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Stellar

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Stellar* (2022), directed by Darlene Naponse.

Keywords

Indigenous film, residential schools, apocalyptic

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Author Notes

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***Stellar* (2022), dir. Darlene Naponse**

Clip: <https://youtu.be/aZc2aT5 EPg>

On the one hand, Darlene Naponse's new film *Stellar* is a love story. Two unnamed people, played by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers (Blackfoot/Sámi) and Braeden Clarke (Cree), meet in a bar and over the course of an evening fall for each other. On the other hand, *Stellar* is about the end of the world – and maybe a new beginning.

If that sounds a bit surreal, you're getting the gist. The movie begins simply enough, but with hints that this may be a different kind of story than some of us are used to. After a beautiful opening shot of a deer framed by the northern lights, we watch a woman walk down the street in a small town. She stops to look at a kitten in a window. A dog comes by and the woman says (in subtitled Anishinaabemowin), "That's a hunting dog." She enters a small drinking establishment and sits at the bar, not far from the man who is the only other customer. She orders a Scotch with ice.

Things quickly become less linear.

Several scenes are filmed from the rear of the bar. At the back of the shot is the entrance on the left, and on the right a large window facing the street, showing us what is happening outside. And sometimes what is happening is very odd. At first, we see signs of a rain storm. But as the storm intensifies the buildings outside disappear and we seem to be in the clouds, lightning all around. Then there are raging, all-consuming forest fires. At one point fish swim by, as if the bar is under water. At times the building shakes with the violence of what is taking place.

The bar window in this respect functions much like a movie screen. As such it suggests the meaning and impact of film itself, particularly Indigenous film. How might Indigenous-made movies change the world? Whose world would they change?¹

The Indigenous couple, and a few others, react very calmly to the apocalyptic goings-on. Early on a Black man ambles into the bar, and casually remarks: “Hasn’t the world been ending since it started?” Then he adds: “Regeneration.” The Indigenous man replies: “Cyclic.”² But white characters respond with terror. The bartender becomes overwhelmed with panic and anxiety, and eventually has to leave. Another white man bursts into the bar:

White man: “What’s happening?!?”

Indigenous man: “Change.”

White man: “Fucking Indians!!”

¹ The window-as-movie in *Stellar* reminded me of a similar device in *Arrival* (2016). In that earlier film, the window/screen worked as a metaphor for the story’s reflections (sorry!) on communication and connection.

² This element of the film reminded me of Anishinaabe artist Lisa Jackson’s interactive post-apocalyptic VR project, *Biidaaban: First Light* (2018). It is set in a destroyed Toronto of the future, which nature has reclaimed. Wildlife has returned to the space. Trees grow through sidewalks and buildings. People canoe through flooded subway tunnels. Everything is peaceful and thriving.

Then the white man runs back out of the bar.

The point is fairly clear: the ending of this particular world is a problem for some, not so much for others. Who benefits from preserving the status quo, and who wouldn't mind seeing it go up in flames? At one point the woman says she quit her job today: "The work benefits nothing, just their privilege."

Much of the film is about the importance, and the difficulty, of making human connections – particularly in an Indigenous context. Colonialism tore children from families, families from communities, and communities from traditions, language, and land. The man mentions that he is packed and ready to go home, but he never does. The woman has boxes of her mother's and grandmother's things, but never opens them. In a post-screening Q&A, Naponse remarked that Indigenous people are re-learning how to touch and connect after so much trauma, so many years of being separated and isolated from one another.

In her previous film, *Falls Around Her* (2018) – featuring the amazing Tantoo Cardinal in her first starring role (finally!) as Mary Birchbark – Naponse included several Indigenous elements without explanation. We see the frame of a sweat lodge in the background of one scene. In another Mary removes litter she finds in the woods, then lays down tobacco. She sets up a simple alarm made of small metal cones at her cabin, set to chime if an intruder comes up the stairs. These cones are the same ones used in dresses for the jingle dance ceremony. Recognizing these moments for their connection to Anishinaabe traditions certainly makes the film more meaningful in certain respects, but *not* recognizing them doesn't hamper an outsider's understanding of the film's plot.

Naponse has turned up this particular dial with *Stellar*. There are several moments in the film when I literally had no idea what was going on, although it was clear these scenes mattered, and were made with care to be understood by insiders. In this way Naponse continues (and intensifies) a trend in Indigenous filmmaking that most obviously began with Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), in which the main intended audience is not simply Indigenous, but members of a particular community. *Atanarjuat* was clearly aimed at Inuit viewers. *Stellar* is for Anishinaabe.

The movie begins with a quote about a meteor, never mentioned again. Naponse explained that this is a specific, crucial reference to her northern Ontario home of Atikameksheng Anishnawbek. A meteor did in fact fall to earth there long ago, depositing minerals that have been mined for decades to the environmental detriment of the region, and the well-being of Naponse's community.³ There are also several moments in which characters speak Anishinaabemowin with no English subtitles. At one point two men burst into the bar and start fighting, one of them growling like a dog (or a wolf? or ???). Then, suddenly, they are gone.

Some moments I did catch, however. There are references to the violence of residential schools.⁴ Tailfeathers' character wears a red top, possibly a nod to the REDdress project started by Métis artist Jamie Black in response to the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada (and elsewhere). Many shots of industrial pollution are intercut with scenes from the bar. These tie in with a moment when we hear

³ Naponse actually shot *Falls Around Her* at Atikameksheng Anishnawbek, and the issue of mining features very directly in that film.

⁴ Naponse told us that *Stellar* was filmed in the summer of 2021, when hundreds of unmarked graves were being discovered at the sites of several former residential schools across Canada. Her father was a residential school survivor, as were other family members and families of other people who were working on the movie.

– in the background, from the bar’s television – Cree Member of Parliament Romeo Saganash’s 2018 comment that Prime Minister Trudeau “doesn’t give a fuck about [Indigenous people’s] rights.” He’s referring to the government’s insistence on building the TransMountain pipeline across Indigenous lands whether the people want it or not, and the environmental harms that will result.

But pipelines and hydro towers and mines don’t get the last word. At one point the woman says to her new partner, “Be present. We are the land. We are the sacred space, even in the city.” Her comment is prophetic, and the film ends in hope and love. There is destruction and then there is rebirth. It’s cyclic, like the man says.