

WIDE ANGLE

## Venice Biennale 2019: Zacharias Kunuk's new film works as a sad, insightful preservation project



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Mallik (Jacky Qrunnut) and Japati (Gouchrard Uttak) see Boss's dogteam coming.

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One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk

Written by: Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn

Directed by: Zacharias Kunuk

Starring: Apayata Kotierk, Kim Bodnia and Benjamin Kunuk

RATING ★★☆☆

In Noah Piugattuk's igloo one day in 1961, the morning begins with tea, but his wife warns him they are out of sugar to sweeten it. It's time, he tells her and their teenage daughter, to go trade for some more of the white man's goods. Tea, sugar, biscuit, jam, tobacco — these are things that Noah and his family value. They aren't so sure about money, houses or schools.

But that is what is on offer when a government agent approaches Noah as he and the clan are out seal hunting. The man keeps asking with increasing persistence when Noah will move into the settlement: There will be a house with a stove, a family allowance, a school for the children and access to a nurse. It is the need to educate the children that the government particularly insists on, although the agent also, in these Cold War days, trots out global security as an issue too.

Zacharias Kunuk's most recent film is based on the actual story of the real Noah Piugattuk — he is shown briefly in a 1992 interview at the end — the last Inuit to abandon a traditional, semi-nomadic life and move into a Canadian-built settlement at Igloolik in the North Baffin region. Sitting somewhere between the renowned director's more sweeping fictions (*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*; *Maliglutit*) and his documentary work, the film restages the encounter between Noah and Boss, the government agent. Indeed, a full hour of its 112-minute length is their conversation, through a translator, on the subject of the proposed move. The real-time effect, in one single setting on the ice where the group has stopped for tea with sugar and biscuits off the white man's sled, is

compelling as its languor and its repetitions gradually reveal the deep cultural misunderstanding that is going on.

Three powerfully naturalistic performances anchor the conversation. Apayata Kotierk plays the stolid Noah, building through gentle bemusement and recalcitrance to increasing anger and sorrow. Kim Bodnia, recognizable as the actor who played the Danish police investigator on the Scandinavian series *The Bridge*, makes Boss frustrated and pushy but sufficiently sympathetic in his desire to provide what he perceives as help not to overbalance the piece.



Benjamin Kunuk as Evaluarjuk on set.

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The subtlest part belongs to Benjamin Kunuk, who plays the unhappy translator, glossing over Noah's blunt responses as he relays them to Boss but rendering the white man's real intentions rather than his actual words as he translates the other way. His pained face, Kunuk and Norman Cohn's layered script and the play between subtitled Inuktitut and spoken English make the misunderstanding between the two men particularly poignant. Meanwhile, like all of Kunuk's work with the Isuma film and video collective that he helped establish, the film also works as a preservation project in its historic recreation of traditional Inuit life.

In particular, the film is packed with information about the hunt, diet and food sources: As Noah and Boss part, the white man tells him to keep the sugar.

One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk is available on iTunes.