




October 2023

## Hey, Viktor!

Ken Derry  
University of Toronto, ken.derry@utoronto.ca

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### Recommended Citation

Derry, Ken (2023) "Hey, Viktor!," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 27: Iss. 2, Article 17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.27.02.17>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol27/iss2/17>

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## Hey, Viktor!

### Abstract

This is a film view of *Hey, Viktor!* (2023) directed by Cody Lightning.

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### Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and from 2012 to 2018 he was the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Together with John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on the Star Wars franchise by scholars of religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



***Hey, Viktor!* (2023), dir. Cody Lightning**  
Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxmsslxVfDE>

The 1998 feature *Smoke Signals*, by Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie, is inarguably the most well-known and influential Indigenous film ever made. Its importance drives the plot of *Hey, Viktor!*, and also provides the film with its most explicitly “religious” elements. The title is a reference to a famous line of dialogue spoken throughout *Smoke Signals*, most often by Thomas, the young man who Victor is bound to in various ways. (Replacing “Victor” with “Viktor” references a joke in the movie about intellectual property rights.) Cody Lightning<sup>1</sup> starred as young Victor in the earlier movie, a role that remains the high point in the acting career of Cody in *Hey, Viktor!* In a voiceover at the start of the film, Cody tells us that since he was a boy he wanted to make something important to his people, something they would “worship.” To recapture (and cash in on) his famous past, he dreams of making a sequel: *Smoke Signals 2: Still Smoking*. It would bring us up to speed on what Victor has been doing over the years, how he became a “fallen god.” To help raise money for the project, Cody agrees to be part of a behind-the-scenes documentary about its production –

a plan that fails miserably. *Hey, Viktor!* is made up of the footage shot for the fictional documentary, as a film crew captures Cody's every move and his many, many mistakes.

The general veneration of *Smoke Signals* is both lampooned and reflected in Lightning's movie. Most of the principal actors from the original film appear here, for instance, and all of them hate Cody. There is a tiny replica of Arnold's yellow pickup truck hanging from Cody's rear view mirror. At one point he wears a version of Thomas' iconic "Frybread Power" t-shirt. One of the film's funniest scenes involves Cody breaking into the home of Adam Beach, who played the older version of Victor. He smashes a window to gain entry, relieved there's no alarm. He is in search of a holy relic, which he eventually finds displayed in a kind of shrine: the wig that Beach wore after the dramatic scene in which, grief-stricken, he cut his hair with a knife. Cody lifts the glass case covering the wig, only to find that while Beach's home is unprotected the holy hair is not. The alarm sounds. Cody is arrested.

On the more serious side of *Smoke Signals* veneration, when Cody eventually and genuinely tries to redeem himself and his movie, he raises the money he needs by pawning his own sacred souvenirs. These include the basketball from *Smoke Signals*, signed by cast members. The men at the pawn shop, who previously had only ridiculed Cody, respond with awe and concern. They worry that Cody is in genuine trouble if he's parting with such valued talismans. The scene is funny in its way, but not really played for laughs. Even still, this more sincere reflection of what *Smoke Signals* means to many people is just the flip side of the more parodic bits. The fact that so many of the original actors lampoon themselves in *Hey, Viktor!* suggests that, for them and for Lightning, making fun of *Smoke Signals* is part of the recognition of its genuine significance.

And the silliness itself is also arguably sacred in its own way. In an interview with Gary Kramer, Lightning affirms: "We need to laugh. There is so much trauma with the loss of language

and culture, residential schools and really heavy content. Let's laugh at ourselves. That's what *Smoke Signals* did."<sup>2</sup> Eyre himself made a similar point years ago: "You don't have to show the steps of the Sun Dance. The real spirit is laughter, and I try to have it in every one of my movies. [In *Smoke Signals*] there's an element of love and understanding between the characters; humor is a part of religion."<sup>3</sup>

Another religious connection between *Smoke Signals* and *Hey, Viktor!* is the idea of the trickster. Eyre identifies Thomas as a trickster in the former,<sup>4</sup> and Cody is clearly one in the latter. Thomas is a very gentle trickster, though, joking and telling stories and disrupting Victor's life in helpful ways because he cares. Cody is a more traditional version of this figure who, in many Indigenous stories from different Turtle Island communities, is a self-indulgent agent of chaos functioning as a cautionary tale, causing himself all kinds of amusing and extreme harm. And so, in one sequence, Cody accepts \$100,000 to fund his movie from Chomsky, a German arms dealer and "Indigenous enthusiast," on the impossible condition that he gets the rest of the original cast to star. Cody then compounds this deadly problem by immediately losing about a quarter of the money celebrating, waking up the next day—in very trickstery fashion—completely naked in a field, covered in some kind of disgusting slime that has to be hosed off of him.

