

Smoke signals essay



The movie *Smoke Signals* is produced by Carl Bressler, Lary Estes, Scott Rosenfelt and David Skinner and the lead casting includes Adam Beach, Evan Adams, Irene Bedard, Gary Farmer, Tantoo Cardinal and Cody Lightning. The movie *Smoke Signals* is based on short stories from Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie's collection, "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" and directed by Chris Eyre. The film is distributed by Miramax Films and is approximately 1 hour 29 minutes long.

The film has an exclusively Native American creative team with a Native American director. Released in June 26, 1998, it has won rave reviews, critical acclaim and several international awards. The film revolves around Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams) who are residence of Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation of Idaho. In the reservation, life is leisurely and boys are occupied with sports like basketball or listening to local radio stations airing traffic reports. The two friends grew up together since infancy.

However, in the 4th of July of 1976, when Thomas's parents held a celebration firework party, their house accidentally catches fire and before they perished, they threw their son Thomas outside and Victor's father caught him and later handed him to his grandmother. Thomas grew up like an aboriginal, which reflected in his dress, his braided hairstyle, and his mannerism. Victor on the other hand is raised by his single mother after his alcoholic father deserts them. He grew up with an attitude of cynicism, mistrust, and sullenness.

When Victor learns that his father has died, the two friends travel together by bus to Arizona, to collect the mortal remains and the old pick up of Arnolds. En route to Arizona, Victor and Thomas share memories of Victor's father. When they met their destination, they met Susie Song, who was a good friend of Victor's father before his death and confided in her a great deal. Through Susie's mouth, Victor begins to learn some dark secrets about his father and why his father had become an alcoholic. He also learns how his father has changed for good and had become a person with conscience and feelings for his family.

Victor experiences conflicting emotions towards his father. Finally Victor is able to shed his inhibition and gloomy temperament and realizes his father's agony, drunken bouts, his guilty conscience, and the reason behind him leaving his family. He forgives his father and understands why Thomas has unconditional reverence for Arnold and accepts Thomas's views. The significance of forgiveness in this film is not about forgiving father but about transforming oneself by getting rid of inner turmoil carried over the years.

In this movie, the director being a Native American used the tradition he knows best but the movie is meant to transcend culture. What makes the movie special is that while focusing on Native American ways of life, the theme of the movie has universal appeal. The movie gives us a glimpse of the way of life and culture of the American Indian in our midst. It shows us typical ways that Native Americans have learned to cope with the largely indifferent, if not hostile world around them. The universal appeal of the film lies in finding ones root, which holds true for all human beings.

Moreover, audience could associate with Victor's emotions and his state of anguish over his father desertion and later his death. It strikes a chord among the viewers. The bus journey from Idaho to Phoenix is dotted with incidences like racism and hostilities of the world, outside the Indian community. All throughout the journey, Victor narrates story about his father's alcoholism, his insensitivity and his finally abandoning them. Thomas in his seemingly casual way talks to Victor about his father's story and his greatness in saving Thomas from the fire.

Victor in his state of hostility finds Thomas's words and casualness irritating and remains distant and stern throughout the journey. The identity crisis reaches a crescendo during their drive home from Phoenix in Arnold's pick up truck. Victor and Thomas have heated argument about Victor's repressed anger. The scene is over-invested aesthetically and generically. They are no longer passengers on an antagonistic bus but driving their own car. This sense of control over their mobility and their direction is conveyed through some classic generic aerial shots of the car driving.

While screaming at each other, they have crashed into another car, and this crash becomes a major turning point in their relationship and in the narrative journey as a whole. The journey is forced into a deviation and they meet police chief who starts off extending the racist attitude of the white driver and of small town America. However, there is a sudden twist in this racial attitude and the chief congenially allows them to go free. Although started with a racial undertone, the director later diverted the story to add human touch, in the form of changing attitude of the police chief.

The dialogues in the movie are riveting. Thomas made an obscure remark in the beginning of the movie. He said “ Some children aren’t really children at all. They are just pillars of flame that burn everything they touch. And some children are just pillars of Ash and they fall apart as soon as you touch them”. This remark holds sense later on when the film nears its end. Also there is satirical undertone to many of the dialogues in the film which puts the audiences in splits. During the bus ride to Phoenix, Victor says to Thomas in the bus, “ You gotta look mean or people won’t respect you.

You got to look like you came back from killing a buffalo. ” In reply Thomas says, “ But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fisherman. ” And Victor says, “ What! ” You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish! This ain’t no dances with Salmon you know! ” Another satirical dialogue Thomas says is, “ Sometimes it is a good day to die and sometimes it is a good day to have breakfast. ” Smoke Signals is a kind of road picture whose structure is based on a journey towards a destination and back.

The story allows for freedom and improvisation along the way. Although the movie centers on the bus trip to Arizona, the real movement occurs as the two men discover life’s meaning and possibilities through their growing friendship. Dialogue is the heart of the movie but the dialogues never tries to advocate anything, rather they are subtle (Johnston, 2000, p. 136). The film uses humor and fondness for Indian culture to help viewers understand both today’s Native Americans and themselves.

Through the use of storytelling so typical of Indian culture, Smoke Signals intertwines together fantasy and realism in a series of flashbacks and fast

forwards, often narrated by Thomas. In the process, not only are Thomas and Victor able to accept their past and present but we as viewers are enabled to discover the true essence of the story. Thomas is the film's primary vehicle of the Native American visionary tradition. Thomas embraces the old ways and is a talker, funny and foolish at times. Victor is more modern, weary, skeptical and subdued.

Thomas is a weaver of tales, challenging the border between fact and fiction. His awkward clothes signify his clumsiness and social incompetence. More importantly, his overwrought glasses draw attention to his vision. The clumsy, outdated spectacles help him see, give him perspective and insight. An idealist, he articulates the meaning of their journey in terms of magic, disclosure, and existential healing. Thomas has dreams and visions that we actually see. He still believes in his people's traditions in contrast to Victor's bitter pragmatism (Laderman, 2002, p. 32). When Thomas returns from the journey at the end, his mother asks him not only what happened but what will happen. Thomas closes his eyes and goes into a dream trance, gliding. Aerial shots over a river and find Victor on a bridge, wailing in agony for his father. The most touching part of the movie was when Victor showed his willingness to share his father with Thomas by giving half of his father's ashes to Thomas. The film closes with Thomas's voice over asking a series of contradictory questions about forgiving our fathers.

In the movie, returning home occurs at many levels, right from Victor's journey to his father, their return back to the reservation, and a more general return to their vanished "ancestral home", the traditions of their people. The film is potent with entrancing themes of strength of family ties

and deeply spiritual nature of fascinating people. Direction is insightful and intelligent and the undertone of humor throughout the film makes it a viewer's treat. The story has universal appeal in the sense that viewers tend to associate with Victor and his sense of grief over his father's desertion.

Absence and loss of a father can be felt by all, irrespective of color or creed. Also, the director brilliantly moves from past to present and back to past again in a flawless way, so much so that one does not feel the change of scenes and the people moves around in similar kind of dresses, the only difference is their age. The use of subtle humor through intelligent dialogue makes the movie intensely absorbing and entertaining and at the same time, there is stirring of human emotions with fine acting by the lead casts. It is a classic film which leaves one mesmerized and leaves an indelible impact on viewers psyche.