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Windtalkers

Abstract

This is a review of *Windtalkers* (2002).

In many ways, *Windtalkers* is a typical John Woo action film, complete with all the expected pyro-technic mayhem. The action sequences (which clearly dominate the film) often strain even the most generous suspension of disbelief as (early in the movie) the movie's heroes run through torrents of bullets and bombs unscathed while single-handedly blasting away scores of the enemy. Consistent with the action genre, Japanese soldiers almost always perish with a single shot throughout the movie, while (toward the end of the movie) the American stars of the film drag their bullet-ridden bodies perilously onward and die only after a moving monologue. This film is more Rambo than Saving Private Ryan.

Nicolas Cage plays Joe Enders, a tragic hero haunted both by the faces of those killed under his command and those yet to die under his command. The plot of the movie revolves around Joe's orders to accompany a young Navaho, Ben Yahzee (Adam Beach). Ben is a "code talker," a radio man who relays messages from his reconnaissance team to headquarters via a top secret code based on his traditional Navaho language. The unwritten code exists only in the minds of the Navaho code talkers. Unknown to Ben, Joe's orders are "to protect the code at all costs"-which means that Joe may eventually have to kill Ben rather than allow him to be captured alive. Joe's internal struggles over fidelity to duty and fidelity to human decency are eventually joined by Ben's resentment after Joe kills another Navaho code talker, Charlie Whitehorse (Roger Willie). At the key moment of

decision, when Ben and Joe are cut off from their comrades and surrounded by enemy troops, the actions of both are heroic and predictable.

Although *Windtalkers* has garnered respectable box office revenue in this year's crowded summer movie market, the film is unnoteworthy in many respects and could easily be dismissed as just another summertime indulgence in movie mayhem except for its prominent anti-Catholic theme. If the film has a theme beyond a superficial treatment of the tragedies of war, that theme is a polemic against Catholicism. In a key scene, during a rare interruption of the on-screen carnage, the American unit to which Joe and Ben are attached meanders through a small village on the Japanese home island of Saipan. Joe reverently strolls past a golden Buddha and into a villager's home where he finds a mother and her young son in a Madonna-like pose. After helping to soothe the wounded child's pain, Joe sits down and sketches a detailed drawing of a church in the flour scattered on the table. As Joe finishes his picture, Ben enters the room and asks Joe about his drawing.

Joe explains that he was raised Catholic and confirmed at age 8, but that he is now greatly removed from that life (no longer "a soldier of Christ," Joe says). Given Ben's repeated practice of traditional Navaho religious ceremonies in previous scenes, the viewer is surprised to learn that Ben also has a Catholic background, provided by Catholic schools on his reservation. Ben then relates a

"confirmation" story of his own by sharing an experience from his Catholic past. When Ben was eight years old, not coincidentally the age of Joe's confirmation, he spent two days chained to a radiator in the church basement after a priest heard him speak in his traditional Navaho tongue. For Joe, Catholicism is a relic of an outgrown past; for Ben, Catholicism represents cultural oppression and personal abuse. These images of Catholicism as outgrown and abusive are reinforced by Joe's swift wiping away of the church he had drawn on the table.

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church, like all religious institutions, has moments of shame and abuse in its history-and the radiator story could possibly have some parallels in actual history, but to isolate such atypical stories of abuse and to ignore the countless other stories of love and compassion is untrue and unfair. Such misrepresentation amounts to a subtle, but powerful, anti-Catholic polemic. This polemic is particularly striking in this film where Buddhist images and Navaho religious ceremonies are consistently treated with respect. It makes one wonder if we entering an era in American film making when minority religious traditions are treated with fairness and sensitivity, while the majority Christian traditions in America are subject to misrepresentation and unfair characterizations.

Windtalkers is not a great movie, but it is worthy of a careful viewing. The scene I have just discussed has teaching value for classes on religion and film.