

KUESSIPAN



Original version: French, Innu (English subtitles)

Director: Myriam Verrault

Opening date (Québec): October 4, 2019

Genre: Drama

Country of origin: Canada (Quebec)

Length: 117 minutes

Recommended for 16 years and older

SYNOPSIS

“Freely inspired” by Naomi Fontaine’s novel, this is the story of two best friends in an Innu community. While Mikuan has a loving family, Shaniss is picking up the pieces of her shattered childhood. As children, they promised each other to stick together no matter what. On the eve of their seventeen birthdays, their friendship is shaken when Mikuan falls for a white boy, her first love, and starts dreaming of leaving the reserve that’s now too small for her dreams.

Shaniss is committed to continue living in Ushuat in spite of her problems with the father of her baby daughter. She is trying to protect him against the police who want to arrest him for assault and battery. The writing workshop Mikuan is attending reinforces her desire to leave the reserve possibly with Francis.

REVIEWS

Verreault’s filmmaking is skillful and briskly paced, especially in its tightly edited first act. Her actresses command our attention both in quieter moments and in (sometimes overwrought) slips into melodrama. It’s a coming-of-age story that stands out from the pack for its soulfulness.

— Orla Smith, *Seventh Row*

KUESSIPAN IS STUNNINGLY POETIC AND ROOTED IN REALISM

Fontaine is able to connect viewers to the inner reflections of being Innu and living off the land, while Verreault brings her innate sense of coming of age storytelling. (...) *Kuessipan* definitely brought me back to my time growing up in my own First Nations community. Overall I found the film to be an endearing take on what it can be like for youth growing up on “the rez”. It also skips all of the tired Indigenous stereotypes while still being able to incorporate Indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs.

— Erica Comanda, *Muskrat Magazine*

The emotions of this journey are conveyed so effectively; on top of the film’s electric storytelling, Fontaine-Ishpatao and Grégoire’s performances are raw and unflinching and manage to adhere you to them in such a powerful way that at times it feels like you’re infringing on their privacy. It’s rare to feel as connected to film characters as you will to Mikuan and Shaniss, and it’s rarer still to feel so attached that you’re sad to leave them. *Kuessipan* is quiet and mesmerizing and tragic and full of hope. It is a triumph, and a privilege to spend time with.

— Anne T. Donahue, *Globe and Mail*

DETAILS

LANGUAGE

The film dialogue is in French and in Innu. The songs are generally in English and the language is peppered with English words like “fuck”, “shit” or “dammit”.

The spoken French is Québécois. It is riddled with colloquial sometimes coarse language. It is difficult to count how many times the characters say “tabarnak”/“ostie”/“crisse”/ “câlce” or “marde”. The subtitles try to stay faithful to the language by translating these typically Québécois swear words by the words quoted before adding “Christ” or “Jesus” or “Go to hell”.

This language is mostly spoken by the young generation. For instance, Shaniss is seen as having

interrupted her schooling to raise her baby and Greg is rather rough so it is expected to hear them argue. “fait chier” is repeated and translated by “Fuck you” accordingly.

The young people Innu and “white” use the words “frencher” (to kiss) and expressions like “faire du pouce” (to hitchhike), “je me suis faite pogner” (I fell for it) or “kuei-bitch”.

A funny French lesson tries to set the record straight on distorted words used in texting. One student recognizes that “beach” is “plage” and another student thinks “s’arjoindre” is a French word that she mistakes for “rejoinder” or “joinder”.

Apart from the sexual innuendo of the word “frencher”, Francis is caught by surprise when he is trying to greet Mikuan’s parents and says instead “I have a little penis”.

Beside some violent moves described below, Shaniss screams “slash him in the knees” at a hockey game. Mikuan is taking a picture of Francis and jokingly asks him to step further back almost to the brink of the hill he is standing on. Francis smiles and says: “Are you trying to kill me?”

The topic of battered women is present when Shaniss is sent to a shelter with her daughter. In spite of the fact that she is bearing signs of domestic violence on her face, she denies the fact that Greg did beat her.

Racial slurs are evident throughout the film. One of the most noticeable one is the word “sauvages” or “savages” uttered by Francis’ friends to address the Innu girls. When Francis mentions the bet of kissing an Innu girl, he says someone of “your gang”. He always gets tangled up in you and us the Québécois, the whites... Mikuan also mocks Shaniss passion to defend the Innu against the whites.

VIOLENCE

The bar scene where Greg punches Francis’ friend is non-graphic. The camera does not show where Greg directs his punches nor their impact. At the end of the scene the man is lying down with a little blood streaming. The shot is very brief and not a close-up. It is integral to the plot to denounce the impulsive nature of Greg and the offensive racial slur uttered by the “victim”.

Greg watches a TV program where a man is shooting at a car. This very brief scene shows Greg’s taste for violent movies.

Greg noisily celebrates Christmas with his friends, disturbing the baby who cries. When Shaniss angrily asks him to lower the sound, he pushes her. The fall is off camera. The next image shown is Shaniss crying with a bruised face. The domestic violence is implied but not graphic as far as the action is concerned.

Mikuan is angry at her parents’ reaction not to help her pay for her going to Quebec City to study. She throws her mother’s beads on the floor, which can stand as a symbol of sweeping tradition away.

