



# From the Edge of the Earth: Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*

By Maurie Alioff

ANYBODY WHO DECIDES TO SHOOT A MOVIE IS BETTING ON A LONG SHOT. But not many have faced down the kind of odds that loomed over the people who made *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, the first feature ever written and filmed in Inuktitut, the Aboriginal language spoken from Alaska to southern Greenland.

Director Zacharias Kunuk and his collaborators dreamt up the project for Igloolik Isuma Productions, an independent company they run in Nunavut, the vast Inuit region carved out of the Northwest Territories two years ago. Isuma was founded by Kunuk, the late Paul Apak Angilirq, Paul Qulitalik and the only non-Inuit on the team, ex-New Yorker Norman Cohn. Paul Apak, who wrote the movie, was only 44 years old when he died during production, some say a victim of inadequate northern medical care. Qulitalik, an authority on traditional Inuit life, plays a major character in the film. Cohn, the film's hands-on director of photography as well as a producer and co-editor, has lived in his partners' hometown of Igloolik, a small community in the northern Baffin Island region, since 1985.



Sylvia Ivalu

Until their movie came out of nowhere and took the *Caméra d'Or* for Best Debut Feature at Cannes 2001, few in the Canadian film industry had heard of these guys from the ice floes and tundra of the Far North. For Torontonians or Montrealers, Igloolik is so distant, it might as well be on the moon. To get *Atanarjuat* to the point where a jury, led by actress Maria De Medeiros, gave Kunuk the nod over the directors of *Shrek*, the Isuma team struggled past indifference, condescension, funding catastrophes and tough shooting conditions. The untimely deaths of Paul Apak and a year later, his wife Amelia, didn't make things easier. And despite a tiny budget, they had committed themselves to an ambitious epic story involving dramatic, comedic and romantic notes that had to be hit just right.

well-intentioned whites or officially sanctioned Aboriginal media makers.

Set in the distant past, but affirming a spirit that the filmmakers believe still thrives, *Atanarjuat* offers a romantic, rapturous view of a culture that has flourished for thousands of years. With its dynamic story material and its sweeping visual beauty, Kunuk's picture is mesmerizing in its portrayal of Arctic nomads caught in a struggle between the good and the bad. The film's mythic, yet intimate plot involves a rivalry for a beautiful woman and a very human susceptibility to evil. At the same time, ribald humour feeds into *Atanarjuat*'s down-to-earth feel—as when one character tells another to think of the boulder he is trying to lift as a woman's butt.

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Destined to go down in Canadian film history as the surprise movie of 2001, and one of the best ever made in this country, *Atanarjuat* is bold and emotionally generous. Full of surprises, it never limits itself by locking into one mode and never plays like one of those deadening films about Aboriginal people that stereotypes them as either nature gurus, martyrs or booze-addled, gas-sniffing losers. The Inuit don't need that kind of depersonalization, either from

There are moments when the nearly three-hour film suggests an Inuit *Iliad*, has echoes of a Sergio Leone western, recalls Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, gets as otherworldly as sci-fi and even shifts into an Arctic musical when dialogue gives way to songs. Like Hong Kong's historical extravaganzas, it connects with modern audiences, staging traditional Inuit life without getting pedantic or losing the riveting narrative momentum. Watching *Atanarjuat*, the viewer is drawn into

another world where daily routines, mysterious rituals, cultural values and accurately recreated objects are woven into dramatic situations and editing rhythms. When someone wields an ancient tool or collects food, the action underscores the scene's tensions, rather than putting them on hold.

Like Shekhar Kapur's *The Bandit Queen* or Sergei Paradjanov's *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, *Atanarjuat* doesn't merely itemize an ethnography. The world it imagines is imbued with vivid, sometimes hallucinatory power. As the movie pulls you into Inuit consciousness, Cohn's spontaneous, ultra-subjective

angry," Kunuk laughs ruefully. "They could wipe us out in one second." Able to hunt down a caribou and navigate by the stars, Kunuk is also a 21st-century, tech-savvy man who doesn't want to play poster boy for Inuit life. He lives a mixture of old and new without being self-conscious about it, and when he speaks, the amusement in his voice hints at a fine-tuned sense of absurdity. I asked Kunuk whether the film's uninhibited sensuality discloses a particular Inuit attitude toward sex. He found the question incomprehensible and hilarious, but he tried to answer. "Sex. You can't top it. That's why there's so many of you. Every time I go south, I wonder where all these people came from."

