

Estonia, a Northern European country on the Baltic Sea, has a history of paganism and unique folklore dating back to 9000 B.C.E. Estonian culture has remained relatively unknown in mainstream media, perhaps due to the country's long history of suppression by German, Danish, Russian, and Swedish powers until its independence in the early 20th century. Rainer Sarnet's feature-length film, *November*, features a German-speaking aristocracy as the oppressor. The film uses elements from traditional Estonian folklore, as well as aspects of the surrealist cinema tradition, to create a dark, fantastical, and deadly love story that illuminates and protests the cultural and political domination of rural Estonia by its imperialist neighbors.

Although it unfolds in chronological order, *November* is driven by images rather than plot. The entire film is presented in stark black and white—the characters are all extremely pale-skinned with light blond hair, and they are shrouded in black clothing and smeared with dirt. The landscape is bright white, covered in snow and frozen foliage, but the dark waters and night sky are pitch black. This consistently high contrast means that the composition of each shot stands out, highlighting the threat of outside influences on Estonian culture. The film is also full of thematic contrasts: good and evil, life and death, also emphasizing the tension between Estonian sovereignty and German occupation. In the tradition of filmmakers such as Jean Rouche and Safi Faye, *November* can rightly be described as a work of “ethno-fiction,” a term used to describe a fictional film that provides anthropological insight. Although the characters are played by actors and the shots are staged, audiences still come away from the film with an important understanding of what it means to an Estonian under relentless foreign occupation.

The film opens on a white wolf running through a snowy landscape, at times indistinguishable from its surroundings. The wolf takes the viewers through the woods to a dark, imposing mansion on a large estate. Unlike the ambiguity of the white wolf against the white background, the mansion is solid and angular, standing alone on the property, unconcealed by rocks or trees. In the instant the wolf leaves the frame, the film's heroine, Liina, is shown waking suddenly from a deep sleep on her bed of hay. A loud, jarring sound draws attention once again to the grand estate, where a strange and grotesque creature moves clumsily across the screen, each movement punctuated by the sound of metal scraping against metal. The creature, later identified

as an Estonian folkloric character known as a “Kratt,” is made up of bits of metal, wood, and a cow’s skull, and proceeds to a barn on the estate where it kidnaps a cow. The creature pulls the black and white cow across the estate and into the village, giving the audience its first and only panoramic view of the film’s location. The cow’s journey ends on Liina’s land, where she, her father, and their farm hand rush out to see the source of the noise. The Kratt, a creation of Liina’s father, immediately self-destructs at the request of its master. Then the opening credits roll.

This opening scene sets a thematic tone for the film: cold, bleak, surreal, and already beginning to explore the relationships between a large manor home and a small wooden cottage. The next scene takes place on the first of November, when many Catholics celebrate the Day of the Dead. Liina trades her family’s heirlooms with the manor’s Estonian maid for some black silk to wear for the festival, much to the disdain of the other villagers, who label her a whore for dressing up like a wealthy (German) woman. In the next scene, Liina and the other villagers are seen in the forest late at night, waiting for their dead relatives to appear. Liina’s father speaks to his relatives about their family’s fortune, which is hidden somewhere. In this sequence, Sarnet makes use of uniquely Estonian features of the holiday, elements that seem deeply rooted in Estonia’s pagan past. For example, the dead are taken back to their living relatives’ homes where they will enter a sauna and transform into human-sized chickens, an image that Sarnet includes at the end of the scene. The festival also provides a backdrop for the romantic through line of the film, when the audience sees Liina and the young man she loves, Hans, together for the first time.

As if to contrast the folkloric traditions of the previous night, the following scene depicts the village attending Catholic Mass and celebrating the Eucharist—cultural images that are likely more familiar and less threatening than human chickens to most of Sarnet’s audience. Hans and Liina speak once again, her feelings still clear, but his eyes are on the German-speaking baroness, new to the village and living in the manor seen in the beginning of the film. This puts Hans at the center of a conflict emblematic of the film: he must choose between Liina, an Estonian peasant, and the German baroness. This baroness, the audience soon learns, has a dangerous habit of sleepwalking on her roof, her unconscious self wanting, it seems, to jump. Sarnet uses this bit to

create a feeling of anxiety, and perhaps to foreshadow the future demise of this particular foreign occupation.

After this scene, the audience is finally shown how Kratts come to be. Liina's father, after building an appropriate body for a new Kratt out of various useful items, goes into the woods to find the Devil. For the price of the man's blood and soul, the Devil will animate the Kratt, and it can begin to do the tasks assigned to it. Liina's father, however, tricks the Devil by using cranberries. The Devil is fooled, but only once. Hans tries to animate his Kratt made of snow with the same trick, but the Devil is wiser and takes his blood and soul. Sarnet's use of the Kratt, a uniquely Estonian element, illustrates the subversive power of Estonian folklore, but also its danger. Liina's father takes a risk and harnesses the power; Hans takes the same risk but is instead trapped by the Devil, perhaps an allusion to his infatuation with the German baroness and his less-than-complete loyalty to Estonia.

Liina, aware of Hans' affection for the baroness, visits the town's local witch for advice. Like her father, she is choosing to harness her culture's powerful roots. Now it becomes clear that Liina is the wolf from the opening scene—she uses witchcraft to animate the wolf's body. Liina and the witch devise a plan to win Hans' heart. Liina trades more of her family's heirlooms for one of the baroness's dresses and sends Hans a forged letter telling him to meet the baroness (Liina in disguise) in the woods. They share a kiss, although Liina's veil never comes off. Since his snowman-Kratt has melted, however, Hans is killed by the Devil on his way back down the path to the village. In that same moment, the baroness jumps from the roof to her death. Liina returns to her rightful place in the Estonian wilderness as she wades into the icy lake in the woods. She is retrieved by two villagers who, after finding Liina alive in the lake, also find her family's fortune. The film ends with Liina's strikingly pale body and hair, as white as the snowy ground, staring unblinkingly up into the camera, adorned in her family jewels, ending the film with a juxtaposition between Liina—an emblem of the Estonian peasant—and overwhelming wealth, the two forces that pulled her apart.

