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## *Diet of Souls* – Extreme Filming in the High Arctic

*A shooting schedule utilizing two interdependent units was devised to shoot a broad range of material over large distances*

by Christopher Ball csc

“The great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls.” So an Inuit shaman summarized the moral danger of being human.

For thousands of years, the Inuit of the circumpolar regions have cultivated a complex and sophisticated culture, entirely in harmony with the animals and environment around them. This spiritual accord has enabled them to survive the brutal Arctic conditions in which they live.

Can animals be spiritual equals and one’s daily bread? This paradox sparked writer/director John Houston’s and executive producer Peter d’Entremont’s third journey to Canada’s Eastern Arctic, the land of Houston’s childhood.

*Diet of Souls* is the last project of Houston’s Arctic trilogy, which started with *Songs in Stone: An Arctic Journey Home* and continued with *Nulijuk: Mother of the Sea Beasts*. As he was preparing for the final docudrama, John had to conceive a way to shoot a broad range of material, over large distances, with budget and time constraints. He designed a shooting schedule that utilized two interdependent units, one with cinematographer Robert MacDonald (CSC Associate) primarily filming interviews and dramatic segments, and a travelling unit with me, primarily filming on the land. At times both units would shoot together, at times many hundreds of miles apart.

The somewhat unusual decision to work with two cinematographers was made near the end of *Songs in Stone*, when John was struggling over prioritizing critical interviews ahead of other once-in-a-lifetime events. He noticed the case containing the backup camera body and realized that both priorities could be accomplished by simply having another cinematographer.

In preparation for *Diet of Souls*, John, Robert and I consulted extensively on equipment and film stock. There was some discussion of shooting on video, but having shot previously in the extreme Arctic environment we were convinced film was the right way to go. Attempting to capture the Arctic’s extremes of contrast with the narrow latitude of video is simply unattractive, and, besides, video equipment would not stand up to the Arctic conditions.

On *Nulijuk: Mother of the Sea Beasts*, we carried two different stocks, but this time we were hoping to carry just one to keep it simpler and minimize waste. The new 16mm Kodak Vision2 7218 (500 ASA) had just been introduced and we were extremely impressed with what we saw at a Kodak screening, especially the tremendous range. We all had a feeling it was the right stock for *Diet of Souls*, but we wanted to do some tests that would simulate the actual



Christopher Ball csc outfitted for filming at –47°C, and below, near Pangnirtung. The parka and pants are made of Caribou and are too warm above about –30°C. Photo: John Houston



David Poisey, Gareth Roberts, John Houston, actor Lamech Kadloo, Christopher Ball csc pose inside a glacial ice cave near Bylot Island. Photo: Christopher Ball csc

conditions.

Gaston Bernier of Kodak Canada Entertainment Imaging in Montreal arranged for us to get a roll immediately and tests were done on a frozen lake in Nova Scotia, home base for Houston and me. The test compared 7277 320 tungsten, 7245 50 daylight and the new 7218. The 7218 won out in all categories: wide range, superb colour reproduction, nice tonal scale, and excellent overexposure capacity. The 7218 held detail fully two stops brighter than the 7245.

Although it seemed odd to be taking 500 ASA stock to the bright landscape of Arctic summer, we all agreed it was the most versatile stock for the project. Since the sun only goes down for a few hours, providing lots of magic hour light, we knew we were going to be shooting early mornings and late evenings and avoiding the flat midday glare. We also knew that we were going to be filming a lot of interviews, many of which would be interiors and some inside igloos. Our lighting package was small and run by a portable generator usually housed in a miniature igloo about 20 feet away. Igloos have amazing sound-deadening characteristics.

The most common lamp used in the Arctic is the Coleman, but it emits a greenish colour temperature, so we made a fake Coleman lamp run from battery power to use on camera. We also occasionally used a qulliq (traditional seal oil lamp) as a light source, with some supplementation. In *Nuliajuk*, Robert MacDonald's beautifully filmed interviews employed a supplemented qulliq as the primary light source, which created a striking painterly image evoking Inuit history and tradition.



Director John Houston (left) and cinematographer Robert MacDonald. Photo: Christopher Ball csc

The *Nuliajuk* experience was instructive in many ways for *Diet of Souls*. Both shoots involved separate units filming in extreme cold with extensive travel over long distances, up to six or eight hours on snowmobiles pulling heavy qamutiks (dogsleds converted for snowmobile use) loaded with gear.

Based on the shooting challenges in *Nuliajuk* and *Songs in Stone*, Robert and I did extensive research for *Diet of Souls* with our supplier, William F. White International. Robert worked closely with camera technician Mike Thompson on designing a Barney heating system that was tested in a specially designed freezer at the IMAX facility in Toronto. Many considerations — including the fact that we would be hampered by cumbersome mitts and layers of clothing — were designed into the equipment package, and it all worked very well. Even at sub-zero temperatures, the cameras stayed at a comfortable plus 6 degrees Celsius.

