivated organization, as Michael Robert Evans explains in his introduction to Isuma's Video Art: "The Isuma producers position their organization as a resistance cell, and the power structure that they are resisting is colonial Canada—and through Canada, the colonizing powers of England, France, America, and the rest of the South" (2008 30). As Norman Cohn recently put it: "Isuma's style of

---

[1] Atanarjuat's setting in a mythical "time before time" (Cohn 2012), means that the elegiac manifests in the viewer's experience of the film rather than in the diegesis itself. See Kilbourn (forthcoming in Fall 2019).

[2] For Lucia Nagib, *Atanarjuat* "is the true expression of activism: not representation of victims, but the empowerment of a people, who are sovereign over their land beyond time" (2011 42).

community based filmmaking merged activist video with ancient values of collective survival" ("Inuit Art"), where post-contact cultural survival depends on a canny combination of continuity and adaptation. Anyone who doubts that Isuma's films or video works are political in form as much as content need only re-watch *The Journals*.

In a fascinating article on this film, Sylvie Jasen highlights:

> the complex of processes involved in preparation for filming (including rehearsals, set construction, organizing the mise-en-scène) that constitutes the field in which traditional knowledge is performed and wherein the film as a record of Inuit history (reenactment of an event) becomes merely one dimension of a much larger project of preserving and continuing ancestral skills (reenactment as an event). (Jasen 4)

From "reenactment of an event" to "reenactment as an event," the film's production itself becomes a politically charged gesture. In *The Journals*' 'Qaggiq' scene, for instance, Kunuk and Cohn coin a species of uniquely Inuit Brechtian cinematic style. The evening before Avva and his family leave for Igloolik, all the principal characters gather in the main igloo for a kind of 'disinhibition' party (Cohn 2012). In the midst of shooting a masked character bangs into Cohn's camera. This unscripted moment, which they decided to retain, overtly draws attention to—'lays bare'—the decidedly non-Inuit means of production while challenging the viewer to remain invested in the deeply Inuit story (see Kilbourn 2014, 203). Fully titled 'a series of events based on *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*,' the film reclaims these events, drawing them back into an Inuit cultural orbit, just as this exemplary scene shows the filmmakers repurposing digital video, claiming the camera itself as a tool facilitating the transition from a pre-literate to a post-literate, digital epoch (Siebert 538). Following this logic, Rasmussen disappears from *The Journals* immediately after this scene, and the Inuit characters—Avva the shaman, his daughter, Appak (Leah Angutimarik)—move to the centre of the story, which, the non-Inuit viewer belatedly realizes, was only ever theirs.

One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk is focused around a crucial encounter between two men, Noah Piugattuk (Apayata Kotierk) and the Canadian Government official, nicknamed Isumataq ('he thinks for us')[3], or 'Boss' (Danish actor Kim Bodnia), the film's embodiment of 'colonial Canada.' They meet at a high Arctic oasis at the foot of an ice-locked iceberg, in the middle of the day, in the clear light of noontime. Like a hirsute Socrates and his recalcitrant interlocutor, they engage in a dilated battle of words and wits. In the short term, within the diegesis, Piugattuk emerges the winner, but in the long term, well beyond the film's diegetic purview, he and his family, his people, his culture, his world, can only be seen as the loser. This slowly paced film in effect allegorizes the moment when the fate of Canada's Inuit was sealed. It does this by dramatizing a single meeting, one long conversation, in pseudo-real time, mediated by an Inuit translator, wherein Piugattuk refuses to comply with the RCMP officer's demand that he move with his family to the government settlement at Igloolik.

One Day opens with an exterior wide shot of Kapuivik in the spring of 1961; morning, the sun recently risen over scattered sod houses and a number of sled dogs in an otherwise empty landscape. In voiceover we already hear Piugattuk, muttering inaudibly to himself, a clock ticking in the background. A cut to the interior of a hut shows Piugattuk in the foreground, reading from his bible *sotto voce* in Inuktitut. (this is the only subtitled dialogue in this portion of the scene): "If you have heard him and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, turn away from your old way of life and be born again." In these lines from the Gospel narrative (Ephesians 4.21-22) can be heard the Protestant emphasis on redemption, being born again—an intra-textualization of *The Journals*' critique of the impact of Christianity on Inuit shamanism. In a crucial irony, the lives of the Kapuivik Inuit in the film's early 1960s setting are already deeply imbricated with Southern ways and goods: tea, sugar,