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camerawork evokes a wide range of physical sensations from agonizing pain to delicious pleasure like racing across ice on a dogsled or making love in the flickering warmth of a seal oil lamp.

At Cannes, *Atanarjuat* screened one day after Francis Coppola's remixed version of *Apocalypse Now*, also an epic reverie about primal forces threatening civilization. Maybe Coppola, who once floated the idea of an unknown from nowhere doing wonders with a video camera, pulled himself away from fine cuisine long enough to enjoy this movie shot on digital Beta and expertly transferred to 35 mm by the Digital Film Group of Vancouver. Kunuk accepted the *Caméra d'Or* wearing a Versace suit and he enjoyed his sojourn on the Riviera, but he was happy to escape Cannes' heat, non-stop partying and inability to provide what he considers a decent breakfast. "They just served us strong coffee and bread," he told me by phone from Igloolik where he had just returned from a seal-hunting trip that almost ended in disaster. Some friends and relatives fell through melting ice on their Ski-Doos, but to Kunuk's great relief, they were rescued in the nick of time.

When 43-year-old Kunuk was a small boy, the Canadian government moved his family out of their nomadic camp. His parents complied because "the Inuit were very scared of Southerners. The Second World War had just happened, and we wondered about what would happen when they got

In 1981, Kunuk was what Cohn calls a "funky carver" whose soapstone work sold well enough for him to finance a growing interest in still photography, and eventually video. When Paul Apak, then with the Inuit Broadcasting Corp., hired the young artist, the two began experimenting with visual storytelling techniques that could portray their society in a compelling way. While others were "doing ersatz cable," says Cohn, "Zach and Apak were kind of self-invented Inuit filmmakers, making much more observational, non-verbal kind of stuff." For Kunuk, there's no essential difference between sculpting and shooting video. "You're putting expression into the soapstone that you want people to see from all angles, and videotaping is exactly the same thing, except with video you have more room to play."

Cohn, raised in Washington Heights and a Long Island suburb, felt a creative kinship with Kunuk and Apak when he first saw tapes of their short dramas and documentaries. Living in Canada since the summer he helped a friend build a house in PEI, Cohn is a videomaker who explored what he calls "experimental non-fiction" as far back as the days when Sony's lightweight Port-a-Pak system was the hot technology. An adventurer who undermines the stereotype of the 1970s rebel who traded in his wandering ways for a stock portfolio, Cohn has always wanted to bridge the gap between so-called art video and work driven by social activism. Determined to avoid preachy didacticism while striving for aesthetic excitement, Cohn's subjects tend to be

“people who were essentially rendered invisible in our society, and as a result subject to exploitation and injustice.” His award-winning work includes the 1987 feature-length project *Quartet for Deafblind*.

When Cohn first saw Kunuk and Apak's work in the early 1980s, it reminded him of his own. “It doesn't look like television. It doesn't look like film. It doesn't look like experimental film. It doesn't even look like video art.” Eager to meet the two young Inuit, the New Yorker landed a teaching gig in Iqaluit, on Baffin Island. Kunuk registered for Cohen's seminar in “alternate camera techniques,” and the two became fast friends. With characteristic zero tolerance for withered sacred cows, Cohn points out that Aboriginal media bigwigs in Ottawa were uneasy about his blooming relationship with the Inuit. “They knew that if anybody like me came along, the people they were participating in colonizing would know there was another way to do this. And some of them would jump, which was exactly what happened.”

Cohn, Isuma's front man in its dealings with Southerners, is equally outspoken about some of the institutions the company tussled with during its long struggle to finance *Atanarjuat*. “We were trying to convince people who never for a minute believed that we could make this movie or deserved to make a movie.” In fact, the project “was so far off the radar screen” that even with the win at Cannes, excellent initial reviews and invitations to film festivals

around the world, including a gala screening at the Toronto International Film Festival, Cohn says, “All of a sudden, some coloured guys from the edge of the earth are the Stanley Cup champions. Somehow between the first game and the seventh game of the finals, it wasn't Colorado or New Jersey, it was the Wing Wangs from northern Saskatchewan who win the Cup.”

In excruciating detail, Cohn recalls the tortuous labyrinth he and his colleagues groped their way through to find the \$2 million they needed to make their movie. At a crucial twist in the path, they believed they had satisfied Telefilm and Canadian Television Fund requirements by painstakingly assembling 15 per cent of their budget from a cluster of mostly Arctic broadcasters and government agencies. On top of that, they secured Vision TV as a second window. (As for the CBC, it wouldn't pre-license *Atanarjuat*, but it made what Cohn refers to as a “weird promise to acquire this film at the top rate if it got made.” With quiet irony, he lampoons the CBC's classic Catch-22 position: “We'll buy the film only if you finish it, but you can't finish it if we don't agree to buy it.”)

