

Jindabyne screening notes

Background and production

Jindabyne is the third feature from Australian director Ray Lawrence. His previous film *Lantana* used a similar narrative device of using a murder investigation to explore the relationship issues of a number of couples. *Lantana* is a thorny, creeping shrub, which grows in the outback and is a metaphor for the intertwining relationships and deceitful lives of his characters.

The script for Jindabyne was adapted from American author Raymond Carver's short story *So Much Water So Close to Home*. Carver's story was originally set in America. Lawrence adapted it to Australia and added the race element to the plot. The story also featured in Robert Altman's highly acclaimed film *Short Cuts*, which takes the form of a series of interconnecting stories based on Carver's work. Altman even managed to give it a humorous ending by linking it to a story about a special effects makeup artist who practices on his wife.

Lawrence shot every scene in one take using available light. This helps the actors feel part of the scenery, with no artificial lights to get in the way.

Narrative

The story is told through mood and emotion, rather than actions, revelations or plot points. At first it seems like this is going to be a whodunit or police procedural, but the murder soon takes a back seat to the complex moral and emotional reactions of the inhabitants of Jindabyne. Lawrence taunts us with glimpses of the murderer throughout the film, but we never get any closer to catching him or understanding his motives. He becomes a silent witness to the drama that is unfolding in his wake.

The film is much more concerned with examining the consequences of the men's decision to delay reporting their discovery of the body. In doing so they stir up a whole hornets nest (literal as well as metaphorical) of relationship issues, forcing them to deal with issues that have previously been brushed under the carpet.

The film can also be thought of as an allegory for the colonising forces that invaded Australia and ousted the Aboriginals from their homeland. The rape and murder of a black woman by white is followed by ignorance and indifference by the white men who discover her. They are unable to admit the abhorrence of their actions, reflecting contemporary Australia's inability to reconcile its past with its future.

Imagery

The town under the lake

This represents the internalised secrets and emotions that lie beneath the surface of the characters. It is also invisible, like the Aboriginals are to much of the white population. The flooding of the old town could be thought to represent the destruction of the community by modern society.

Power lines

The town was flooded for a hydro-electricity project, so the director is making a link between electricity and death / destruction. When we first see the killer, he

makes a comment about the electricity coming down from the power station. The power lines also represent a conflict between man and nature and the technology led culture of the white man vs the spiritual culture of the Aboriginals.

Water

Water plays an important part in the film. We see Tom nearly drowning in the lake and Claire teaching him to swim. Some of this footage is shot from below, as if the water is pulling them down.

The characters are weighed down by the past, out of their depth with the moral and relationship issues their actions have raised. There are also several shots of fish flapping about on dry land. Who are the fish out of water? The Aboriginals or the fishermen? There is an uneasiness in this clash of cultures. The lead characters are Irish and American, adding another layer to the cultural mix.

Nature and the supernatural

Nature could almost be thought of as the main character in the film, exerting an invisible hold over the residents of Jinderbyne. The eerie atmosphere created by the cinematography, music and natural sounds gives a feeling of the presence of ancient spirits, which is further embellished by the talk of ghosts and zombies and the bleached out look of the film (a fade to white is often used as an indication of the moment of death). There is an air of lurking danger throughout. In the wilderness mobile phones don't work. The pylons whistle in the wind, like spirits of the dead are running through them. Many shots are taken at a distance, making the characters seem insignificant and at the mercy of their environment.

Death is seen and talked about a lot, be it relatives of the characters or dogs hanging in trees. The children kill a (significantly) black guinea pig with a fishing knife (again, significant). They appear to be dabbling in the black arts, re-enacting ancient sacrificial rituals. Caylin-Calandria, who lost her mother when she was very young, seems obsessed with death, watching Tom almost drown and, when Claire is sick, asking if she is going to die (quite the opposite, she has morning sickness.)

Ending

This is another example of Lawrence is playing with genre conventions. We are used to a resolution, for the killer to be caught and justice being dealt. This is not what the film is about. Lawrence teases us with a final scene of the killer being stung by a wasp (or hornet?!!!) That's as much punishment as he's going to get - he'll no doubt kill again. For this man, killing an Aboriginal woman was no more difficult than swatting a fly. The Aboriginals believe their dead become one with nature, so the wasp could be Susan getting her own back. It links in with the scene where they find the body and we see a wasp nest in a tree.

Further Viewing

Lantana. Raw Lawrence. 2001. Cert 15.

Short Cuts. Robert Altman. 1993. Cert 18.

Picnic at Hanging Rock. Peter Weir. 1975. Cert PG.

In the early 1900's, four young girls and a teacher disappear on a school outing to a local beauty spot. We never find out what happens to them, but there is an almost supernatural unease through out the film that makes it compelling viewing.