[3] Norman Cohn (private communication). 'Isuma' famously means 'think' or 'to have a thought' (Evans 2008 20).

biscuits, jam, tobacco; but also Christianity, with its Catholic-Protestant schism intact. Evans describes the twenty-first century social geography of Igloolik, for instance, as “a pair of overlapping circles; the centre of one is the Saint Matthias Anglican Church… and the centre of the other is the Saint Stephen Catholic Church,” and the “emotional edges of these circles [are] never bitter but always palpable” (Evans 2008, 18). Noah Piugattuk’s family group’s relation to neighbouring Inuit families is already riven by the internecine conflicts of southern Christian culture: repeatedly interrupting Boss’s discourse, he admonishes his daughter for flirting with a young man from a neighbouring Inuit family. “You can never marry a Catholic,” he tells her, indicating the degree to which 1960s Inuit life is determined by Western Christian mores as much as by traditional Inuit folkways. (The daughter, it seems, is already well past these contradictions; as her friend teases her, she is mainly interested in the young man’s “cute bum.”)

PIUGATTUK (APAYATA KOTIERK) READS *SOTTO VOCE* FROM HIS BIBLE TO HIS RESTING WIFE TATIGAT (NEEVE UTTAK) IN INUKTITUT.

Isuma's auto-ethnographic attention to material-cultural authenticity, to specific material objects/props within the mise-en-scene, is well documented and justifiably praised. But where in the first three films this was mainly an attention to researching and reproducing the authentic materiality of traditional Inuit cultural practices ('reenactment of/as an event'), since *Maliglutit* the production design has increasingly emphasized those artefacts of white settler culture that have infiltrated Inuit dally life: the things, material or not, that have been appropriated by the Inuit. Certain of these, such as Christianity, have been re-purposed; others, like the rifle with its bullets, have not. And where the first of these is shown in *Journals* to have had long-term and mostly devastating effects on the traditional shamanistic belief system, the latter, guns and gunpowder, are shown—in *Maliglutit*, for instance—to have revolutionized traditional hunting practices. This attention to the artefacts of settler culture, imported or appropriated from outside into everyday Inuit life, is amplified by several degrees in *One Day*, where specific mid-twentieth-century brand name commodities—Red Rose tea, Pilot biscuits, Redpath processed white sugar, Frye's cocoa, pipe tobacco, not to speak of woollen toques and the peculiar white parkas with primary-coloured borders[4]—are presented as taken-for-granted and quasi-indispensable aspects of an everyday life that for some decades prior to 1961 has been disconnecting itself from an interdependency with the land, animal migratory patterns, the weather, seasonal changes, etc., gradually re-reorienting itself in relation to the southern money economy, to Western or otherwise non-Inuit belief systems and educational methods, to the authority of the Canadian government in determining how and, most of all, where they live their lives. "What will our children do if we move there? If they move where there's nothing to do?" Piugattuk asks Boss, rhetorically.

In the film's opening scene, Piugattuk's wife, Tatigat, tells him "we're out of sugar" for their tea—the first audible dialogue in the film. He remarks

---

[4] During the 1950s and 1960s, Inuit bought cloth and made parkas with the cloth and fur for the spring and summer season (private communication).

that someone has to go to the Settlement to "trade for Whiteman supplies." Crucially, what the film's Inuit have not yet completely adapted to is money: a money-based economy, in which work (hunting) is displaced from the centre of life to become labour exchanged for wages, and traditional Inuit folkways are exchanged for southern ways, and children no longer learn from their parents how to do things, but go to school to become educated so that one day they can get a job and earn their own money. This, at least, is the line Boss keeps repeating—"Your children have to go to school!" he insists, a dark harbinger of a future that was already unfolding in the form of the residential schools (see Evans 2008 30). Piugattuk appears to see through this sales pitch; in answer to Boss's question about why he wants to stay in Kapuivik, Piugattuk explains that the traditional Inuit way of life on the land is "useful" because it allows them to live: "that's why we are alive," he says.

