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Northfork

Abstract

This is a review of *Northfork* (2003).

Northfork, released in 2003 is a US independent film from the Polish brothers, starring Nick Nolte, James Woods and Daryl Hannah. Most agree that the film is beautiful: shot in rural Montana in early spring, it has a bleak elegiac cinematography. Northfork is a town about to be drowned, as the dam, which will provide its relocated citizens with hydroelectric power, is about to be commissioned. Early in the film we are introduced to the 'Evacuators,' men in black, driving 50's style black Fords, and who take with them a boxed set of a child's angel wings for the families they are urging to higher ground. Where the magic realism of Northfork is incomprehensible to some, and maudlin to others, the gentle humour of it is always at the forefront, masking in fact a story of terrible sadness. The metaphor of a town that is 'dammed' (damned), and its citizens forced into exile, is the vehicle for a parallel story of a band of modern-day surrealist angels. They have a mission: to find the last lost 'angel' - and are not sure if it is the person of 8-year old, Irwin (Duel Farnes). The boy is being cared for by Father Harlan (Nick Nolte) and lives in parallel worlds: as the sick child and also as the prospective angel.

At issue for the 'angel' boy is to prove his status, and he does this first by bringing them a package, a thin black suitcase which holds a rifle. No ordinary rifle however, but one that shoots tranquillisers, used to bring down the 'angels' of the Plains. We gather that these 'angels' had their halos and wings surgically removed, the wings of the child angels now being used as bribes. Is Irwin the last of the child

angels of the Plains? The band are not convinced by an examination of the angel wing feathers, but cannot deny that the scars on the boy's back tell of the surgical removal of wings.

The psychologist C.G.Jung was interested in creativity and held that all genuine art originates in the unconscious. He also held that colonising people inherit the racial memory of the natives they displace. This is to raise a possibility about Northfork: that as a work of art it follows both of Jung's dictums, and is really about the destruction, not of a 50s American town, but about the Native American way of life. The clues are everywhere when we pursue this analysis: who else could these 'angels' of the Plains be, other than the Native Americans? Who were shot by tranquillisers and 'grounded' by the removal of their (cultural) wings? What else is the extraordinary dog-on-stilts that leads the boy to the angels but a shamanic totem animal? What is the accidental shooting of the dog (by tranquilliser dart) but a reprise of the accidental emasculation of a race? What else is the obsession with feathers but a shamanic fetish?

Here, we suggest, lies the real spiritual content of the film, a juxtaposition of shamanic spiritual values with Christian ones, and a meditation on the loss that haunts the American psyche. Towards the end of the film the priest sits with the gravedigger and says: "I am a man of faith. My job is to dispel doubt. But I doubt my faith." No explicit reason is given in the film about why he should doubt his

faith; indeed he acts on its deepest imperatives: caring for the sick. In the way that he nurses the abandoned boy we see everything that St Paul stood for: spiritual love in Christ translated into care for those in need in the world. Yet it was a Christian culture that destroyed the native Nature-culture, not malevolently, but as a by-product of the clash of incompatible ways of using the land. What took thousands of years in Europe was completed in a few generations in America.

The mainstream may dismiss the film as incomprehensible, the highbrow critic as maudlin. But a spiritual analysis shows, if we hold to Jung's dictums, that it is a great work of art. The Polish brothers have responded to a powerful anxiety in the American unconscious, perhaps the most important spiritual conflict in its history: the loss suffered by an innocent peoples. As Native American values are becoming positively re-assessed, particularly in the light of pending environmental catastrophe, their spiritual tradition is also increasingly regarded (witness the flourishing of neo-Shamanic movements in the US). The priest's reasons for doubt may be buried in the collective unconscious, but art can bring it to the surface. For Christianity to redeem itself we suggest that it must also undergo this collective catharsis.