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## Limbo

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## Limbo

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Limbo* (2023), directed by Ivan Sen.

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### Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and from 2012 to 2018 he was the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Together with John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on the Star Wars franchise by scholars of religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



***Limbo* (2023), dir. Ivan Sen**

**Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybj-Prjz9A>**

Several years ago, Ivan Sen coined the term “outback noir” to describe his films. The term had meanings beyond the obvious. These movies are more than neo-noirs set in rural Australia; they are also deeply informed by Sen’s own Indigenous understandings and perspectives. Criminals are not just greedy, or evil, for example. Whether they know it or not, they are part of a larger system of colonial violence. And the police are typically just as bad. As Sen states in the press kit for

*Limbo*:

The source of these ideas [in my films about the justice system] has largely come from my own personal experience, from family members and friends who have been victims of crime. I have witnessed their struggle not only for justice, but also for fairness and recognition by the Australian justice system.

Outback noir is Indigenous noir, it is anti-colonial noir.

One way in which Sen aims to Indigenize noir is to feature in his films what he calls an “Indigenous-eye view,” which takes a long, wide view of situations. This view is represented at

times by drone shots from far above, which frame tiny human actors against vast expanses of land. In many ways our actions and concerns, these shots suggest, don't matter very much. All this will pass. In traditional noir and neo-noir fashion, Sen's films also don't exactly have happy endings. Many villains go unpunished. The (very blemished) heroes do not resolve their existential dilemmas. But a bit of light shines through the cracks: some people are helped, some wrongs are righted. Things are a bit better than they were.

In *Limbo*, Sen dials up the noir, in some ways literally. The movie is beautifully (but grimly) shot entirely in black and white. Despite much of the action taking place during the day, everything is drenched in shadows, chiaroscuro compositions often formed by lighting in the caves that people have dug into this landscape. *Limbo* was filmed in the town of Coober Pedy. Sen chose the location because of its unique hidden world. It's an oppressively harsh, hot place, and to escape this environment people built their homes, churches, and other sites in the earth and rock. The birds-eye perspective is reinforced by a work of Aboriginal art we see at the start of the film, a work that appears at a key moment late in the film. And the ending is even more quietly bleak than usual. Everyone suffers. No justice is found. Still, there is some healing.

As with Sen's previous outback noir entries, *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016), the protagonist in *Limbo* is a classic noir trope: a cop with significant personal problems, a damaged but fundamentally good person. That earlier officer (Jay) was Aboriginal; this one (Travis) is white. Travis is told by a young boy that he looks more like a drug dealer than a policeman, an insightful observation as he shoots up heroin in his hotel room. There's also a scene in which Travis looks into the bathroom mirror, nude, contemplating his tattooed torso. The moment evokes a similar scene from Christopher Nolan's iconic *Memento* (2000), about another broken, tattooed neo-noir murder investigator.

In all three of Sen's austere detective films the instigating event involves violence against a young woman. Travis has been sent to look into a cold case involving the murder of an Aboriginal girl, Charlotte Hayes, twenty years ago. It's her artwork we see at the film's start. Not surprisingly, no one will talk to Travis. The few white people who know anything keep quiet because they are involved. The Aboriginal folks impacted by Charlotte's death have been regularly harmed by colonial authority figures, including the corrupt police who first looked into the crime.

A crucial theme that runs throughout *Limbo* involves the fractured relationships between fathers and sons. This theme is signalled early by a Christian radio program that Travis is listening to when he drives into town, as the preacher tells the biblical tale of Joseph. In the story, Joseph is favoured by his father but the two are separated for more than a dozen years, the result of Joseph's jealous brothers selling him into slavery. Travis is likewise estranged from his son, although we don't learn why. But this situation may be what gradually leads him to help heal the rift in Charlotte's family, the separation between her older brother Charlie and his son Zac. Charlie had been falsely accused of Charlotte's murder in the early days of the investigation, after the police tortured two other men into lying, saying they had witnessed the crime. In his trauma, Charlie left his son in the care of his other sister, Emma. He ekes out his days living in a trailer outside of town, scrabbling to find anything of value in the rocks.

In addition to the story of Joseph there are a few pointed references to Christianity in the film. The radio sermons are full of meaningless platitudes and pious clichés: Have patience. Trust in God. Fear no evil. The killer's sad, dilapidated bedroom features a prominent cross. At one point, Travis enters the local church. No one is there. A recording is playing that explains the theological concept of limbo, a place where people who are not saved but also not damned spend eternity separated from God, going nowhere. This idea is echoed by an Aboriginal character speaking about

the emptiness and injustice of their daily lives: “Nothing ever changes.” In *Limbo*, that is mostly true. But not entirely.

Travis and Charlie and Emma look haunted throughout most of the film. But they slowly, slowly build trust between each other. And Charlie eventually returns to his sister’s home, and to his son. And in very quiet ways they all begin to brighten, just a little.