They are alive and well, for the moment, but, as established in the opening scene, his wife has a persistent cough, suggesting the presence of the sort of pulmonary ailment that afflicted Canada's Inuit since the late nineteenth century. Of all of Canada's indigenous peoples, tuberculosis came to the Inuit late, and remained a scourge throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s "thousands were transported to southern hospitals and sanatoria for treatment" (https://www.cpha.ca/tb-and-aboriginal-people). The average stay was two and a half years, and some never returned at all. (The peculiar history of TB among the Inuit population is the basis of Benoît Pilon's 2008 film *The Necessities of Life*, starring *Atanarjuat*'s Natar Ungalaaq.) According to the Canadian Public Health Association website, the effects of TB were exacerbated by malnutrition, while "the confinement of First Nations peoples on crowded reserves allowed the disease to spread rapidly" (ibid.). While the Inuit in *One Day* do not give in to the officer's demands to move to Igloolik (the 'Settlement'), their failure to do so means that they will also not avail themselves of the medical attention Boss tells them will be one of the perquisites of relocation. As with so much else in this film, the retroactive

ironies are complex and sobering. Again according to the CPHA, in 2008 the TB rate among Canada's indigenous peoples was almost six times greater than the overall rate, and in Nunavut more than 38 times the national rate. It was with first contact that diseases like TB were passed to the Inuit, and it was with compulsory resettlement that such diseases were able to spread more efficiently. It is therefore necessary to qualify the elegiac tone I noted above as one that is irreducibly ironic, becoming a kind of moral-aesthetic modality, like comedy or tragedy: the Inuit ironic-elegiac.

PIUGATTUK (APAYATA KOTIERK), *LEFT,* TRANSLATOR EVALUARJUK (BENJAMIN KUNUK), AND BOSS (KIM BODNIA) IN A CUMBERSOME THREE-WAY PROCESS OF TRANSLATION.

This history, and the subsequent suffering of thousands, which goes unrepresented in the film, is hinted at, metonymically, in the quietly coughing person of Piugattuk's wife, Tatigat, who has only a few lines in the opening and closing scenes. *One Day* has an almost perfectly balanced concentric structure, as if to suggest that the typical day in the life of this Inuit elder, like the seasons themselves, follows a circular rather than a linear path. The film's unusual six-scene structure breaks down as follows:

1 **Opening scene**: exterior, single long static establishing shot of Kapuivik in spring 1961, morning, the sun newly risen (APPROX. 1 min. 24 sec.).
2 **Interior sod house, morning** (APPROX. 6 min. 34 sec.); one cut near end; minimal camera movement.
3 **Exterior of house, dog sled journey** (APPROX. 5 min. 13 sec.); single cut between preparations and dog sled trip in progress.
4 **Exterior, on frozen sea ice, meeting at iceberg** (APPROX. 86 min. 12 sec.); varied shot scale, favouring close-ups and medium shots in long takes.
5 **Exterior, dog sled journey** (APPROX. 4 min. 2 sec.); single long take.
6 **Interior sod house, evening** (APPROX. 4 min. 37 sec.); single long take.

The film begins and ends with a pair of bookend scenes: long, nearly single-take sequence shots set in Piugattuk's sod house (papered with what appear to be pages from a mail-order catalogue, a photo of the young Queen Elizabeth, and the like); the first as they get up in the morning, the second as they end their day. In between are long single-take scenes of Piugattuk and family travelling by dogsled to get supplies. The middle of the film consists of the extended sequence in which Piugattuk faces off against the government official, Boss, at a sort of Arctic oasis formed by the presence of an iceberg locked in the sea ice, which forms the vast white expanse they are traversing when they pause. This lengthy scene is comprised of several long takes, mainly medium group shots, medium close ups, and close ups, with no shot-reverse shot sequences or two-shots: the dialogue between Piugattuk and Boss is generally presented as a cumbersome three-way process of translation, with Evaluarjuk

(Benjamin Kunuk, star of *Maliglutit*), affectionately nicknamed Ningiuq, or 'Grandmother,' their translator for the duration of this encounter. (Piugattuk's traveling companions sit to one side, occasionally chipping in with advice and sarcastic commentary. Whether or not they understand Boss's accented English remains a running joke—but they do enjoy the southern foods he brings them, in spite of their cravings for caribou.)

