

The filmmakers can't help themselves

Holy Smoke, directed by Jane Campion, written by Jane and Anna Campion

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18 March 2000

Holy Smoke takes up themes addressed in director Jane Campion's four previous feature films: principally, the relationship between the sexes and the problems faced by women who are considered—by themselves and/or Campion—to be at odds with or standing apart from society. Her sister, Anna, co-wrote the screenplay.

Born in New Zealand, Jane Campion studied film in Sydney and made a series of short films, to critical acclaim. Her first feature, *Sweetie* (1989), told the story of two young sisters and their disturbing relationship. *An Angel at my Table* (1990) was an intelligent adaptation of the Janet Frame autobiographies, about a young woman wrongfully and cruelly diagnosed as mentally unstable, admitted to a psychiatric hospital and subject to electric shock treatment. With *The Piano* (1993) Campion hit the big time, picking up three Academy awards. Less well received was *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996).

Although Campion has been somewhat of a favourite with the international critics, *Holy Smoke* has generally met with very poor reviews, at least outside of Australia. Critics in Australia seem to be trapped into promoting every local production, either from blatant commercial motives or the misguided notion of encouraging the national film industry.

The central character in the film, Ruth (Kate Winslet), travels with her girlfriend to India, two young women wanting to see the world. Ruth, despite her friend's protestations, is attracted to a religious cult and finds apparent serenity in its ranks. When word of this gets back to her family in Sydney, they decide to employ the services of a professional “exiter” (de-programmer), P.J. Waters (Harvey Keitel), from the US—someone who specialises in breaking people from such sects.

Ruth is lured back to Australia believing that her father is dying of cancer. The family then take her to a remote settlement in the desert and it is here that the rendezvous with Waters is made. The male members of her family give Ruth little option but to go with Waters for three nights—in which time he calculates to have her back to “normal”.

Waters thereupon attempts to undermine Ruth's belief in her Indian guru and strip away what he believes to be her false and naïve beliefs. Ruth finds this not only pointless and unfair, but concludes that Waters is a shallow and cynical middle-aged opportunist who would do anything to get into bed with a young woman. As it turns out, they find themselves attracted to each other and by the end of the three days have developed a deep bond, for better or worse.

It appears as though the Campions have used the problem of cults and their appeal for young people merely as a way to explore their

own views on sexual politics. In any event, the film treats the former problem superficially. The filmmakers have made no serious attempt to grapple with the dilemma confronting people whose confused and discontented friends or family members seek answers and the “truth” in various mystical groups. There is certainly something to be said about the social origins of this disorientation and where it leads. However, this is not the film which says it.

A serious analysis would need to deal with the discontent obviously felt by growing numbers of people with their lives and society and their effort, however confused, to search for more profound answers. The general absence of any progressive social or moral compass by which people might guide their actions allows various organisations, including churches, to take advantage of people's deep-seated sense of insecurity. Cults, as a rule, attract the most confused and even despairing types, that is, figures quite unlike the apparently strong-willed and strong-minded Ruth. Indeed it's hard to imagine a less likely candidate than she, particularly as played by the sturdy and down-to-earth Winslet.

On the other hand, one feels it is not entirely accidental that Jane Campion has chosen the question of cultism as her vehicle. She has stated that she personally feels attracted to the conception of “spirituality.” Indeed, the Indian cult in the film is characterised in a most favourable fashion, in spite of the burlesque shots of the cult members and the guru himself—who looks more of a spoof than the real thing.

Far from offering a critique of cults, the film lends support to them. At any rate, the Campions crudely counterpose that sort of existence to the one led by Ruth's lower middle class family, with the latter coming off far worse. From our first glimpse of Ruth's parents and siblings, the message is clear: these people's garb and language and values are no less outlandish than those of the Indian cult, and considerably more vulgar and banal and empty. Of course, there is a great deal of backwardness and rubbish in everyday life in Australia and elsewhere that deserves to be exposed and ridiculed. If the filmmakers had left it at that, fine.

But the Campions are after bigger or, at least, different game. They seem unable to resist the temptation to express contempt and hostility for those less sophisticated and cultured than themselves. The central image is the same as in *The Piano*: the sensitive, misunderstood, middle class female versus the brutish masses. It's a bit pathetic actually.

And detrimental to Campion's art. She's unable to represent Ruth's family as anything other than caricatures. Ruth's mother Miriam

escapes this fate somewhat. She ends up with Ruth in India, not in a cult, but working for a children's charity. Although extremely naïve, she comes to her senses, helped by the discovery of her husband's philandering, and escapes the trappings of "normal" life.

