

A study of cinema and post-colonial identity in australia



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Before we look at Post-colonialism, one must have a closer look at the word Colonialism, the word by its dictionary definition the “ Alleged policy of exploitation of backward or weak peoples. ” For most however when we broach the delicate topic of Colonialism, we envisage a more romanticised view such as: Adventure, Pioneering, Exoticism, Romance, Glamour, High society and Glorification.

In more present times and with the enlightenment of documented literature, Photography, and more recently cinematography, we have come to acknowledge the darker elements such as; Class segregation, Barbarisms, Racism, Domination, Slavery, Greed and Genocide. There are so many different facets within that one word, and as we delve further into the characteristics of the definition of Colonialism, we realise that whether used derogatively, or not, the foundation upon which the whole of humanity have built their empires.

We have to be aware of colonisation and its particular form of social structure and take into account that we have used it as means of survival a reassurance that our kind will continue to grow and flourish. This behavioural pattern is evident throughout the history of humankind from the nomadic natives pillaging and stealing women from the next village through to the great conquerors of more present times expanding their borders and territories. To find an actual definition for Post-colonialism is difficult.

Dr. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta’s world literature website describes it as follows: “ A cultural, intellectual, political, and literary movement of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries characterized by the representation and analysis of the

historical experiences and subjectivities of the victims, individuals and nations, of colonial power. Post-colonialism is marked by its resistance to colonialism and by the attempt to understand the historical and other conditions of its emergence as well as its lasting consequences”.

Despite the fundamental consensus of the general themes of Post-colonial literature there is an on-going debate regarding the meaning of Post-colonialism. The word Post-colonialism implies many issues on a small or larger scale for numerous different people in society; it is for a large majority a way of life and state being, which has conditioned their existence within their own particular ethnic groups. Be it the subjugated or the vanquishers the influence of this will have touched many of us directly or indirectly. As well as in many ways helped shape our lives into the identities we as humankind have today.

Edward W. Said, with the publication of his book “ Orientalism” in 1978, set the stage with his theory for the critical and theoretic body that would consequently take shape under the a new classification for Post-colonial studies. Said, examined the means by which “ the West,” predominantly meaning, Britain, France, and North America, generated knowledge about and exerted power over “ the East. ” Said, offers his theory on how Western people have come to think negatively about Eastern people and that this social discourse has come to establish itself into the Western attitude. Said calls this “ Orientalism”.

To continue down this critical debate, there have been a large number of scholars and critics with interests in Said’s theories. They elaborated on and

expanded the peripheries of his project. This includes third World writers such as Homi Bhabha. He describes in his theory that, based on Said's work, " hybridisation is the birth of new cultural forms from multiculturalism, and does not see colonialism as something locked in the past. " There is such an array of diverse perceptions in regards to Post-colonial theories and studies that there is still a lot of generalisation made over this.

Thus, what brings these fields of study together in the first place is in the object of its study, by taking into account, both the Colonial and Post-colonial periods, with the emphasis being on the various ways this power was wielded, and how the identities were constructed within that. Therefore, one can conclude Post-colonialism as the aftermath of colonialism; it is therefore the shaping of history, which changes the society of the newly merged culture in such a way that it can no longer exist as it was.

The moulded and merged modern culture of that society is the residue left over from that original pre-colonial culture by the influence of the new social culture, which in most cases is the dominant one. Under some very unusual circumstances, this has been a gradual but relatively easy transition.

However in most situations this has resulted in violent blood baths and shocking social issues that have grown into almost impossible circumstances to resolve. " The Colonies! " the phrase alone rings of exotica and is at the same time pragmatic. However, what of the cultures, and their identities, which are lost through the results of Colonisation?

It is my belief and opinion that through colonisation the true history of these cultures and their identity have been tarnished and falsified. This came in

the way in which those cultures were portrayed through documentation. Namely, those who were responsible for documenting the culture of the peoples of whose lands were occupied, be it for anthropic and biological or other such scientific studies in earlier history were occupiers themselves and therefore biased. In addition, the interpretation of artists, authors and journalists with their elaborate and colourful illustrations, as it was also biased.

Later with the development of new technologies such as Photographic images and Cinematography, propaganda it was possible to produce propaganda that was more sensational. It was in the height of the Western Imperialist expansion, when the use of moving pictures was developed. Through its invention, the new magical phenomenon of cinema had a powerful and aggressive angle in those countries. With its use, it could wield the greatest political impact back in the homelands in that it would attract the masses and reach a huge audience by its mere existence and wonder.