At the beginning of the film, Mikuan’s father puts his hunting gun away and Mikuan grabs it in her desperate rage at being ditched by Francis. Mikuan rides a skidoo to “the cabin of her first love”, shoots at the door, breaks the windows and shoots again at anything inside. She runs out of bullets, but she still aims at Shaniss who came to apologize. Shaniss does not know it and feels scared. Mikuan puts her gun down and cries.

NUDITY

Francis is tenderly holding Mikuan by her shoulders: he is bare-chested and Mikuan's shoulders are bare. In the morning, Francis gets up: he is wearing his underwear. He grabs Mikuan's bra, pretends he is putting it on and wakes Mikuan. They laugh at his joke.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Instances of kisses on the mouth:

- At the night club, we see a young couple is kissing on the mouth.
- Later Francis dares Mikuan to kiss her to win a bet with his friends. They do have a long kiss.
- Shaniss and Greg share a kiss on the mouth before their implied sexual activity
- While in the cabin, Mikuan and Francis kiss each other a few times on the mouth.
- Metshu is attracted by Shaniss: he ends up kissing her on the mouth after they jokingly play around.

Implied sexual activity

Shaniss joins Greg after the bar incident. Greg passionately kisses her and takes her to the sofa where he lies on top of her. He implicitly will make love to her, but the camera cuts off the action. No graphic images.

Sexual innuendo

Mikuan brings Francis to the family cabin to spend the night with him. She tenderly kisses his hand and his arm. They kiss on the mouth and lie down. The next image shows a bare-chested Francis holding Mikuan by her shoulders. Later, Francis in his underwear gets up from bed. Mikuan has been lying down beside him. In this case the camera did not show anything of their tryst.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT/THE MESSAGES

◆ PORTRAYAL OF A COMMUNITY IN DISTRESS

Shaniss lives with an alcoholic mother.

The scene where she asks Mikuan to help her drag the body of her mother to her bed is very sad. Shaniss has to leave her home and her friend Mikuan to go and live with an aunt. But Mikuan's generous parents and the sisterly love that bonds the two little girls will bring her back to the community she knows.

Greg, Shaniss's mate, symbolizes the crisis the First Nation youth goes through: loss of bearings that leads to drinking too much. Mikuan in her portrayal of Shaniss predicts that he is going to cheat on her, beat her and let her raise her children alone.

Alcoholism is a threat that englobes everyone from young to older like Shaniss's mother or even Mikuan's mother who once was an alcoholic.

Drugs are alluded to as a possible nuisance: Shaniss and Mikuan take some kind of unidentified substance (pill) at the night club.

Shaniss smokes a joint at one point at Mikuan's home.

◆ A COLONIZED, EVANGELIZED, FRANCIZED COMMUNITY

The Christmas celebrations, Metshu's death are steeped into Christian icons: Christ on the cross, and crosses at the church. By contrast though, the Innus were chanting their own songs in their own language.

It is showing the fracture between the elder who express themselves in Innu and the younger generation who speak French.

◆ THE TUG OF WAR BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

One of the most engaging segment of the film is the debate about the exploitation of the mines in the Innu territory. It reveals the desire to find a balance between tradition and the economy as well as a need to govern their own territory. The teens compare the traditional way of life to the modern lifestyle.

Mikuan's parents bring back a deer or a moose they cut up in the traditional way in the middle of their modern home. Another paradox of an animal traditionally hunted in nature that finds itself in an unexpected place.

In the film Mikuan symbolizes the desire to leave the reservation towards a modern world. Shaniss stays in the territory, having children to insure the perpetuation of the Innu people.

◆ INNUS VERSUS WHITES: DISCONTENT AND RACISM

At the night club, the confrontation between whites and "savages" is uneasy and somewhat violent.

The bet Francis took to kiss an Innu girl has racial tones. Francis wants to "frencher" (kiss) a girl of her "gang."

When he breaks up with Mikuan, he gets entangled into words that betray his thoughts of discrimination: Innus are not Québécois like him, they are not white...

Through his uninformed eye, we, as the film viewers, discover an unknown community with its problems.

◆ THE PRIDE AND RESILIENCE OF THE INNUS

Mikuan describe with pride what her reservation and her people are about. Her reading is beautifully accompanied by men and women of all generations moving at the same rhythm, hugging and loving each other, an image of hope and resilience.

◆ ALCOHOLISM AND DRUGS

Aunt Simone likes her glass of wine at meals.

Poupou and Raymond drink white wine when they meet.

There is the café gathering when everybody get merry after they drank a bit too much.

The farmers drink at the bar counter but it is not specified what.

The café/bar is a gathering place in the village. Drinking wine is not unusual for French people.

◆ A FEW DETAILS TO REMEMBER FOR SENSITIVE AUDIENCES

Mikuan gives a needle to her grandmother who fakes being pricked awkwardly.

She initiates her little sister to do the same. The grandmother continues to jokingly pretend it hurts. Mikuan accidentally triggers a small fire that is safely controlled.

Mikuan's parents are cutting the deer or moose in pieces including extracting its heart. Mikuan's mother shows her pain and distress by screaming when the body of her dead son is brought to her.

Mishu's body is seen in an open casket.

Mikuan questions the purpose of living if our destiny is already programmed.

PHOTOS OF THE FILM



Mikuan and Shaniss two inseparable friends.



Metshu, Mikuan's brother.



Francis Mikuan's first love.



Grégoire in court accused of assault and battery.



Mikuan and Metshu's family, who also became Shaniss family.