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The Moogai

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Abstract
This is a film review of The Moogai (2024), directed by John Bell.

Keywords
Stolen Generations, Australian Aboriginal Religion, Indigenous Peoples, Horror

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Dereck Daschke is a professor of Philosophy & Religion at Truman State University and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Particularly interested in the intersection among religion, psychology, and wellness, his academic work over more than two decades has analyzed the transformational breakdowns and creative buildups in the form of apocalypses, mysticism, new religious movements, psychedelics, the Bible, Bob Dylan, and, of course, film. He regularly teaches “Religion and Film” at Truman and has overseen a number of student research theses that have contributed to the conversation about just why it is that movies capture our meaning-making imaginations in the way they do.

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The terrifying specter of a supernatural entity that snatches children, and even kills and eats them, is a stock character of world mythologies and folklore. From the bogeyman that hides under the bed or in a child’s closet in the US to the Slavic Baba Yaga or the malevolent “first Eve,” Lilith, in Judaism, the fear that something evil and nebulous is lurking in the dark, waiting to evade a mother’s protection to end an innocent’s life, surely describes the universal anxiety new parents have over their limited ability to guarantee their child’s safety. But even more horrifying is the historical fact that many European colonial governments for decades robbed Indigenous families of their children by relocating them hundreds of miles away to residential schools, where they could be educated and Christianized out of their “savagery,” all in the name of progress and civilization. In the US and Canada, First Nations children were sent to Indian boarding schools. In one notorious example, the mission of Pennsylvania’s Carlisle Indian Industrial School was articulated as “Kill the Indian; Save the Man.”
The same policy existed with respect to Australian Aboriginal children throughout much of the 20th century, creating the Stolen Generations, the cultural context for John Bell’s supernatural horror film *The Moogai*. Bell, as well as much of his cast, is of Aboriginal descent, and the film specifically attempts to tie together the evil of the two types of child-stealing, albeit with mixed success. (Certainly, much of the historical backstory needs no introduction to modern Australian audiences, but as an American, I had to make some educated guesses about what was going on, which may have limited my appreciation for some of the story’s nuances.) The film’s story is launched when two government agents arrive in Indigenous lands sometime in the mid-20th century for the purpose of taking custody of Aboriginal children, only to have them scatter and disappear into the bush. One of them, a young girl named Agnes, successfully evades capture by hiding in a cave, but when her sister Ruth comes to retrieve her after the agents leave, some unseen force drags Agnes back into the cave, never to be seen again—at least not in her living form.

The film picks up in the modern day, perhaps some 70 years later, where Ruth’s adult daughter Sarah is herself very pregnant with her second child. However, we learn that Ruth was forced to give Sarah up for adoption to a White family, with whom Sarah stridently identifies, rejecting her Aboriginal mother and her culture outright. But when Sarah actually dies, briefly, while giving birth to her infant son Jacob, it opens the door to bad things. Trying to see her new grandson, Ruth is treated as an unwelcome presence, but she’s aware that Sarah is now in danger, telling her, “You died on the operating table. There’s no telling what comes next.” And when Jacob comes home, Ruth attempts to use traditional ritual elements of protection, such as sage, ochre, and a snakeskin band, to safeguard the house, which Sarah hostilely rejects as “superstition.” Yet Sarah begins to be plagued by disturbing dreams and visions, at first with symbols of fertility and birth: bloody unhatched chicks in their eggs, and large eggs surrounding Jacob in his crib that hatch a litter of snakes. But soon both she and her first child, Chloe, encounter beings who are not there.
At night, Sarah sees a girl whom she believes to be Chloe, but whom the audience may recognize as Agnes, who whispers, “He’s coming.” Worse, Chloe is talking with an unseen guest, “the man with the long arms”—which is, of course, the Moogai, the aboriginal version of the bogeyman who snatched Agnes in that cave 70 years ago and is here to collect Jacob and Chloe both.

What follows, unfortunately, leans heavily into the conventions—clichés, even—of modern supernatural horror, reminding this viewer of great films in the genre like Rosemary’s Baby (1968) or The Witch (2015), as well as lesser ones (any number of them where a child plays with an invisible playmate and draws a spooky drawing of something unseen). At the heart of The Moogai is the intergenerational trauma due to the legacy of Australia’s “civilizing” policies toward its Indigenous population, and the strongest scenes in the film involve the standoffs between Sarah and Ruth over how to protect Jacob and Chloe, the tension of which is resolved when the Moogai actually does come for the children. Sarah tearfully tells Ruth, “I judged you. I thought you were lesser than me,” a somewhat on-the-nose sentiment that nonetheless is meant to be a cathartic apology on behalf of Australians more generally. Embracing her heritage, Sarah battles the Moogai using traditional ritual defenses of her Aboriginal ancestors, a climax that does resolve both the external spiritual threat as well as her internal identity conflict. Yet even in so doing, the film sidesteps the full impact that the Moogai-as-metaphor for Australia’s racial history could have provided. Unfortunately, one cannot kill nearly a century of inhumane government policy with a stick.