



TIFF Review: The Journals of Knud Rasmussen

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Superficially, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* -- the film that opened this year's Toronto International Film Festival -- is the story of how a small group of Inuit people confronts a changing world. Lead by Avva (**Pakak Innuksuk**), a powerful shaman, the group is faced with the twin challenges of a weather-induced famine and the arrival of Western culture, in the form of both religion and Greenlandic explore-cultural anthropologist Knud Rasmussen (**Jens Jørn Spottag**) and his

team. Purportedly based on events described in the journals of its title, the film is set in 1912 in the Canadian arctic, moves at an extremely slow pace, and takes place almost entirely in Inuktitut (an ancient language now spoken by fewer than 100,000 people), much of which isn't translated in subtitles. In reality, the film -- the second collaboration from **Zacharias Kunuk** and **Norman Cohn**, directors of the award-winning *The Fast Runner* -- is more a collage of image and sound than it is a traditional narrative feature, and is a challenge well worth audience perseverance.

We see Avva's little tribe -- his family alone consists of several grown children and in-laws, in addition to at least once grandchild -- experiencing a wide range of emotions and events, from family discipline to a wild party; from simply passing the time together to an exorcism of sorts. As viewers, we are kept very much outside of their world, reduced, like Rasmussen and the other White Men, to impotent watchers. At one point, Avva tells the story of his childhood directly to the camera, answering off-screen questions that could just as easily be asked by us as by Rasmussen -- like all cinema-goers, we are voyeurs. The difference here, however, is that the objects of our gaze are always aware of our presence.

Kunuk and Cohn's film is filled with song, prompted both by anthropological curiosity (both Avva and Rasmussen ask the other to sing) and real-world events; the Inuit people seem to use song to express joy, sadness, and the grey area in between. Because the lyrics are almost never translated, the songs work on the audience as pure sound and emotion, and affect us on a very fundamental level. They bypass the brain and go straight to another, more basic part of our consciousness, acting with a totally unexpected power (and it's no accident that the dirge-like prayers sung by the converted Christians are the most jarring and exhausting in the

film). The same is true of the emotions on display -- the faces glowing with joy, or expressionless in attempts at strength, speak more than entire conversations that are never reduced to subtitles. The stolen moments in the lives of Avva and his tribe -- particularly those shared by the women and children -- are so private that no one, audience or otherwise, deserves access to them. We never have any doubt, however, what is happening in the hearts of those we can't understand.

Visually, the movie is equally powerful, and equally fragmented. There are touches of narrative -- Peter Freuchen's (known to the tribe as "Big Pita", and played by the soulful **Kim Bodnia**) casual closeness to the young men around Avva is particularly moving -- but most of what we see is ice, either in great, eye-filling swathes, or in the miraculously orderly blocks of an igloo. Switching violently between blinding, ice-reflected sunlight and close, lamp-lit darkness, Kunuk and Cohn create a vivid impression of a world of extremes, and never lets us forget the daily battle for existence fought by those we're watching. Often, the ice shares the screen with a nut-brown, craggy face shot in extreme close-up, a second contrast of light and dark reminding us again and again how out of place man is in this environment. Like the visual extremes, the cliffs and valleys in those expressive, worn faces -- particularly the eyes, heavily lined from constant squinting against the punishing cold and wind -- serve as further reminders of the astonishing struggle behind the lives on screen.

Within the whirlwind of sound and image, however, we have one anchor: **Leah Angutimarik** as Apak, Avva's troublesome youngest child. Gifted with her father's power to contact the spirit world, Apak uses her ability only to have passionate dream-sex with her murdered husband (eerily, the claustrophobic sex is shot largely from his point-of-view), and steadfastly refuses to conform to the expectations of those around her. She's not aimlessly rebellious, simply opinionated, and too strong to bow to the expectations of her little society; Angutimarik's is a truly astonishing, genuine performance from a girl who had never before appeared on film. In addition to challenging her family on a regular basis, Apak's inner power also renders her staggeringly lovely. When she laughs, she puts her entire soul into it, and her eyes burn with an energy so bottomless that it's hard not to just stare, open-mouthed. Rather than leering, however, the men lucky enough to be in her presences simply gaze upon her in grudging awe. "With someone that beautiful around," an ex-suitor grins ruefully, "no one is safe." By reading Apak's wide, open face, we know exactly the emotional temperature of the film and, despite the impenetrability of the language, absorb the gist of what is being said.

Some films earn audience commitment from the start, drawing us in with arresting characters, clever writing, promising plots or some combination of the three. They're thrilling or engaging or hilarious from the start, demanding nothing more than our presence in exchange for instant payoff. Others, however, require more trust. Instead of winning us over, they proceed according to their own agendas, seemingly willfully ignoring the needs of the audience; we are left to hope that the images before us will eventually be transformed into a whole that will have been worth our time and attention. *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, falls very much into the latter category, and though we're not always aware of how the film is working upon us, its last image packs such an unexpectedly shattering power that there's no doubt our trust was not in vain.

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