Indigenous Society On The Screen In Rabbit Proof Fence

The purpose of this academic poster is to gain an insight into the way Australian First Nations people have been portrayed on the silver screen and whether or not it has been demonstrated with cultural sensitivity and accuracy or if it has it been tainted with overtones of racial discrimination and stereotyping.

The poster will also explore the significance of the interest in Australian First Nations Films. It will enable the reader to examine three separate articles that explore both the portrayal of First Nations people in film as well as facilitating a deeper understanding of the significance of the interest people have in First Nation Films.

The articles also explore the evolution of politics in regarding the onscreen and off-screen treatment of Aboriginal people, and the way in that the media influences a particular image of the men in remote communities.

The poster looks at several films, as well as a television series, however, it looks closely at three films in particular, Rabbit Proof fence, Samson and Delilah and Australia. It also delves into the role and evolving character of the Aboriginal Tracker, who has been seen in a variety of films.

Konishi, S. (2011). The four fathers of Australia: Baz Luhrmann's depiction of Aboriginal history and paternity in the Northern Territory. History Australia, 8(1), 23-4.

The article 'The four fathers of Australia: Baz Luhrmann's depiction of Aboriginal history and paternity in the Northern Territory' explores the accuracy and significance of the representation of The First Nations people. Australia explores the culture, the laws and songs and stories of the dreamtime and the relationship the First Nations people have with the land, the spirits and each other. It also represents the relationship that they have with colonialists and their way of life.

The film Australia is set during the bombing of Darwin. It is about a woman who takes over a cattle station and creates a family with a drover and Nullah, an Aboriginal boy, who is taken from her and sent to the mission, They retrieve the Nullah who eventually leaves with his grandfather to go back into the bush and back to his country.

'Australia' invited a lot of criticism about the way the past was presented and represented, some critics and academics alike considering it unreliable in in its presentation of the facts.

Australia was a politically fuelled movie that embraced then prime minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology speech, it acknowledged the impact of the stolen generation and altered the perception of the "good white father" (Kinoshi, 2011).

According to sociologist Jackie Hogan the film is "an excuse in national wish fulfilment', offering 'symbolic absolution for the violence of colonialism' and anachronistically celebrating 'multiculturalism and reconciliation" (Konishi, 2011).

Australia explored the highly significant relationship between The First Nations people, their country, their laws and customs and their relationship with each other.

The decision to make the grandfather the guardian for the grandson was morally correct and a political statement as at the same time the media was intent on making all Aboriginal men appear to be deviants that were able to hide behind the traditions and customs decided by the First Nations people.

Australia honoured the traditions, the customs and the spiritual relationship that The First Nations People had with the land. They exposed viewers to the importance of this when the drover explained to Lady Sarah that if she did not allow Nullah to go with his grandfather on walkabout she would be doing a great disservice to the boy, he would have “no country, no story, no dreaming and he would be all alone (Konishi, 2011)”.

Collins, F. (2010). After the apology: Reframing violence and suffering in First Australians, Australia, and Samson and Delilah. Continuum, 24(1), 65-77.

The article ‘After the apology: Reframing violence and suffering in First Australians, Australia. And Samson and Delilah’ discusses the normalisation of the brutality, savagery and adversity facing The First Nations people in those living in isolated communities. The article discusses the cinematic performances of the television series, ‘First Australians’, and the movies ‘Australia and Samson and Delilah’.

The article suggests that at times the nonindigenous Australians can be shaken into reaction by films and media depicting themes that are too shocking to become the expected norm. It is widely known and accepted that there is violence, drug use and sexual abuse in isolated communities. The point of films such as Samson and Delilah were to highlight the violence and the drug abuse that is destroying isolated communities.

The film Samson and Delilah tells the story of two teenagers living in an isolation, a young man addicted to petrol sniffing, and the girl he is determined to gain the affections of steal a car and travel to Alice Springs.

The series First Nations expose the viewer the reality of the trauma experienced by The First Nations people during colonisation, it is done through an incessant progression of actual pictures, statements and documents, the accounts are real and horrific (Collins, 2010).

The significance of watching this is that it evokes an emotional response, that these atrocities are seen and heard and no longer are they hidden from the history books of Australia.

The film Australia demonstrates a bridging of the worlds of The First Nations people and that of the settlers, when Nullah walks off with his grandfather he tells Lady Sarah that he will sing songs that will her to him and she replies that she will hear his songs and through them she will find him. This may not be reflective of the time but it was incredibly important at the time of the making of the film as it was around this time that Kevin Rudd was making his Sorry speech and that he too was hoping bridge the gap between two very different worlds.

Langton, M. (2006). Out from the shadows. Meanjin, 65(1), 55.

The third article, ‘Out from The Shadows’ looked at the way the depiction of the tracker has evolved from a sinister and untrustworthy man, to a man with magical mystical powers.

Tracker’s according to Langton (2006) were men who were forced to serve alongside of the state police, they were not well endeared by their kin due to their compliance with the police and those who ran the missions.

“Their special skills, such as their capacity to survive in the face of dangerous enemies, so useful to an occupying force were harnessed to create a sinister version of the bush guide - the native mounted police, who terrorised the Aboriginal populations of Queensland during the last nineteenth century (Langton, 2006)”.

The trackers character has developed from demonstrating a lack of malleability due to essentialism and determination to one of a more mystical and magical character. Trackers now were seen to be men who were in tune with nature, these trackers now possessed special supernatural powers that had given them a sixth sense (Langton, 2006).

The film Bony was a great example of the newly formed characteristics of the tracker, he was a very bright and skilled police detective who was exceptionally observant.

Most recent films have demonstrated the tracker be so much more than the compliant employee of the state police but one who has considerably more depth to his character.

According to Langton (2006), [the tracker] “is a credible character with intent, intelligence, emotion, humour and the strength and capacity to subvert the imperial mission, even if only in isolated, local and futile circumstances”.

This is evident in the film Rabbit Proof Fence, where the tracker continuously loses the tracks of the three young girls, thereby allowing two of them to finally go home.

The film Rabbit Proof Fence exposes the viewer to the hardships faced by those of the stolen generation, it tells the story of three young Aboriginal girls who follow the rabbit proof fence home after being taken away from their mother and placed in a mission home.

The significance of the development of the tracker is to dispel the myths surrounding the role, explaining the capabilities of the tracker and removing the magical mysteries surrounding their skills and abilities as well as clarifying the relationship that trackers had with their kin, with the state and with the colonialists. It also tried to remove to the racial tensions that are still present between Australian First Nations people and the colonialists.

References:

1. Collins, F. (2010). After the apology: Reframing violence and suffering in First Australians, Australia, and Samson and Delilah. Continuum, 24(1), 65-77.
2. Langton, M. (2006). Out from the shadows. Meanjin, 65(1), 55.
3. Konishi, S. (2011). The four fathers of Australia: Baz Luhrmann’s depiction of Aboriginal history and paternity in the Northern Territory. History Australia, 8(1), 23-4.