The trip back was a gruelling, overnight snowmobile trip through pack ice

Two Aaton XTR Prods were used with a selection of shared lenses, including the new Canon zoom lenses, which were excellent in Arctic conditions and never froze up. Also on board were 9.5mm and 85mm Zeiss lenses for speed, an ultra-wide Century 6mm and, for wildlife, a Canon 800mm with 2x extender and a periscope. Two O'Connor 2575 fluid heads were rock-solid in high Arctic winds and performed flawlessly, no matter how low the mercury fell.

In order to travel light while maintaining high production value, we carried specially designed equipment, including an anti-vibration mount for shooting from snowmobiles, a home-built ladder pod for high shots and a custom-designed dolly that was made to "ride" on any ladder available in the North.

We travelled a huge circle from Rankin Inlet on the western shore of Hudson Bay, far inland to Baker Lake at the mouth of the Thelon River, then northeast to Kuugaaruk (Pelly Bay), Pond Inlet and back south to Iqaluit on Baffin Island.

Pond Inlet is home to the Bylot Island bird sanctuary, where we captured images framed by massive icebergs against 5,000-foot-high mountain ranges. About 15 miles out from Pond Inlet (73 degrees latitude), we filmed in a stunning ice cave underneath a glacier and then took our break with tea made from 10,000-year-old ice chipped from the walls.

John Houston was playing with this ancient ice, and noticed that it

was so pure it could work as an optical crystal. So much for our tea break; instead we filmed our shaman character, played by Lamech Kadloo, distorted by our tea-water ice.

The trip back was a gruelling, overnight snowmobile trip through pack ice, leaving at 23:00 and arriving at our next location at 04:00. It made red-eye flights seem like fun holidays, but the visuals were astounding. Throughout the journey we moved deeper and deeper into a gorgeous deep-blue half-light.

One cannot film in the Arctic without the ingenuity and stamina of an Inuit crew. The Inuit who worked on the production were actors, camera assistants, sound recordists, grips, advisers, safety reps, scouts, guides, visual consultants, script editors, hunters and food providers (hunting and fishing en route) . . . often all wrapped up in one. Actor Lamech Kadloo was also a grip, camera assistant, navigator and snowmobile driver and was outstanding in any role. At times when I felt like I could barely devise a way to stay warm, one of our crew would be happily popping open snowmobile hoods and changing spark plugs with bare hands.

Our travelling menu consisted mainly of raw caribou, seal and Arctic char, and although that sounds unappetizing, it is incredibly delicious and has a rapid warming effect on the body. Raw seal liver is a delicacy that puts caviar to shame, and there is nothing fresher than 10-minute-old seal and char.

The resourcefulness, immeasurable capabilities and wonderful sense of humour shown by the Inuit was one of the best aspects of the experience. Inuit have survived the seemingly inhospitable Arctic because of perseverance, equanimity and a deep respect they have for the land and the animals they share it with.

Throughout what became an extreme stress test, the 7218 stock performed flawlessly. Several observers at Eyes Post, the production's transfer facility, remarked that they could not believe the project was not shot on 35mm, and that it looked like a feature film.

Robert MacDonald commented: "There is another intangible when considering film versus tape that is not always taken into account. John Houston's films incorporate archival material in order to help convey the historical context; some of this material is over 70 years old, shot originally on film. As I work with the Inuit, I am intensely aware of the privilege of documenting an incredibly fragile and threatened way of life. Several of the elders that we met have passed on, and their stories and memories vanish with them. The footage that we shoot and the sound that we record of these remarkable people (and remember it can't all be in the finished film), should be designed to last as long as possible. These are stories and images worth preserving on film; I am confident that they will be."

*Diet of Souls* premieres in Ottawa, at the National Gallery of Canada, on June 20, 2004, and on Vision TV on Thursday, June 24, at 10 p.m. ET.

Crew:

- *Writer/Director/Producer:* John Houston
- *Producer:* Peter d'Entremont
- *Cinematographers:* Robert MacDonald, Christopher Ball csc
- *Camera Assistants:* Gareth Roberts, Mosese Kipanik, Elisa Kasarnak, Abraham Niptayuk, Colin Krejunark.



(Top) Robert MacDonald sets up a shot on the ladder dolly to film Gino Aqqak waiting (nine hours) at a seal breathing hole. In the background is director John Houston, Vincent Ningark and Brent Haliskie; (centre) The ladder dolly is adapted for a crane shot in front of a glacier near Bylot Island. Christopher Ball csc (foreground) works with Houston, actor Lamech Kadloo and grip/driver Elisa Kasarnak; (bottom) Ball films Gino Aqqak char fishing from a custom-designed ladder pod, with Houston and Gareth Roberts. Photos: Christopher Ball csc

- *Gaffer/Grips: Kevin MacNeil, Charles Tarvaq*
- *Unit Managers: Craig Simailak, Jaco Anaviapik, William Noah, Vincent Ningark*  
*Sound: David Poisey, Brent Haliskie*
- *Composers: Marsha Coffey, Ian Tamblyn*
- *Picture Editor: John Brett*
- *Assistant Editor: Alethea Arnaquq-Baril*
- *Production Co.: Triad Film Productions*
- *Post-Production: The Lab in Toronto, Eyes Post Group*
- *Equipment: William F White International Inc.*

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