



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 4
Issue 2 October 2000

Article 9

12-16-2016

Holy Smoke!

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Recommended Citation

Makarushka, Irena S. M. PhD (2016) "Holy Smoke!," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/9>

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Holy Smoke!

Abstract

This is a review of *Holy Smoke!* (1999).

Being a great fan of Jane Campion's work over the years, I really tried to like her recent film, *Holy Smoke*. In this film, she explores themes such as dysfunctional families and the search for meaning which are also found in earlier films like *Sweetie* and *Angel at My Table*. She creates here one more powerful female character named Ruth Barron, played by Kate Winslet. She tackles the issues of religion, gender and power. And she provides breathtaking views of the Australian desert. Yet, in the end, the film fails to satisfy.

The film suffers from an identity crisis not unlike that which is central to the story itself. Whereas in other films Campion offered an unsentimental, nearly clinical perspective, in *Holy Smoke* she wavers between parody and empathy. The Director seems to be asking: What can we expect from family life and belief systems at the end of the twentieth century other than confusion? The seriousness of issues such as religious and sexual power (she intimates that they are one and the same) or right action seems inadequately inflected to make the viewer care about them or the characters.

The story line is relatively straightforward. A young Australian woman, Ruth Barron, looking for the meaning of life goes to India, finds a guru and becomes a devotee. Her mother lures her back home, hires a deprogrammer named P. J. Waters, played by Harvey Keitel, to save her from herself. Numerous events involving several family members including a gay brother and his lover, a

philandering father, a sex-obsessed sister-in-law and a sheep that serves popcorn provide the backdrop for the deprogramming process. In the end, the deprogrammer himself is deprogrammed and Ruth returns to India with her mother. The deprogrammer marries his assistant and everyone lives happily ever after.

Campion is clearly having some fun with this film in a way that she hasn't with others. Her choice of names alone adds to the atmosphere of carnival. The family, plagued by infidelity, a runaway daughter and fairly strange relatives, lives in a suburb named Sans Souci. Their farm, in the outback flatlands in the middle of nowhere, is named Mount Emu Farm. Ruth (which means mercy) Barron (whose life seems barren) battles P. J. Waters (who, despite initial bravado, is fairly wishy washy). And the list goes on.

As a good anthropologist, Campion surveys the belief systems of various groups, including the family itself. While complaining about Ruth's Hindu rituals, some members unreflectively engage in their own hybrid mixture of Christian devotionism. Ruth's sister-in-law, Yvonne, ritualizes her carnal lust in her pursuit of salvation through P. J. who is only too happy to oblige. P. J., who sees himself as a late twentieth century savior of lost souls, in the end is not what he pretends to be.

The film's climax, the sexual pas de deux between Ruth and P. J., is only partly successful in its realization. The emotional confusion that marks many scenes, visually represented by rapid scene shifts, reaches its apex here. Perhaps reflecting Ruth's own ambivalence, the tension between sexuality and spirituality is worked out through the desire on the part of each character to surface the vulnerability of the other. The scene in which Ruth dresses P. J. in a red dress and puts make-up on his face is a good example of the ambiguity that haunts both characters. Campion seems to suggest that both Ruth and P. J. learn about vulnerability and power from succumbing to one another. However, she should have ended the film with the scene where Ruth is in the back of a pick-up truck holding P. J.'s head in her lap trusting viewers to draw their own conclusions. By adding an epilogue, she gives into an unproductive whim of literalism. Viewers would have been better served left wondering about salvation and the true measure of Ruth's mercy.