Stories from the reservation

Smoke Signals: A film by Chris Eyre at the London Film Festival

Paul Bond
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Smoke Signals has attracted attention as the first full-length feature film written, directed and performed by American Indians. It marks the directorial feature debut of Cheyenne-Arapaho filmmaker Chris Eyre. The screenplay was adapted by writer Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d'Alene) from his collection of short stories, *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

The film is set on a Coeur d'Alene reservation in Idaho. Victor Joseph's stepfather Arnold has just died outside Phoenix, Arizona and the son is asked to collect his ashes and his pickup truck. The only way he can afford to carry out the mission is by accepting an offer of money from his peer, the geeky Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Thomas's side of the bargain is that he be allowed to accompany Victor on the trip. Out of this develops a version of a road movie that had promised something more.

The film opens with a reservation house ablaze. A voice-over by Thomas (Evan Adams) tells us that his parents were killed during a Fourth of July party celebrating 'white man's independence'. As the partygoers realise that something is amiss, the baby Thomas is thrown from the window and caught by Arnold Joseph (Gary Farmer). Thomas explains that he and Victor were born of fire, but also says that all he has now are the stories.

When we cut forward 20 years the characters have become defined. Victor (Adam Beach) is the athlete, while Thomas with his suit and glasses, is the storyteller.

Much of the clashing between these two cinematic stereotypes fails to rise far above the standard 'buddy movie', yet the characters also hint at the promise contained within the film. Thomas tells stories, personal and family histories and myths. To this extent he offers Eyre a chance to transcend the limitations of ordinary narrative and create his own visual language. That certainly seems to be what is on offer at the beginning of the film. Instead the director presents many of Thomas's stories in a more conventional manner. It is as if Eyre is afraid to allow the cinema to tell the stories for him.

Yet this is perhaps an injustice to the filmmaker, in as much as *Smoke Signals* is actually about resolving these contradictory elements, and he handles with assurance the different timeframes he intermixes, as memories and elements of stories. (The editing, however, is often not crisp enough to do justice to the ideas. The young Victor runs up the drive and the adult Victor comes through the door, but the join is evident at exactly the point where it needs to be hidden).

In part this seems to be a problem with the script. Where *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was a series of discrete stories about a single group of characters, the film attempts to render them into one. The book, narrated by Thomas in the first person, gives a picture of life on the reservation as a series of vignettes, recounted by Thomas, by Victor's mother Arlene, by Arnold's neighbour Suzy Song. The disparate visions are framed by the story of the collection of Arnold's ashes. Alexie's stories fictionalise a real life, a life of drunkenness, unemployment and basketball. Thomas's narrative can be seen as a way not only of rationalising the brutality of reservation life, but also of coping with it. In *Smoke Signals* there seems to be pressure on Alexie and Eyre to conform to a Hollywood road movie format.

It is not that the film shies away from such problems as drunkenness or hopelessness. In Victor's memories we see his parents drunk and awkward, we see his father practising the traditional warrior's art of 'disappearing'--hiding himself as protection from what

is going on around him. We see pervasive, everyday racism once they leave the reservation. We see Lester Fallsapart's car, broken down in the same spot for 20 years. What we don't see so much, which we do see in the book, is the banal cruelty of such a relentless life of isolation without a future.

Basketball is a good example. In the book basketball is described as the ultimate Indian sport, but also as the only chance that most youth on the reservation have of doing anything. Here we get the same lines (Geronimo as the first basketball player), but the sense of desolation is not present in quite the same way. Perhaps the only time we see that balance between the hope of shooting hoops and the despair it conceals is in Arnold's finely performed and edited monologue about playing two on two against a couple of Jesuits.

Instead the film centres on a notion of redemption, of resolving the tensions between father and sons. Arnold is trying to apologise across the miles to Victor and to Thomas, while the final voice-over asks how we forgive our fathers, and whether we forgive them in our age or theirs. The film succumbs to a commercial and sentimental notion of universality which tears it away from showing the specific issues in a more affecting way. The film certainly contains traces of the acuteness of which both Alexie and Eyre are capable. (When we first come to the present day it is with a local radio show voice-over announcing 'K-Res, Voice of the Reservation. It is a good day to be indigenous'.)

It is interesting, for example, that the best realised sequence is the one that plays with the notion of a stereotyped Indian identity and ends up confronting racism face to face. On the bus Victor encourages Thomas to behave more like a real Indian, to stop grinning all the time and be 'more stoic'. 'Look like you've just come back from killing a buffalo,' Thomas is told. 'But we were never buffalo hunters. We're a salmon fishing tribe.' 'You want to look like you just been fishing?' At the next stop Thomas returns from the toilet a different figure, his hair unbraided, his suit replaced by a 'Frybread Power' T-shirt and jeans. He is happy and relaxed, only to find two rednecks have taken their seats. The deflation is palpable.

The filmmaker makes imaginative use of references to popular cinema throughout the film. (This parallels what Alexie has also been doing with literature in, for example, his latest book *Indian Killer*.) Victor accuses Thomas of having a childish and romantic view of what it is to be an Indian. 'How many times have you seen *Dances With Wolves*?' he demands. When they are forced from their seats by the racist cowboys they get into an extended discussion (and song) about John Wayne's teeth. When they leave the bus and walk out of Phoenix, Thomas infuriates Victor by babbling on and on about Arnold being like Charles Bronson in *Deathwish*: 'Not Charlie in the first *Deathwish*, but Charlie in *Deathwish 5*.'

Alexie and Eyre are interested in what it is to be (mis-)represented (when the woman Thomas and Victor rescue from a car-crash says they arrived like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, there is a small correction; 'More like Tonto and Tonto'), and in how a more accurate representation might be made. They are also interested in how a non-realistic storytelling might work.

This is a debut effort in feature filmmaking and shows evidence that both writer and director have more to say, more to explore, but it also suggests some of the commercial pressures that will continue to come to bear down on them.

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