In the spring of 1998, Isuma applied to Telefilm with their commitments already in place. According to Cohn, the agency had already green-lighted some final-stage development funds it knew would be funnelled into an essential April shoot. In the Arctic, April is the only month warm enough to use sensitive equipment while grabbing

Natar Ungalaaq and Pakkak Innukshuk





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convincing winter footage. Assuming they had a “fair chance” at a complete package of Telefilm money, the team shot footage and waited. “You can imagine how we felt,” says Cohn, “when we discovered Telefilm never even considered our application. We never got evaluated, even though we made sure that we had met all the eligibility requirements and would be considered for national envelopes.” Telefilm explained that it assumed Isuma wanted to trigger the Aboriginal Production Fund, which, in fact, the company was trying to sidestep. Cohn says the Fund’s per-project cap was too small for the full-blown feature he and his partners wanted to shoot. For various reasons and in various ways, the game of funding Aboriginal films played by separate rules, a systemic problem Isuma has been grappling with for years.

In the end, after going into what Cohn calls “political-warfare mode” while reeling from Paul Apak’s premature death, Isuma convinced Telefilm to “put in writing that if an Aboriginal project meets all of the national eligibility standards, it will be evaluated within the national envelope.” To be fair, Telefilm kept its promise, and *Atanarjuat* received equity funding as well as Canadian Television Fund money. Then much to Isuma’s surprise, a pitch to the NFB yielded a significant financial commitment and a co-production agreement through the Board’s Aboriginal

Filmmakers’ Program. Cohn says that he doesn’t usually meet the “world’s brainiest people in government bureaucracies,” but Germaine Ying-Gee Wong, Sally Bochner, Barbara James and former NFB head huncho Sandra Macdonald “are four pretty smart ladies.” Although the NFB no longer produces fiction, it bought Isuma’s argument that Aboriginal storytelling like *Atanarjuat*, which is based on an ancient legend meant to inform as well as entertain, doesn’t separate drama from documentary. “Even though we have actors working from a script,” says Cohn, “we are part of a tradition where this story has been told generation after generation as if it happened and in a very real sense, if we wanted to make a documentary about the legend, we would make the same movie.”

With Germaine Ying-Gee Wong and Sally Bochner producing for the Board, *Atanarjuat* resumed shooting, Inuit-style, in 1999. There were many days when the filmmaking started at three in the afternoon and continued until 3 a.m. at a time of the year when the sun never sets. While as Cohn points out, “any successful film is a result of enormous luck,” the Isuma people’s methods are “very much about trying to control that question of luck.” Definitely not the way the mainstream does it. For Cohn, conventional production depends on “a military style. The director is the commander-in-chief. Everybody knows exactly who is one



Zacharias Kunuk

step above you and one step below you. Everything is organized around issues of control and discipline.”

Inuit filmmakers would not survive in Hollywood. “They have no word for war,” says Cohn. “They never conducted anything remotely like a military adventure. They’re completely horizontal. Leadership is an unstated, undesigned, lead-by-example, generally non-verbal process. You can’t bark orders at Inuit, who are not even used to working in groups as large as a film crew.” Cohn explains that Isuma’s “style of filmmaking is very intuitive, very spontaneous, while remaining very deliberate in its intentions. But you can’t plan. If you plan, you don’t get it. There was no storyboarding, no shot list. I can’t even believe that.”

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Kunuk’s approach with the actors depended on an Inuit conviction that adults who possess “isuma,” which means the “quality of thoughtfulness,” won’t screw-up their task. If they do, they screw-up everybody else. “The people working on this film knew what they were supposed to do,” Kunuk says. “We’ve been at this for a long time. There’s no special method. Each actor has to get into their character and learn who the character is.” Then there’s the Inuit concept of naming that might translate into certain acting powers. “Every Inuk,” Cohn explains, “has three or four or five names that represent three or four or five identities of who you actually are, all at the same time. Maybe the Inuit

have a sense their entire lives they are actually performing their namesakes.” Whatever the reason, the performances in *Atanarjuat* are subtle, transparent and completely believable. A network of reaction shots nails down the thoughts and emotions the characters don’t necessarily broadcast to each another.

