

Reverse Shot

http://www.reverseshot.com/article/journals_knud_rasmussen

The Old World

by Michael Joshua Rowin

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen

Dir. Zacharias Kunuk & Norman Cohn, Canada/Denmark, no distributor

It'll be interesting to chart the reception given to *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* in the U.S. upon wide release, if it has one. This Canadian-Danish co-production, directed by the filmmakers of the widely heralded *The Fast Runner*, outwardly resembles, in not an insignificant number of ways, that recent juggernaut of critical and cult allegiance, *The New World*. Both explore a collision of cultures, both contain a strong female protagonist, and both pine for the romantic "purity" of a lost world without, thankfully, fully succumbing to insipid noble savage illusions. Yet it's difficult to call the real-life tale of Knud Rasmussen and his anthropological Fifth Thule expedition into the Canadian arctic completely comparable to the John Smith-Pocahontas story, or the film itself an entirely equivalent artistic statement to Terrence Malick's vision of the legendary British-Native American romance. Even so, interesting similarities exist between the two films in approach and representation of their subjects. Norman Cohn and Zacharias Kunuk have fashioned out of their source material a complex, haunting treatment every bit as vital as *The New World*, but without the distracting showiness or big-budget gloss. Here's a prediction: may *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* ever see the light of day (or dark of theater) in America, it won't receive nearly the amount of attention as its counterpart, brutal and abstract and unsexy as it is.

As in *The Fast Runner*, the first film written and performed in the Inuktitut language, Cohn and Kunuk use film to impart the myths and history of Inuit society. Rasmussen (Jens Jørn Spottag) was a Danish explorer and scientist who spoke Inuit, enabling him to record the songs and stories of the peoples he befriended and sought out as subjects in the 1920s arctic. One of those anthropological subjects, Aua (Pakak Innuksuk), was the last of the real Inuit shamans, part of an ancient tradition pushed toward extinction in the early twentieth century by the spread of Christianity. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* thus serves as a record of those long vanished practices, customs, and values of a culture radically altered by its encounter with the West. The results are simultaneously revelatory and pedantic: large stretches of the film involve Aua speaking to Rasmussen, his Danish partners, and the camera as he explains how he became a shaman or teaches the fundamental principles of the religion ("All our customs come from life and turn towards life"). Other demonstrations include dances and songs, absolutely mesmerizing incantations and celebrations amidst the missionary-influenced Christianity encroaching upon these sacred rituals.

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen works best when it emphasizes environment, employing the immediacy of digital video to strongly invoke the unforgiving terrain and crushingly oppressive conditions of the arctic. Scenes of overwhelming brightness powerfully contrast with the pitch darkness of night and the interiors of igloos. The effect is as lulling as it is undoubtedly “beautiful”—this is a world where time stands still, slogging through the sameness of ceaseless snow drifts and the grueling daily howl of privation, even as it draws toward a disastrous confrontation with the inevitability of Christian takeover. Like Malick, Cohn and Kunuk should be applauded for resisting the obvious: The Journals of Knud Rasmussen is a trove of distinct rhythms and compositions discovered in the filmmaking and editing process, challenging viewers by thrusting them into the middle of a world unknown to most Westerners and staying true to the moods dictated by the surroundings. But while leaving aside the sort of exotic pageantry that at times made The New World queasily fetishistic, Cohn and Kunuk don’t do quite enough to engage narrative interest: a harlequin romance a la Malick’s Smith and Pocahontas clearly wouldn’t be appropriate, but the love triangle involving Avva’s insolent daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik) and two husbands—one inept and cast out, the other dead and her partner in rapturous, hallucinatory sex dreams—doesn’t contain a high level of conflict or spark. Likewise, the sociologically vital but otherwise unremarkable scenes of the Inuit people’s increasing dependence on foreign trade make little impression.

The real drama is in the sorrowful disappearance of shamanism, Aua and his small tribe’s way of life, tradition, and source of comfort and joy. The very last scene, in which Aua, desperate to join forces, so as to share in their much-needed provisions, with an Inuit Christian tribe, reminded me of my response to Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice*: puzzled or downright alienated by the preceding action, the climax stuns with such emotional and visual impact that everything that has come before gets brilliantly illuminated. It’s an unforgettable moment, one that seems to piercingly express the destruction of an entire people’s culture: Aua summons his guiding spirits and declares he must leave them behind—as shamanism is considered Satanism to the new Christian faith, any talk of the “old ways” are completely taboo. In one long, interminably painful shot, the spirits go off into the far away mountainside, wailing and intermittently turning as if hoping for a change of heart by Aua, who can only continue to implore their retreat. Once they’ve gone Aua attends the host tribe’s mass: the taking of the Eucharist, the recitation of prayers and renunciation of sin. Here *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* contains a far more complicated and far less naïve foreshadowing of the Occidental legacy than in *The New World*—no frolicking in European gardens, no unions of love to overcome the cruelties of history. When a phonograph recording of Enrico Caruso plays over the end credits and photographs of the real-life Rasmussen and Aua, the tune conjures an earlier scene that introduces the modern to the Inuits—its plainsong qualities call out to everything that introduction would harken and erase.

* Fall 2006 * New York Film Festival 2006