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Abstract

'Aboriginality and Australian Cinematography: Engaging with History': Review of One Night the Moon, Rachel Perkins, dir., John Romeril sc., MusicArtsDance Films Pty Ltd, film released on 08/11/2001.

Keywords

moon, night, review, engaging, australian, aboriginality, one, history, cinematography

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Veracini, L. 2002, "Aboriginality and Australian cinematography: Engaging with history': Review of One Night the Moon', Cultural Studies Review, vol. 2, pp. 220-222.

‘Aboriginality and Australian Cinematography: Engaging with History’: Review of *One Night the Moon*, Rachel Perkins, dir., John Romeril sc., MusicArtsDance Films Pty Ltd, film released on 08/11/2001.

During the last two years, Australian cinematographers have engaged intensely with Aboriginality. This choice has obviously pleased local and international audiences, and while awards have been collected at an unprecedented rate, important issues of Aboriginal politics (the ‘stolen generations’, customary law, police harassment) have been placed or replaced on public agendas. In this context, *One night the Moon* is a somewhat eccentric example: while the narration is certainly more sophisticated than in comparable cases (*Yolngu Boy*, *Rabbit proof Fence* and Ivan Sen’s *Beneath Clouds*, to name the leading ones), the movie’s main dissimilarity lays in the choice of locating the action in a single area rather than constructing a voyage narrative. Localism, and a specific focus on local relationships between the white and the black communities, emerges as the movie’s most distinctive character. Yet, even if history is never far from sight in these movies, a very reflective kind of historical reflection, a type of historiography more oriented towards understanding than denunciation, is also a distinguishing feature of this work.

One night the Moon is an Australian musical told with eloquent simplicity (though director and co-writer Rachel Perkins prefers referring to music clips – the musical’s contemporary equivalent).¹ The story is set in the 1930s and taps into what is one of white Australia’s most potent myth; that of the lost child, the child missing in the bush. Yet this is not at all a repetitive work, and its particular novelty – the use of song within the narrative – allows the expression of themes that only music permits. The movie is about Australia’s history, about Australia’s understanding of its past, though it makes no direct reference to it. While other aspects have been extensively reviewed in other locations, I prefer calling attention to the more historiographical content of this unusually collaborative work.² While authorship is somehow difficult to identify, the end result is a collective effort in which historical discourse remains diffused throughout the whole movie (scriptwriter John Romeril aptly and explicitly describes himself as “a bit of a historian”).³

When the only daughter of a farming family in outback Australia disappears in an enchanted landscape and her father refuses to let a black tracker lead the search party, the main ingredient of the movie - white Australia’s denial of Aboriginal presence, knowledge and property rights - is explicitly staged. It is worth quoting from Romeril and Perkins’s evocative script: the elements of a complicated pattern of relations are all there, patriarchy, exclusion and rejection of Aboriginal people, and a society organised along unbending hierarchical lines. The scene is staged at the beginning of the rescue operations for the missing girl - the five characters involved include the distressed parents and three police officers, among which there is Albert, an Aboriginal landowner and tracker.⁴

FATHER: “We going to sit around having tea all day or we going to get going?”

The SERGEANT takes in the surrounding countryside. A car is approaching in the distance.

SERGEANT: “Now that Albert's arrived, yes, we can begin”.

[...]

FATHER [to SEARGENT]: “Hang on a minute I don't think we'll be needing his [ALBERT'S] services”.

SERGEANT: “Albert is a police officer and also a highly skilled blacktracker”.

The FATHER gives the MOTHER a look. She drops the kettle and goes inside.

FATHER: “Listen sergeant, my daughter is out there and I'm not having some blackfella leading the search party”.

SERGEANT: "You've been up all night, you're not thinking straight".

FATHER: "It's my daughter and my station and I'll decide who can be on my land".