It is nearly impossible to discuss the development of the film medium without also taking into account its ties to the age of the empire. A number of film historians and theorists such as, Prem Chowdry (2000), Sampat Patel (2001), Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (2003) have devoted their time to researching the diverse key issues of how film and photography has functioned in the past, as a building stone for colonial propaganda. They also report on how it continues today to be both a symptom and representative of the West's unrelenting economic and cultural control.

In addition, theoretical studies have been undertaken to investigate as to how cinema has emerged as a “ site of resistance”, throughout the history of cinemas. Cinema opened the door for many aspiring directors from various backgrounds and cultures having used film to convey some of the powerful anti-imperialist concepts to build an image of the instabilities of colonial discourse. The historical and dynamic relationship between cinema and imperialism plays a huge role in both Colonialism and Post-colonialism as part of contextual research and theory.

Our hand in this reaches the four corners of the globe. One could almost say that we (being the imperialists), having conquered to such a great extent, are a great and mighty race; however we over look the destruction and deprivation we have left in our wake. Thus, taking in the identities of these cultures and the wide effects that imperialism has infringed upon so many different nations. This becomes apparently evident if we take a closer look at the incredible impact we have had on the Australian Aborigines as a people and their nation.

I have under taken a closer study of three modern films, which all brush on similar subject matter but are as diverse from each other as can be. All three films are set in Australia. My choice for this was that am more familiar with the subject of colonisation in that country having lived there for over 30 years. All three films deal with Aboriginal issues mainly racism, the children of the half-caste, the reservations and the impact this has had on their identity as a culture and sense of belonging.

However, each one looks at the issues from a completely different perspective. The film “Australia”, set around the time of the Second World War, directed by Baz Lurman (2008), which stars Nicole Kidman as “Lady Sarah Ashley” and Hugh Jackman as “Drover”, aimed for a broad international and commercial audience was supposed to be a hit in the box office. The film is bigger than life, cliché and romanticised, and it has all the expected classical plots we have come to rely on for entertainment in a feature film such as this.

However, sensitive to the problematic issues of the country the film does try to, in its meagre form, to encapsulate the myth and lore of the Aboriginal culture. Not only does this offer the film a sense of magical wonder but adds an air of mystery that can only improve the viewing. Furthermore, they also lightly brush on other typically known issues of this time such as the role that women played during those colonial times and how that conditioning is still prevalent today in the country’s Post-colonial society.

Lastly and more importantly not over looked is the nature and mentality of western man in how brutally ignorant and prejudiced they were not only towards the opposite sex of their own culture but that of the Aboriginal communities. The unfortunate side of this film is that it has completely over exaggerated the impact that the colonisation has had on this great land and its indigenous culture. What the film fails to do is deliver the message home. They merely tentatively brooch these highly controversial subjects as to avoid any later repercussions in that it may cause damage to promotions and sales.

The cinematography is spectacular and shows Australia off in all its vibrant glory. If it were to be a travel brochure, it will have indeed achieved its purpose in that. [1] In complete contrast to the film “ Australia”, “ The Rabbit Proof fence” a film produced by Phillip Noyce (2002), is based on a true story relating to the author’s mother. It shows how she along with her sister and cousin, all half-caste Aboriginal girls, ran away from the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth, to return to their Aboriginal families.

The film follows the girls as they walk for nine weeks along 1, 500 miles of the Australian rabbit-proof fence to return to their community at Jigalong, whilst being pursued by a white authority figure and an Aboriginal tracker. The Government of Western Australia opened the settlement in 1918 under the patronage of the Chief Protector of Aborigines Mr. A. O. Neville. Neville came to this position completely inexperienced in Aboriginal affairs or any dealings with Aboriginal people.

The settlement housing predominantly “ half caste Aboriginal children”, Neville then as the legal guardian of every Aboriginal in Western Australia, had the power “ to remove any half caste child from their families from anywhere within the state”. It was originally intended to be a small, self-supporting farming settlement for Aborigines, along with schooling and health facilities and employment opportunities. However, the objective to turn the settlement into a farming community failed because the land was unsuitable for cultivation.

This facility among the many other similar institutions throughout Australia remained functioning for as long as 1974, when it was finally handed over to

the Aboriginal Land Trust, and is now known as Budjarra. In my opinion the film “ The Rabbit Proof Fence” took on a more realistic and historical approach to the accuracy of the Aboriginal plight and the Aboriginal Protection Acts, as well as the issues, which were gently raised in the film “ Australia”. Both films most certainly become light family entertainment after having viewed the film “ Samson and Delilah” produced by Warwick Thornton (2009).