I have written about the Isuma films in the context of transmediation (Kilbourn 2014); the new film addresses the even more fundamental issue of translation, in effect the process at the root of a constellation of other processes constitutive of what we used to call Western culture: remediation, transmediation, intermediality, adaptation, appropriation. Each of these is dependent upon, is indeed a variant of, the fundamental communicative act of translation. Here Evaluarjuk, the translator, is a stand-in for the filmmakers, and for the medium of HD digital video itself (*One Day* was shot in 4K digital with an Arri AMIRA and Sony FS7), mediating between Piugattuk and Boss as the Isuma team mediates between the Inuit experience and the non-Inuit viewer. In either case a certain amount of information gets lost in translation. Evaluarjuk, the translator, may not be an out-and-out traitor—*traduttore, traditore*, as the saying goes—but he clearly favours his Inuit brothers, translating selectively, mistranslating some things, failing to translate others altogether. The viewer without Inuktitut can only wonder how much s/he is missing—but then this has always been a feature of Isuma's work. "Every spectator is either a coward or a traitor," stated Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (reiterated in Solanas and Gettino's 1968 Third Cinema masterwork, *The Hour of the Furnaces*). To invoke Rancière, it is up to the spectator to be open to the emancipation that the film offers. It is not that the filmmakers intentionally omit or mis-lead; rather, as others have pointed out, the language of narrative film, or rather digital video, does not originate with the Inuit. The salience of Faye Ginsburg's point about the 'Faustian pact' signed by the Isuma team, about the ever-present danger of cultural-technical 're-colonization,' has only intensified since

the 2001 release of *Atanarjuat, The Fast Runner* (Ginsburg 2003, 79). The stakes have only risen with each passing year and with each new film, video, television or web-based production. As a frustrated Evaluarjuk says to Boss at one point, “Inuktitut doesn’t have words for it.” Language is as much the barrier as the gateway to successful communication, just as it is a defense against outside influence. Language is a *pharmakon*, both poison and cure, in that it is also a bridge or conduit that connects and brings people together. In the film’s protracted central sequence Kunuk and Cohn use the language of narrative film to dramatize the difficulties and complications of translation between English and Inuktitut, but in a manner that favours the Inuit characters, encouraging spectatorial empathy. The Inuit and non-Inuit viewer alike is compelled to align her-/himself with Piugattuk; the sustained and intense close-ups on Kotierk’s face, both during their colloquy and also during the sled journeys on either side, encourage identification and affective allegiance with him. The inscrutable quality of his expression on

SUSTAINED AND INTENSE CLOSE-UPS ON KOTIERK’S FACE ENCOURAGE IDENTIFICATION AND AFFECTIVE ALLEGIANCE WITH HIM.

the homebound journey, in particular, amplifies the irony of a non-Inuit viewer experiencing empathy for a man whose thoughts and motivations remain essentially hidden.

Even more than the protagonists of Isuma's earlier films, Noah Piugattuk commands the viewer's attention throughout, appearing in almost every shot. That Piugattuk, like Avva in *The Journals*, was a real person, only adds weight to an already formidable role. One realizes in watching the film that Kunuk and Cohn have taken the opportunity to illustrate certain precepts of traditional Inuit life—aspects that have since disappeared or are disappearing as you read this—such as, most significantly perhaps, the respect traditionally accorded to elders (see Evans 2008, 163). It was Piugattuk himself—the real Noah Piugattuk—who, in the mid-1990s, shortly before he died at the age of 96, casually remarked that he would love to taste bowhead whale blubber again while he still lived. In doing so he inadvertently precipitated the 'bowhead whale incident,' in which traditional methods of hunting the bowhead were belatedly resurrected and saved from oblivion because of an elder's fond memories of a traditional Inuit delicacy (ibid.). As Evans explains, for the Inuit this seemingly offhand remark represents an implicit command: the wish of the elder that must be obeyed, despite its flouting of a government prohibition on bowhead hunting. In this traditional worldview, Elders are the ones with the most experience and knowledge, and therefore they are to be consulted and obeyed (ibid.). This is exactly Piugattuk's cultural role in *One Day*: his children and the other Inuit obey with alacrity his every directive, and it is to him that the translator, naturally, and Boss, necessarily, defer. It is no coincidence that, after the main narrative portion of the film, the real Noah Piugattuk appears in an archival video appended after the film proper, singing a traditional *ajaja* song, ""Isumallarlirama" ('I am thinking')," taped in 1992, four years before his death. Piugattuk's song combines a yearning to gaze upon the sea ice once more with a blunt recognition of the mortal dangers it poses to the fisherman. This coda crystallizes what I mean by the Inuit elegiac.