The following song, "This land is mine/this land is me", is the highlight of the film, and melodically and thematically positions the Father and Albert as counterpoints to each other. While the obvious contraposition between 'belonging' and 'property', between Aboriginal and white Australia's approaches to property emerges in its naked irreducibility, the viewers are confronted with a situation in which race relations are not portrayed in a simplistic fashion. This is, I believe, the most outstanding feature of this movie, because in its historical content *One Night the Moon* goes beyond 'black armband' history in a way that is off-puttingly brilliant, in a way that disrupts codified interpretative and rhetorical patterns. In its straightforwardness, while remaining sympathetic to Aboriginal perspectives, this work calls, somewhat ironically, for a type of 'reconciliation' (the movie makes an explicit reference to "unfinished business") that acknowledges white Australia's loss.⁵

As already said, historical reflection does not limit itself to a call for reconciliation. The search strategy deployed by the volunteer party (deprived of Albert's knowledge) in its failed pursuit of the missing child, for example, resounds closely a well-documented historical episode, when during Tasmania's 'Black Wars' a party of settlers and troops had searched the whole island in pursuit of Aboriginal guerrillas (failing to meet any). This is a highly symbolic choice, while white Australia is 'drawing lines' upon the land (destroying in the process any track the girl may have left, and any hope to rescue her), Aboriginal knowledge is based on a knowledge that is, literally, 'on the dot'. This type of critique is also detectable in the Father's assertion that the land is his "All the way to the old fence line", while Albert refers to his land in the singular form: "Rock, Water, Animal Tree" (and constitutes the main theme of another movie dedicated to Aboriginal questions that was released shortly after *One Night the Moon*: in *Rabbitproof Fence* White Australia is again drawing lines on the land in order to separate whereas Aboriginals use the same line to communicate).

One Night the Moon contributes meaningfully – whether consciously or not remains a contentious point – and gently to current historical debates. As a matter of fact, *One Night the Moon*'s suggestion that Aboriginal people had maintained – long after dispossession – an unbroken relation to their land is consistent with some recent interpretative proposals (see for example Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy*).⁶ As the movie entails, while this relation has survived to a previously unacknowledged degree, this relationship still constitutes the base of an unsundered title. In the climax of their song both Albert and the missing girl's father declare that they won't be dispossessed of their land: "They won't take it away" becomes in such a way the compulsively recurring refrain of the song and, by extension, of the movie. The dispossessed Aboriginal knows the solidity of his claim (Albert's reference to "generations past" and "infinity") whereas, in a dynamic that stresses symmetry as well as coexistence, the settler knows the fragility of his own, a fragility that demands Aboriginal exclusion. Nonetheless, *One Night the Moon* allows, as we have said, for reconciliation, for a reconciliation that is based on recognition and, more practically, on acknowledgement of indigenous rights.

After all, if two diametrically contrasting regimes of "property" can coexist within a single stanza of an ear-catching song, they may have coexisted on the land itself. This coexistence may have survived in a much better fashion than it has generally been acknowledged (this, however, does not mean absence of conflict, as the movie intensely points out). These overlapping regimes of property may also have existed for much longer than it has been recognised (one should not forget that the movie is set in the 1930s, well after Aboriginal dispossession). The recuperation of this legacy of coexistence – of a shared stake

on the same land – may be the way through the difficulties that the Native Title legislation is currently encountering. *One Night the Moon* is a contribution in this direction.

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¹ See K. Millard, “*One Night the Moon*: Interview with Rachel Perkins”, *Senses of Cinema*, 17, 2001.

² See, for examples, B. Green, “*One Night the Moon*: Soundtrack”, <http://www.urbancinefile.com.au>; and J. Rigg, “Film Review: *One Night the Moon*”, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/>

³ For the process of collective negotiation between script, musical, and directing inputs, see K. Millard, “*One Night the Moon*: Interview with John Romeril”, *Senses of Cinema*, 17, 2001.

⁴ http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/17/moon_extract.html/

⁵ See K. Millard, “*One Night the Moon*: Interview with John Romeril”, cit.

⁶ Heather Gooddall, *Invasion to Embassy*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996.