This film encroaches on a completely new and highly controversial approach to the situation. Warwick Thornton having grown up on the streets of Alice Springs and coming from an Aboriginal background himself, wanted to portray a more realistic account of the way of life and problems within his culture surrounding this Post-colonial society in the present day rather than as a piece of their history. Warwick Thornton was asked in an interview with Matt Bochenski (2009) about the film; “ An obvious forebear would be “ Rabbit Proof Fence” for instance; it touches on some of the outrages and atrocities.

In your opinion, are they legitimate? Or, is it frustrating that these are still white mediated films? That they are speaking for the culture? ” Thornton answered; “ It is a really interesting one because all those white filmmakers who’ve made indigenous films, you know, from “ Baz Lurman” all the way to anybody, are always past tense. They are always designed around history where it is something that they can sink their teeth into because there are books on it and concepts and it is the past.

None of them has ever tried to tackle the future or the present day - they are all petrified of it because it is a very dangerous place to go as a non-indigenous filmmaker. It is something that I have noticed. So those films, they do have that rather... They can research, in a sense. " The film " Samson and Delilah" is a love story between two Aboriginal teenagers, who even in their own reservation among their own culture have no one, so they find each other out of desperation and need for a reality for the acknowledgement of some type of existence.

Samson a young man who is being raised by his brothers surrounded by squalor and dirt and nothing solid to eat he begins his day by turning on his only prized possession a aging old ghetto blaster and snorting petrol. Delilah on the other hand cares for her aging grandmother whom paints for a western gallery owner from the city to help raise a meagre amount of cash to live on. These paintings are then sold for an exorbitant amount of cash to fine art collectors around the world.

The film shows in a very raw and in your face manner how culture exists today on these reservations and how detached these teenagers are, not only still from our society but also from each other. The film also encapsulates how these young people have their own dreams and how they struggle to try to change things within their own society, only to be met with more disappointment and relentless defeat of how the situation appears to be continually hopeless.

The new colonists in the past in Australia would often take on Aboriginals as slaves to help with the vast acres of land that needed to be worked and they

would also make use the Aboriginal women for both their household services as well as to satisfy their sexual needs, thus producing a long string of half caste children. Hence, the campaign to separate them from their culture and families was undertaken by some overly concerned Government bodies.

This was to ensure that the barbaric native stock was bred out. They would be purified, by marrying them to members of their own western cultures.

Today still in the Australian modern society, many of these Aboriginal people continue to suffer from this mindless and meaningless destruction of their identities, family lives and culture. Today we know them as part of the stolen generations. For over hundreds of years, the aboriginal people resisted the invasion of their lands to white settlers. They are still fighting at present to gain some foothold and return the dignity back into the proud culture they once were. My conclusion is, after watching these films; one can still witness parallels and compare them with the theories and writings of Post-colonialism.

When one looks at cinema today with all our understanding and so called empathy, new age ways and postmodern outlooks, we see that this method of propaganda and even documentation has changed little. The product that comes out of cinema being deployed as an artistic perception, colours and clouds the truth in various forms rather than revealing the bitter truths of the exploitations, degradations and countless other atrocities we as colonists are responsible for. In fact, we as humankind from the western society are blinkered to the real issues at hand and refuse, to perceive our arrogance in believing we have superiority over these cultures.

We weakly cower behind feeble excuses and bureaucratic debates. Very few have the strength and clarity it takes to dare to undertake and deliver the true image to the people. At this point one can only acknowledge and respect those few, like Warwick Thornton who have attempted to endeavour this bravely paying little heed for the repercussions and impact it may have on their own lives, because of the height of controversy and sensitivity of the subject matter.

So how does this all tie back in with the study and theories of Cinema and Post-colonial Identity? Humanity after all, has spent its entire existence on this planet, conquering and colonising. One can only concur at this point after reading only some of these case studies about this immensely complex subject matter that there are cases where there may have been a few cultures that have benefited through the merging of these societies through colonisation.

The unfortunate irony is that in the majority of these nations such as Australia, that were colonised there are and were no benefits to be seen for the indigenous cultures. It has instead created a huge untameable monster, which has become an almost impossible situation to rectify. Thus we see here, on the most part humankind prefer to establish their own perspective and concept on the images rather than see the bare truth, as the truth would be considered unacceptable.