There are also some meaningful links to another Indigenous filmmaker with similar storytelling interests, the late Mi'kmaq writer-director Jeff Barnaby. When Cody and his friend Kate are reviewing the many scripts they've worked on over the years, they realize that most of them are about zombie priests. Then in the final version of the film that Cody makes (retitled *Fire Signs*), there's a hilarious moment when a mundane conversation is suddenly interrupted by an attack of (you guessed it) zombie priests. In Barnaby's first feature, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013), a man tells his nephew about the zombie priests up at the spooky residential school on the

hill. And his follow-up (and final) movie, *Blood Quantum* (2019), was about a virus that turns white people into zombies, a virus from which the Indigenous community is immune. This setup gives Barnaby free reign to mount many excellent scenes in which Native characters mow down hordes of white zombies, scenes that Lightning seems to be paying light-hearted homage to in his movie-within-a-movie.

Lightning and Barnaby also appear to share a similar interest in *not* showing traditional Indigenous ceremonies or items in their films. The closest we come to this kind of material in *Hey, Viktor!* is a fake headdress that Cody wears for a hilariously inappropriate fracking commercial (tag line: “Less slack, more frack!”). We also learn that one reason Simon—who played young Thomas in *Smoke Signals*—hates Cody so much is that Cody burned his powwow regalia. In his interview with Kramer, Lightning explains:

A lot of people have a fantasized version of what Indigenous culture is — that is ceremonies and medicine and healing and community. And yes, that is a huge part of who we are. But like any other ethnic background, there is dysfunction, there are hardships, there is alcohol and drug addiction, there is everything.

It is this grounded, messy reality that Lightning “wants to portray in the projects I am writing, acting in and directing.” Barnaby likewise found more meaning in what happens outside of ostensibly religious moments:

Ceremonies are meant to be sacred, and take place in a specific space and time, but I am interested in what those guys do when they go home. When the pomp and presentation of ceremony is not there. I am more interested in humanizing Native people rather than perpetuating this idea that we’re doing ok.<sup>5</sup>

For both Barnaby and Lightning, humanizing Native people means showing not only the difficult, fractured relations within communities, but the ways in which individuals can and do come together to support one another. This is also true of *Smoke Signals* itself. Sometimes this means two young men ultimately overcome their differences and their trauma to grieve the death

of a father. Sometimes it means a damaged narcissist finally snaps out of substance abuse and self-pity and realizes the film he's making is not actually all about him, but about *everyone* who worked on the project and everyone else who supported him along the way. And sometimes it means people join forces with anyone who is nearby to kill a bunch of zombie priests.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Given that several actors are playing versions of themselves in *Hey, Viktor!*, I will use surnames when talking about the actual people, and first names when referring to their character. So Lightning is the writer-director of this film, for instance, and Cody is the man *within* the film trying to make *Smoke Signals 2: Still Smoking*.

<sup>2</sup> Gary M. Kramer, "'We need to laugh': 'Hey, Viktor' is a much-needed send-up of Native dysfunction and Hollywood." *Salon*. June 12, 2023. Accessed September 30, 2023. <https://www.salon.com/2023/06/12/hey-viktor-cody-lightning-smoke-signals>.

<sup>3</sup> Julien R. Fielding, "Native American Religion and Film: Interviews with Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie." *Journal of Religion & Film* 7, no. 1 (2003). <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol7/iss1/5>, pp. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Fielding, "Native American," p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Jamaia DaCosta, "Interview with Jeff Barnaby on *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*." *Muskrat Magazine*. February 1, 2014. <http://muskratmagazine.com/interview-with-filmmaker-jeff-barnaby-on-rhymes-for-young-ghouls>.