“**Holy Smoke**” (1999)

Directed by Jane Campion. Starring Kate Winslet as Ruth,

the searcher for meaning, and Harvey Keitel as Tom,

the smooth-talking deprogrammer.

*Holy Smoke* is a simple story. Ruth travels to India to find enlightenment. While there she finds instead a guru whom she can worship. Fearing that their daughter has fallen prey to some kind of cult, Ruth’s parents lure her home by telling her that her father is dying and wants to see her. When Ruth comes home, she discovers that her parents have lied to her and have hired a famous deprogrammer, Tom, to help Ruth escape the cult.

Tom makes every effort to bring Ruth back to normal, but in the process discovers that it is Ruth that is “deprogramming” him, not the other way around. During the deprogramming of the deprogrammer, both Ruth and Tom discover important truths about themselves. In the end, Ruth returns to India, this time with her mother, whose husband has left her for another woman. Ruth and her mother find joy living in a different culture without returning to the worship of a guru.

But this is a Jane Campion film and so, while the story is simple, the film is not. Throughout the simple story Campion takes up such issues as “family,” “love,” “objects of worship,” “caring and cruelty,” “religion,” and “the meaning of life.” So how are we to understand Campion’s commentary on these various topics in relation to the simple story? This question might be answered in different ways, but here is my suggestion about how to understand the film, how to give the film some overall meaning. I take the title, *Holy Smoke*, to be the significant factor in interpreting the film. The title suggests that what we often think of as holy or sacred (family, love, caring, religion, and so on) is in fact really smoke, something that we can see, but something without substance.

Some people see “family” as holy or sacred: “There’s nothing more important than family.” But Campion presents the viewer with a family that is dishonest and dysfunctional. The family lies to Ruth to bring her home. Ruth’s father leaves his wife for another woman. Family might be sacred, but it can also be a sham.

Others see “worshipping the guru” (the worship of a human being rather than the deity) as sacred, but Campion demonstrates that Ruth’s worship of a guru is shallow, limited to cliches and easily left behind. What Ruth and many others think is holy turns out to be nothing but smoke.

“Love” is often thought to be holy, but again, Campion shows that what we take to be love is is confused with sex, love becomes not something holy, but just smoke. Campion recognizes that “religion” is often seen as the epitome of the holy or sacred. For her characters, however, religion is shown as merely a mindless ritual or performance. The family that prays for Ruth is merely repeating a ritual. Such religion is merely smoke.

Finally, Campion shows that “caring” for someone else can really be the exertion of power over that individual, an effort to control, even dominate them. Tom claims that he is deprogramming Ruth, but he is merely manipulating her. When Ruth turns the table on Tom, we discover that her “caring” for Tom is just an opportunity to express her cruelty by making Tom wear a dress and put on lipstick. Caring for others may be holy, but it also can be merely smoke.

If the things we often see as holy or sacred turn out to be merely smoke, to what can we turn as we, as well as Ruth, search for the meaning of life, the search for the holy? Campion provides an answer to this question in her inimitable manner. Tom writes “Be Kind” on Ruth’s forehead. “Be Kind” is written backward, so that Ruth can read the message when she looks in the mirror. “Be Kind” is a message of many religions, even if it does not require religion to serve as the meaning of life. When what we seek as the holy turns to smoke it is essentially because what we seek is about ourselves or for ourselves.

But “Be Kind” is an idea that by its very nature is not about ourselves and as a practice it reaches well beyond our own self interests.

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