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The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat)

Abstract

This is a review of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* (2001).

Atanarjuat, a Canadian film released in the United States under its subtitle, *The Fast Runner*, has met with extraordinary success. Cast entirely with Inuit actors, it is the first dramatic feature film by producer/director Zacharias Kunuk. An official selection for the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, the film won the Camera D'Or for best first feature film, as well as a number of other awards.

The story is set in the Inuit community of Igloolik circa 1000 CE. A mysterious stranger enters the small Inuit camp, and assists in the murder of the camp's leader. Years later, there is conflict between two families. The son of the new leader kills the brother of Atanarjuat, and Atanarjuat has to flee for his life. Nursed back to health, he returns to the camp, drives out his evil rival, and becomes the new leader.

The landscapes and the physical geography captured in the film are stunning, yet there are many disappointing facets to the film. To begin with, the opening section with the mysterious stranger is quite confusing. Without naming the stranger as a shaman or an evil presence, the action could have been better scripted to explain the plot to the viewers — the vast majority of whom know very little about Inuit myth and culture. Second, there are some odd film techniques that seem out of place in the movie. For example, at one point partway through the film, there is a switch to a hand held camera for an outside shot, which makes little sense in context of the film as a whole. Third, while I am perfectly willing to suspend

disbelief in a work of magic realism, it is jarring to see a close up of Puja's hand and realise that it was perfectly manicured in a love scene between Puja and Atanarjuat. Perhaps current archaeological work in the region will discover evidence of nail salons in 1000 CE. Fourth, the names of the evil characters, Sauri and Oki, sound suspiciously similar to other evil characters in mythology, Sauron and Loki.

But these are all minor irritants. The use of almost every available cliché; is the great disappointment with the film. Evil is not autochthonous but comes in the form of the stranger. An evil son murders his father, and his own son grows up to be evil. Young heroes rise from poverty where they were dependent on the food of others to become the best hunters and providers in the camp. The beloved hero wins the beautiful heroine from the evil prince in a contest of strength. A second wife creates trouble. A woman is, yet again, the scheming and evil character. The same woman creates sexual jealousy between her husband and his brother. However, the brothers are able to repair their relationship before one of them is murdered. The beloved older brother is killed, and the younger brother takes his place. The beautiful wife of the hero is raped by the hero's evil rival while the hero is away. The hero returns to his village and vanquishes evil. Non-violence wins the day. Evil can be driven out. Everyone lives happily ever after.

At a deeper level, what is more troubling is this "Joseph Campbell lite" understanding of mythology. While Campbell did much to popularize an understanding of myth, he also reduced it to the hackneyed story of The Hero, the myth of the modern male-existentialist loner. And of course myth is much greater than this. Myths are stories that give meaning to our lives, revealing to us something of our understanding of the ultimate order of things. At bottom, *Atanarjuat* is a pastiche focussed around yet another Brown saviour figure, this time sadly constructed by a colonized people.

Like Jesus and Hercules before him, Atanarjuat is another humiliated king. He is a hero of humble birth. Unlike the traditional Christian Jesus, he is married (twice yet) and sexually active. However, like the Jesus understood by most Christians, Atanarjuat eschews violence. He runs from his attackers (the murderers of his brother) rather than face to fight them. He suffers great physical pain and bleeds, albeit from the feet alone and not the hands. However, at the end, Atanarjuat does what colonizers want Brown saviours like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, or Nelson Mandela to do: he lives out the gospel of non-violence. The evil ones are not killed, but only banished. That this Brown saviour is constructed by other Brown people¹ is what is most troubling.

Canada has a terrible legacy of colonization and brutality toward the Inuit and other First Nations peoples. However the true horror of colonialism is not what

it does to the colonizer, but what it does to the colonized. To learn to play the colonizer's game, and better them at it is a common strategy, whether the game be writing, cricket, soccer or film-making. According to the atanarjuat.com,² "*Atanarjuat* gives international audiences a more authentic view of Inuit culture and oral tradition than ever before, from the inside and through Inuit eyes."

While I applaud the effort by Inuit to bring Inuit stories to the big screen, I grieve that variations of this particular story have been told before as part of the attempt to keep the Brown peoples of the world oppressed and colonized. Then again, perhaps the function of myth is to give hope to the oppressed.

¹ "Canada's first feature-length fiction film written, produced, directed, and acted by Inuit" as advertised on the atanarjuat.com web site (<http://atanarjuat.com/>).

² atanarjuat.com (<http://atanarjuat.com/>).