Although there is a plot in *November*, the symbolism and subtext contained in each shot tell the story. The opening sequence sets the tone: bleak, cold, colorless, half dead. The landscape

is covered in snow, and each tree and bush is dead and frozen. The only sign of life is the white wolf, blending into the landscape. The chill of the scene settles into the viewer and never dissipates. The characters look as though the cold has settled into their bones as well, giving them a lifeless appearance. This imagery seems to represent the bleakness of the political climate of *November*: a conflict between Estonia's cultural past and Germany's bold future. By using black and white color tone with high light contrast, Sarnet shows the audience that there are no compromises when it comes to cultural annihilation. If Estonian culture is driven underground, it means death.

Some of the folklore elements, including the Kratt and the Devil, allow Sarnet to interrupt the bleak mood with a type of maniacal (and somewhat disturbing) humor typical of many surrealists like Man Ray or David Lynch. The sound of the Kratt alerts the audience to its absurd and sinister presence before it comes into frame, as if it were behind the viewer and just passing by. The shot of the Kratt ambling slowly across the manor grounds, like most shots in the film, is long and still, with little dialogue. But when the Kratt attacks the cow, we see the cow's face come closer and closer as though we were seeing it from the Kratt's perspective. This abrupt shift in the camera's point of view catches the viewer's attention and makes us feel that *we* are the oppressive force conquering an innocent creature. Later in the film, when Liina's father approaches the Devil, we see him walk slowly through the forest, but then are shocked by quick jump cuts to the Devil's face as he leaps out of the trees, laughing manically. This change in editing style breaks up the slow, suspenseful pace of the film, but it also introduces a threat that is clearly Estonian. Perhaps Sarnet intends for the villains of Estonian folklore—the Devil or a rogue Kratt—to jump out at the audience while the threat of cultural annihilation plods through to build tension. For viewers, the entire film feels like watching the build up of a horror film that never reveals the true monster, perhaps because we are the monsters.

Sarnet uses striking and unsubtle visual contrasts to put his audience in a position of having to choose. Estonia can have either independence or cultural annihilation—but not some halfway compromise between the two. Beauty and ugliness, embodied in the pale snow against the night sky, create a striking and highly symbolic contrast. The maid who attends the manor, for

example, is quite ugly: her hair is poorly styled, her skin is covered in blemishes, and her teeth are crooked and stick out of her mouth. In contrast with Liina, who is fair skinned and youthful, the maid looks like a crone. In their interaction trading the heirlooms for silk, however, it is clear that the maid has a wealth and power that Liina does not possess. Perhaps that has made her ugly, or perhaps her ugliness represents oppression: as an Estonian who has given in to her oppressors, she is made ugly.

Life and death represent the most significant contrast in this film, as the survival of one's culture *is* a life-or-death matter: cultures under the threat of extinction rely on the living to continue breathing to keep the culture alive. Imperialism seems to represent death: the baroness tries to jump from her roof every night, Hans is willing to trade his soul for a Kratt to learn how to seduce the baroness, and Liina is willing to spend all night in the freezing woods to save Hans. The fairytale-like dichotomies of light and dark, long shot and close up, beauty and ugliness, poverty and wealth, and even life and death show the audience the clear cultural (and even moral) distinctions between Estonia and its oppressors.

Filmmakers like Werner Herzog and Jean Rouché, prominent figures in anthropology, have been blurring the line between “real” and “fiction” for decades in their films. Jean Rouché certainly deviates from the traditions of observational ethnographic film when “he disrupts the boundaries between the self and the world, mind and body, the mind’s eye and surveying eye” (Grimshaw 2001, 91). Instead of treating vision as the “noblest of senses,” as anthropologists and filmmakers David and Judith MacDougall do, Rouché wants the audience to be confused, to enter a trance where they cannot trust their senses and have to let the film wash over them (Grimshaw 2001, 90). *Sarnet* uses similar techniques: the magical wolves, the Kratts, the Devil, and the family treasure featured in *November* are all part of a hypnotic experience for the viewer, not meant to be taken as literal aspects of everyday Estonian life. And yet, they tell a *real* story about Estonia’s folkloric traditions and its history of oppression.

African filmmaker and actress Safi Faye, a contemporary of Rouché, has similar complex views on the word “fiction.” While she considers herself a documentary filmmaker, many consider her films works of “docu-drama” or ethno-fiction, to which she responds, “I wrote the

script, I edited it, I sketched out the images, I asked others their thoughts. And after having completed *Mossane*, I am not yet persuaded that I have made a fiction film, because my imagination comes from what I have lived, the values that have been instilled in me, the education that I was given” (Ellerson 2010). Although her films have some scripting and staging, Faye feels her films tell an ethnographic truth because they stem from her own experiences. Sarnet, an Estonian, may have a view his own filmmaking.

Like Faye’s films, *November* tells a cultural truth through its fiction that is as anthropologically significant as it is entertaining, and, although seemingly set in the distant past, reflects the reality of today’s Estonia. Unlike the longstanding (and often problematic) anthropological and documentary tradition of a Westerner filming the “Other” for anthropology [for example, the works MacDougall (1975), Gardner, Flaherty and even contemporary filmmakers like Stephanie Spray (MacDonald, 2014)], *November* is an Estonian perspective on Estonia, told through striking and sublime cinematography, subtle writing, and surreal and sometimes terrifying fairytale style.

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