

Australia **(Baz Luhrmann, 2008)**

The most important thing of all is how to tell a story, we are told in the voice-over that begins Baz Luhrmann's epic film *Australia*. Luhrmann follows his own advice and tells a good story here—a story in the sense of “entertaining lesson” or maybe “personal narrative with larger implications”. If Angus Fletcher is correct, and stories are technologies used to make sense of human relationships, Luhrmann's fits the bill. The film might seem to lean too heavily on clichés about the land down under—it's hot, huge, empty, filled with kangaroos and unusual, exotic personalities – but I will charitably trust a native Australian to tell me what he wants me to know about his own country.

The movie actually contains three stories—in addition to the story of what Australia is like, there is a rather conventional love story between the two marquee names, and a story about identity and belonging, which is the real heart of the film.

This film is *LONG*. 165 minutes, in fact. But it doesn't feel tedious; the pace keeps up, and enough interesting things happen regularly that my attention did not wane detrimentally as I watched it. Some people might find the film boring, especially if they want their plot points and characters to be unpredictable; most of the characters in the movie were stereotypes, from the “rough-around-the-edges loner with a heart of gold” to the “man of the church who is morally repugnant”. TV Tropes has 47 entries for this movie. But I don't think all of this detracts from the fun of watching *Australia*. This is a popcorn-and-air-conditioning movie, released in the height of the Southern Hemisphere's summer—“sit back, relax, and enjoy the show” type stuff.

Yet there is a serious point Luhrmann is trying to make—one of identity. The most important character in the film is Nullah, who, in the first scenes of the film, describes his own predicament this way: “I not black fella. I not white fella either. Them white fellas call me mixed-blood, half-caste, creamy. I belong to no one.”

Belonging and identity . . . those are heavy problems for a young boy to have to face. But for most of the film's first half, Nullah's story is sidelined by that of The Drover and Lady Ashley. Their story is well-told but it is also very conventional. You know what? Whatever. These white people fall in love, defeat the forces of darkness, and save the ranch . . . they sure have a lot of agency, don't they? And Nullah is left

right back where he started: “Everybody happy, except for me. ‘Cause I not white fella. I not black fella either. Me half-caste. Creamy. Me belong no one.” The film makes a hard emotional reset at this point; a resolution that doesn’t actually resolve anything important.

Who decides identity? In this film, the important questions of identity are tied to the concept of belonging: “I am” is also “I am part of” or “I am with”. Some aspects of identity cannot be chosen alone; no matter how much Nullah wants to identify with either of the two racial groups he descends from, he cannot do so on his own—he must be accepted by others first. The crucial moment of the film occurs when Nullah’s grandfather attempts to take him on a walkabout, and Lady Ashley tries to stop him. For the first time, Nullah is actually wanted by the two races. Suddenly he gets the ability to decide his own identity. He chooses to go on a walkabout, thereby signaling his allegiance to his Aboriginal lineage, but he is also accepted by Lady Ashley, who is concerned for his welfare as if he were her own child. From belonging to no one, Nullah now belongs to two peoples.

There are lots of questions about identity floating around the current cultural moment. *Australia* provides a compelling argument for identity not being something claimed or taken, but rather something given and received, in a transactional way—identity, not as a right to be defended, or even a prize to be earned, but as a gift to be graciously accepted.

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