I stated above that *One Day* has an almost perfectly balanced concentric structure, as if to suggest the cyclical nature of the Piugattuk family's daily life. While this accounts for the film's engagement with the cultural level of Inuit experience, narratively the film has a classic, if unusually symmetrical, pyramidal shape, with a section of rising action building to the 'climactic' or inciting event of Piugattuk's rejection of Boss's thinly veiled command that he move with his family from Kapuivik to Igloolik. On this level, the story's denouement, Piugattuk's return journey and the closing scene in the sod house in the evening, display the protagonist outwardly the same but inwardly deeply changed by his encounter with the government official, facing a future he likely did not foresee when he got up that morning. The film closes with the now familiar composition of the fictional Piugattuk in medium shot, slightly out of focus behind and to the right of the frame. He sips his tea, meditatively chewing his biscuit and jam, his wife quietly coughing.

Fade to black.

Russell J. A. Kilbourn is Associate Professor in English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, specializing in film theory, memory studies, and adaptation. He is the author of *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema* (Routledge 2010), co-editor, with Eleanor Ty, of *The Memory Effect: The Remediation of Memory in Literature and Film* (WLU Press, 2013), and *W.G. Sebald's Postsecular Redemption: Catastrophe with Spectator* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2018). His current book project is on the films of Italian director Paolo Sorrentino.

References

Cohn, Norman. (2012) Unpublished interview, 20 October, Montreal, Canada.

Cousineau, Marie-Hélène and Madeline Ivalu. (2008) *Before Tomorrow*. Canada: Igloolik Isuma Productions.

Evans, Michael Robert. (2008) *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's.

Fanon, Frantz. (2004) *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

Ford, John. (1956) *The Searchers*. USA: C.V. Whitney Pictures and Warner Brothers.

Gettino, Octavio and Fernando Solanas. (1968) *The Hour of the Furnaces*. Argentina: Grupo Cine Liberacion and Solanas Productions.

Ginsburg, Faye. (2003) "Screen Memories and Entangled Technologies: Resignifying Indigenous Lives." Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (eds.), Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, pp. 77–98.

"Inuit Art Collective to Represent Canada at 2019 Venice Biennale." (2017) *Canadianart*, December 13. https://canadianart.ca/news/isuma-venice-biennale-canada-pavilion-2019/. Accessed: 01 April 2019.

Jasen, Sylvie. (2013) "The Archive and Reenactment: Performing Knowledge in the Making of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*." The Velvet Light Trap 71 (Spring): pp. 3-14.

Kilbourn, R.J.A. (2014) "If This is Your Land, Where is Your Camera?: *Atanarjuat*, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* and Post-Cinematic Adaptation." *Journal of Adaptation in Performance* and Film 7.2: pp. 195-207.

----. (forthcoming) “The ‘Fast Runner’ Trilogy, Inuit Cultural Memory and Knowledge (Re-) Production.” “Indigenous Knowledges in North America,” special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*. Kerstin Knopf and Birgit Dawes (eds.).

Knight, Chris. (2017) “If *The Searchers* was a western, Inuit film *Maliglutit* is a northern.” *The National Post*, January 12. Accessed: 28 January 2017.

Kunuk, Zacharias and Norman Cohn. (2001) *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Canada: Aboriginal Peoples Television Network.

----. (2006) *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*. Canada, Denmark and Greenland: Igloolik Isuma Productions.

----. (2016) *Maliglutit*. Canada: Kingulliit Productions.

Nagib, Lucia. (2011) *World Cinema and The Ethics of Realism*. New York: Continuum.

Rancière, Jacques. (2009) *The Emancipated Spectator*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London and New York: Verso Books.

Siebert, Monika. (2006) “*Atanarjuat* and the Ideological Work of Contemporary Indigenous Filmmaking.” *Public Culture*. Vol. 18, no. 3 (Fall): pp. 531-50.

Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. (1963) *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. New York: Praeger.

Zinneman, Fred. (1952) *High Noon*. USA: Stanley Kramer Productions and United Artists.