The Fast Runner: Inuit filmmaking from Igloolik to the world

NBE3U, Unit 6: Signal and Story, Lesson 4. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

In 2001, Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, the first feature film written, directed and acted in Inuktitut, won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes. Made by an Inuit production company with its community, it showed the world that a film could centre Inuit language, land and story on Inuit terms.

What students do: Students learn the history of Igloolik Isuma Productions, analyse how the form and conventions of a feature film carry meaning in a teacher-chosen excerpt from Atanarjuat or another Isuma work, evaluate the choices of language, pace, landscape and community production, and discuss how Inuit film has influenced identity and heritage in Canada.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
E5.2	analyse the influence of contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit media texts on identities and heritage in Canada, commenting with increasing insight on the role of media production as a social and cultural force in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities
E2.1	identify general and specific characteristics of a variety of media forms and explain, with increasing insight, how they shape content and create meaning in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures
E1.3	evaluate how effectively information, themes, ideas, issues, and opinions are communicated in media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, and decide whether the texts achieve their intended purpose
E2.2	identify conventions and/or techniques used in a variety of media forms and explain, with increasing insight, how they convey meaning and influence their audience in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning how Inuit filmmakers shaped Canadian cinema. • We are learning to analyse how a film's form and techniques create meaning.	• I can describe Isuma's history and Atanarjuat's significance. • I can analyse how language, landscape, pace and sound create meaning in an excerpt. • I can evaluate how effectively a film communicates with different audiences. • I can explain how Inuit film influences identity and heritage in Canada.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** The Fast Runner deck.
- **Handouts:** Viewing Guide (page 1), Form and Meaning (page 2).
- **Media:** A teacher-chosen excerpt (8 to 12 minutes) from Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001) or another Isuma film (isuma.tv). The full film includes violence and sexual content: preview and choose your excerpt carefully.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	A film in Inuktitut.	Predict.	
8–20	**Isuma**	History.	Note.	
20–45	**Viewing**	Excerpt.	Watch and note.	Techniques noted.
45–62	**Form and meaning**	Analyse.	Analyse.	Analysis with evidence.
62–75	**Influence**	Identity and heritage.	Discuss and write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Viewing guide with timestamps and one example filled in.
- **ELL:** Subtitled excerpt; key film terms with images.
- **Challenge:** Compare with Isuma's later work or Alethea Arnaquq-Baril's documentaries.

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Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Form and Meaning	Media forms and techniques (E2.1, E2.2), effectiveness (E1.3) and influence on identity and heritage (E5.2)

The Fast Runner: key points

- **Isuma:** Founded 1990 in Igloolik, Nunavut, by Inuit filmmakers Zacharias Kunuk, Pauloosie Qulitalik and Paul Apak, with Norman Cohn.
- **Atanarjuat (2001):** A feature in Inuktitut, made by Inuit with their community; Caméra d'Or at Cannes.
- **Language:** Inuktitut dialogue, subtitled for others: the film doesn't translate itself for outsiders first.
- **Landscape and pace:** Long takes and natural light put the land and time at the centre, not a fast Hollywood rhythm.
- **Influence:** It proved Inuit-language cinema could reach world audiences and inspired a generation of Indigenous filmmakers.
- **Effectiveness:** Judge it by its purposes: for Inuit audiences, recognition and language; for others, an invitation to watch on Inuit terms.

Teacher notes

- This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Sources (checked November 2026): Igloolik Isuma Productions was founded in 1990 by Zacharias Kunuk, Pauloosie Qulitalik, Paul Apak and Norman Cohn, Nunavut's first independent production company (Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada). Atanarjuat (2001) won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes and Best Film at imagineNATIVE in 2001 (Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada; The Canadian Encyclopedia). In 2019, Isuma represented Canada at the Venice Biennale (Isuma and National Gallery of Canada announcements).
- Atanarjuat is based on an Inuit oral story from the Igloolik region, retold by Isuma with its community. Students analyse the film as a film; they do not retell the story or treat it as theirs. Students learn about ceremonies, protocols and oral traditions; they do not imitate or perform them, and they do not retell community stories. Leave sacred knowledge to the people who hold it.
- Preview every clip, episode or post before class. Choose excerpts that are short, non-graphic and suitable for your students; check your board's approved media list.
- Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.

Coming up

Lesson 5, Witness.

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