

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Film review

### Kiviug: the power to heal

#### Kiviug

A film by John Houston

Triad Films and drumsong production;

2007

72 min. English

The film *Kiviug*, the Inuit creation myth, begins with this plea from a young Inuit woman: “Many young Inuit have a hole in their spirit as I have. I feel hungry, thirsty, wanting to learn more of our elder’s stories. Our stories have power to heal.” For filmmaker John Houston, who was raised among Inuit in the territory that is now Nunavut and speaks Inuktitut fluently, *Kiviug* was a timely “racing against the cultural clock” project, as he travelled across the Arctic seeking out elders who remembered the legend. The son of pioneer Inuit art advocates James and Alma, Houston says he wanted to promote and preserve the stories of Kiviug, the great Inuit Shaman, for fear of losing them.

These stories take 7 hours to tell. In the film, Houston treats the storytelling as a performance, intertwined with Inuit drum-dancing, theatre and visual arts that honour the story itself. The film features elders, who know the myth, local actors, drummers and a troupe of Inuvialuit dancers from Cambridge Bay. His film, which was made with a relatively frugal budget of \$900 000, features many scenes taped in front of a live audience and uses simple props and décor. Amazingly, this minimalism is quite effective as it heightens the storytelling abilities of the elders and forces viewers to fill in the gaps with their imagination — an integral part of the oral storytelling tra-



Megan Wienberg, drumsong communications

Kiviug rides a fish in search of his Goose family.

dition of which Houston is very respectful.

The story begins and ends with the figure of Kiviug, whose face is half covered in stone showing his genesis from the earth and his inexorable progression toward the end, back to the earth, which is an inherent warning for everyone that there will be no second coming, no great saviour to save us from ourselves.

The legend starts when a great hunter is killed, leaving a young orphaned son who is taunted by those who should be nurturing him. Kiviug is the only villager to show kindness to the boy and, thus, he is spared the terrible vengeance of the boy’s grandmother who sets the sea in a tempest

killing Kiviug’s fellow villagers while they are kayaking. Imbued at birth with the powerful spirit of the shore birds who always return home, Kiviug embarks on a series of adventures and challenges that span millennia, and rival those of Homer’s brave Odysseus.

Kiviug undergoes a series of encounters with archetypal animal figures, which are alternately powerful and evil and vulnerable. The cannibalistic “Bee woman” tries to trap him by luring him into comfort and warmth after an exhausting kayak journey. He is warned about this in his dreams by the ghosts of his deceased villagers and as he escapes he engages the bee woman in a series of battles. Out of this encounter the sea ice was born, an element of the

Inuit mind/landscape that nurtures man and animal yet can be dangerous and fatal to the inexperienced.

He journeys on alone and meets wolf woman and her beautiful daughter whom Kiviug is naturally attracted to. For the first time he encounters deception. In a fit of jealousy, wolf woman kills her daughter, skins her and dons her skin to seduce Kiviug, but he recognizes her. Thus through animal allegory, we work through the human pathos of sexuality, jealousy and fidelity.

In another adventure, Kiviug comes across a beautiful woman bathing naked. Her clothing — which is made of feathers — lies on the shore. He wants goose-woman for his wife, so he steals her feather clothing and asks her to marry him. She reluctantly agrees because she needs her feathers back. At each turn of the legend/myth, humans exchange roles with animals — a reflection of their importance as powerful shamanistic spirits. Conflicts are played out between an individual's needs and his immediate and extended family, tightly knit groups who are interdependent on one another for survival in this harsh environment.

Time passes and the goose-woman grows to love Kiviug, but she is un-



Megan Wennberg, drumsong communications

Kiviug, played by Lamech Kadloo, laments the loss of his Goose wife.



John Houston/drumsong communications

The Kiviug story is preserved in the memory of elders such as Henry Evaloarjuk (right) and Samson Quinangnaq. The latter takes 7 hours to recite the story, which he calls “the secret Bible of the Inuit.”

happy because she likes to eat grass, not caribou meat. One day when Kiviug is away hunting she finds her feather clothing, gathers her children and flies with them far away to the south. When Kiviug returns he searches everywhere for them. At the end of the journey, Kiviug finds his goose-family and they live together again but the story ends on an uncertain note, showing the fickleness of life and happiness.

*Diet of Souls*, a film Houston released in 2004, is less allegorical and more documentary, but nonetheless offers important insights into the Inuit intellect and spirit as it relates to their traditional way of living. It is the story of an elder hoping to teach his grandson not only the hunting techniques necessary for survival, but also the respect that is required when one takes the soul of an animal by eating it. One of its most poignant scenes is when the elder must stand outside in the cold for several hours staring at an air hole in the ice before a seal comes up to catch a quick gulp of air. He must be vigilant and quick in order to shoot, then harpoon the submerged animal,

but this lengthy ordeal proves too much for his grandson who has given up and is back inside watching TV.

Both films are a cultural “tour de force” by Houston in terms of preserving stories authentic to Inuit tradition without compromising content to make them palatable for mainstream audiences. By these modern methods of filmmaking, Houston hopes to make culturally healing stories that will reconnect youth and elders by tapping into the rich Inuit shamanistic tradition. Similar to *Atarnarjuat the Fast Runner* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, they are inevitably sad retellings of tales about a proud culture faced with tremendous challenges to the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of its people. However when viewed from the cult of consumerism, Inuit legends have much to teach us about how to live a respectful life in harmony and balance with nature.

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