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Australia

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Australia

Abstract

This is a review of *Australia* (2008).

Baz Luhrman's *Australia* is romantic. Viewers would acknowledge not the mere romance between Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman (mere in the grandest, star-crossed sense possible), but would observe the romantic in the grand sum of all the passion, adventure, and emotion imbued within the film. The romantic vision of Mr. Luhrman also deserves commendation for his humble nod to the grand days of old Hollywood and such classics as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*.

Set in northern Australia in a pre-World War II era, the aristocratic Lady Sarah Ashley travels to her late husband's cattle ranch, Faraway Downs. In an effort to protect the property from a greedy cattle baron, Lady Ashley reluctantly enjoins her fate, and the fate of the dreamy downs, with that of a rebellious and rugged stock-man. Together they must traverse the landscape of northern Australia with 2,000 cattle, suffer trials and betrayal, stand against the sentinels of society and prejudice, survive the Japanese bombing of Darwin, and fall in love...

Australia is replete with religious relevance. Integral to the religious nature of the film is the fascinating and fertile frontier setting of the Australian outback. The frontier sees a lack of boundaries, whether socially, emotionally, or religiously created, and thus provides a free environment for new experiences. The frontier also frequently functions as a meeting place for the sacred and profane, as well as birthing the western: itself a vehicle for all sorts of religious relevance.

Thus as a western, *Australia* naturally lends itself to traditional western themes, notably the theme of liminality. Coined by anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality is a term used to describe an in-between threshold of existence that can foster a *communitas*, or community of individuals united by their threshold existence and void of hierarchy. Essentially, Lady Ashley, Drover, and Nullah are all liminal characters caught betwixt worlds and societal existence. Born of an aboriginal mother and a Caucasian father, Nullah is a child amid two identities and nationalities. He is dissonantly removed from society and surrendered to the area Catholic Church in an effort to raise him void of his aboriginal ancestry; it is a destructive attempt at reincorporating Nullah into traditional society. Following the attack upon Darwin, Nullah is rescued from the clutches of both the Japanese invaders and the Church by Drover. Nullah finds sanctuary in the care of Lady Ashley and Drover, who permit him to embrace either his white or aboriginal ancestry; perhaps this is because Drover and Lady Ashley understand what it is to be liminal.

Many liminal rituals see a final stage of reincorporation into society and identity; a stage where an individual sheds his or her liminal state to become reunited with society. It is curious that Lady Ashley does not reincorporate into her former culture of high society in England; rather she remains in Australia, on the frontier, with a liminal child and her vagabond lover.

Implied by the very setting of *Australia* is the religious theme of damnation. One cannot ignore the implications of the British policy of banishing criminals to the barren land of Australia. Therefore, does Australia, especially with its ample supply of red sunsets and red dirt, lend itself naturally as a hell? (The Proposition is such a film that explores this query)

The Aborigines represent the obviously religious of *Australia*. Lührman gives much attention and screen time to the plight and idiosyncrasies of the aboriginal culture. It is significant that such an ancient and special religious tradition has found an audience in the American populace.

Another facet of *Australia* was its commentary upon the significance of story and myth. A recurring theme is the importance of story and how one does not have an identity unless one possesses a story. Lührman's film provokes one to think of the fortitude of myth as a conduit for ethical lessons.

Australia is a revelation of romance, spectacle, and the glamour of a lost world. The film is also replete with religion. Lührman's epic grants the Aboriginal religion ample screen time; the director also stresses the importance of story/myth to culture, self, and identity. *Australia* is further a film about the frontier and thus visualizes an environment where the sacred and profane may meet, especially among characters in threshold existence.