As for the dazzling visuals, Cohn shot most of the exteriors and interiors with available light, rejecting the fancy settings on his Sony DVW 700 digital widescreen camera in favour of the factory defaults. Apparently, Sony has isuma. “I figured those guys who invented and developed the equipment would know how to set it. Sony’s cameras and televisions have exactly the colour temperature I like,” Cohn says. “I had the privilege of working with some of the world’s most beautiful, dynamic light. I’m not stupid enough to think I can improve on it. All I want to do is pass through it.”

Reviewing the 1993 Canada/France co-production, *Agaguk* (*Shadow of the Wolf*, with Jennifer Tilley as an Inuit temptress!), critic Roger Ebert thought that it did a “splendid job of portraying the grandeur of the scenery, but a spotty job of examining exactly how Eskimos go about surviving in the forbidding winter months.” Based on the rock-solid foundation of a legend from a thousands-of-years-old oral tradition, *Atanarjuat* has no problem meeting Ebert’s standard for a good Arctic movie, and hits a much higher mark. Developing the script, Paul Apak listened to eight elders tell different versions of the story. He took something from each. He then layered in a plot line

explaining the thrilling climactic scene where the hero, *Atanarjuat*, runs naked across melting ice.

Like all Inuit, Kunuk knew the story of the fast runner when Apak came up with the idea of filming it. He had heard the legend for the first time when he was about five, lying beside his brother and sister in a house made of frozen moss. “Atanarjuat out there, naked and surviving,” Kunuk says. “That’s like cheating death.”

The movie unfolds in a nomadic camp during the first millennium. The landscape of ice and snow is unearthly, limitless. The light is sublime. Women’s faces are traced with

delicate, feline tattoos. Then, in a place where singing is considered good because it's like laughing, "Evil," says a character, "came to us like death." The malice is embodied by a diabolical shaman, who may or may not be human. He infects the community with hatred, lies, betrayal and a thirst for murder.

As the picture jumps forward in time, there are hints that the young hunter Atanarjuat (Natar Ungalaaq) will eventually confront, if not necessarily defeat, the shaman's malevolent influence. But first he wins the regal Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu) away from her groom-to-be, the repulsive Oki (Peter Henry Arnatsiaq). The battle takes the form of a bizarre contest where the two young men take turns punching each other's head as hard as they can. Atanarjuat's victory is ambiguous. Atuat loves him, and Oki is a destructive jerk, as Puja (Lucie Tulugarjuk), Oki's amoral, sexy sister points out, but one is not supposed to pursue a woman betrothed to another man, and needless to say the humiliated Oki will stop at nothing to satisfy his craving for revenge.

Some would speculate that the film's evil shaman is a metaphor for the priests and traders who spread a lot of poison around in the Inuit communities. But no metaphors are intended here. What you see is what you get: an ontological force of evil that will eventually lead to total havoc. The late Paul Apak, says Cohn, "believed that there is such a thing as evil shamans. Evil shamans involve spirits and have what we would call supernatural powers. Sometimes you could say they are evil people or sometimes those spirits exist apart from people. You get it in Shakespeare and you get it in modern-day Uganda. The world is out of joint. An Idi Amin shows up. How do you explain it. What is he?"

The legend of Atanarjuat, and the film made from it, depicts a fight to the finish between the forces of continuity and those of destruction. Eventually, betrayal linked to love is forgiven because that's a human weakness; however, betrayal with its roots in evil will not be. You have to love to survive, but when evil gets into love, it turns the tables, and you have to turn the tables back. Like other stories in other oral traditions, Atanarjuat was passed on from generation to generation to convey a moral vision and to relay information about the practical details of living: how to take care of your children, how to make a tent, and so on.

"We're Inuit storytellers in a history of 4,000 years of storytelling," says Cohn. "And if we are successful, this story and storytelling will last for another 4,000 years. It just so happens that in our moment, to do our job, film and television exist on earth. We see ourselves in this Inuit storytelling history, not in the Hollywood history of storytelling by the likes of D.W. Griffith or Steven Spielberg."

*Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* has the impact of pure moviemaking that has nothing to do with either self-righteous preaching to the converted or celebrity-crazed hype. It offers what films from the silent ear to the current dawn of digital production are supposed to give audiences: entertainment, catharsis and renewal. *Atanarjuat* takes us by surprise and floods us with authentic emotion. It's a story about communal exorcism in ancient times, made by people who had a ball entering a world driven by myth and magic, and let themselves become totally possessed by it.

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