It's an odd experience reading the comments of the Campion sisters about their film. There's a very limited relationship between their stated aims and the results that appear on the screen. In relation to Ruth's family, for example, Ann Campion explains: "We needed to deconstruct the seriousness of Ruth's situation in a post-modern way. So the Barron family became what Woody Allen would probably call a Greek Chorus and we call funny." According to the film's production notes, the family members "operate as a slightly comic foil for the seekers Ruth and P.J." What sort of artists first of all conceive of any group of human beings as "slightly comic foil" to obviously superior "seekers", and, in any event, far from making those individuals "funny," reduce them to semi-moronic, monstrous or whorish caricatures, respectively?

The blows directed against Ruth's family are a secondary, although unsavory element of the film. The Campions' main emphasis is on the relationship between Ruth and Waters.

This is more or less what happens: in their desert shack Waters initiates a discussion about religious theory with Ruth, conducted at a rather low level on both sides. With extraordinary ease, she appears to crumble. Sensing his attraction to her, Ruth seduces Waters and thereby gains considerable power over him. She uses it rather vindictively, humiliating him, dressing him up in a woman's dress. He rather enjoys this surrender, this apparent "feminization", but reproaches her for her cruelty. In the end she realizes the degree to which she has misused her newfound power, and grows tender, taking his injured body into her arms in the final shot of the film.

Several things immediately come to mind. First, there is the element of political parable. It's difficult not to see this as some kind of a supposedly cautionary tale about the consequences for women themselves of feminist "empowerment." Unfortunately, it's not an especially convincing caution. Kate Winslet is a remarkable performer and the compassion she exudes is genuine, but the script and the direction of the film have been working in quite a different direction. Waters' disintegration doesn't generate sympathy on the spectator's part so much as it does pity. He seems an even more miserable worm than we'd thought. The Campions simply cannot help themselves: they must present their female protagonists, under any and all circumstances, as morally superior. It's really tiring.

Of course, this is not what they think they're doing.

"Jane observes that while she began the project identifying with the young woman's position, with Ruth's crusading drive, her interest in P.J.'s journey was piqued as she realized her own situation in life perhaps held more parallels with P.J.'s. She points out that fundamental to P.J.'s character is a deep need for a challenge, 'maybe even an experience of surrender,' that his empowered position in life denies him. Thus when P.J. first sets eyes on Ruth, at some unconscious level he recognizes the opportunity—the challenge—he has secretly sought out....

"Jane Campion:

"'Ruth meets with one of her own in P.J.: an explorer, but one who has been wounded by the experience. I'm attracted to people who are explorers—and I'm very curious about people who aren't.'"

Aside from the rather unpleasant self-aggrandizing going on here (we certainly needed to know that Jane Campion sees herself as an "explorer" and is attracted to other "explorers"!), this description of

the film's internal logic is so desperately off the mark as to make one groan. It's simply nonsense to suggest that *Holy Smoke* conveys "a compelling symmetry between her two main protagonists," as the production notes elsewhere assert. We are never allowed to forget for one instant that Ruth is essentially beautiful, brave and strong. And that Walters is self-deluded, vain and opportunist. The one-sidedness of their relations is built into the script, the direction and everything else about the film, even at those brief moments when Waters is supposed to have the moral upper hand. If the filmmakers can't see that elementary fact about their own film, why should we trust their vision about anything else?

And what about this? Jane Campion again: "Ruth has a kind of battle cry to her—and she's after an authentic experience for herself—all of which P.J. finds irresistible. She also throws back at P.J. a reflection of his chauvinism and sexual vanity.... *This is why she dresses him up in the red dress, so that when he looks at himself he is seeing a woman his own age*, someone sexually undesirable. She wants to appall him with his own double standards" (our emphasis).

What a clever dramatic device, having a middle-aged man put on a dress so he can be made to see what a woman his age looks like! Is that the effect? Not in the slightest. Waters doesn't resemble a woman his own age, he resembles a middle-aged man, unused to wearing women's clothing and therefore rather grotesque, in a dress. But this is typical of the adroitness with which the filmmakers operate.

The Campions' social outlook is so powerful and all-pervasive that it bends everything with which it comes into contact, like gravity bending light. Dramatic considerations, considerations of psychological plausibility don't stand a chance against their self-pitying, self-involved feminism. As we suggested years ago about *The Piano*: "The film is not essentially an effort to grasp the truth about the world, *but to shape the world according to a particular sensibility.*"



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