

## Grand Allusions: “Australia” as Meta-Movie

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Reviewers and moviegoers alike have been amusing themselves in discovering the many allusions that Baz Luhrmann’s new movie “Australia” makes to other movies and to existing music. Those who have not yet seen the film might want to skip this article, which could spoil the fun they will have in seeing, hearing, and identifying the allusions for themselves. But those who know the movie already might find it useful to have some of the more obvious allusions laid out systematically.

“Australia” refers most openly to “The Wizard of Oz” and its song “Over the Rainbow.” Australians like to refer to their country as Oz, but more significantly it is through the story of “The Wizard of Oz” and Dorothy’s song that Lady Sarah Ashley—who first considers herself bereft of maternal instincts—begins to show affection for Nullah, the half-white, half-aboriginal boy at the center of the movie. Later in the film Nullah gets to see “The Wizard of Oz” itself when it is projected in an open-air theater in Darwin—a scene reminiscent of the “film-within-a-film” scenes in “Sullivan’s Travels”(1942), which similarly involves a mixed-race audience, and “Cinema Paradiso” (1988), another coming-of-age picture.

The Australian composer David Hirschfelder wove “Over the Rainbow” into his score. But he also incorporated classical music, including Bach’s “Sheep may safely graze” and the climactic “Nimrod” variation from Edward Elgar’s “Enigma Variations.” (This last quotation will remind those who know Elgar’s work that in another variation he painted a musical portrait of his friend Lady Mary Lygon, shortly before she sailed to Australia in 1899.) Likewise Luhrmann’s cinematic allusions go far beyond Oz. Here are a few of them, arranged thematically.

*A young wife goes to a desolate homestead to join her husband, whom she discovers to have been recently killed.*

“Australia” shares this opening with “Once upon a Time in The West” (1968) where the young wife who finds herself a widow is Claudia Cardinale. Sergio Leone’s movie, like “Australia,” assigns the evil doing to two men: an unscrupulous businessman who doesn’t want to get his hands dirty, and a malevolent thug (Henry Fonda) who actually carries out the crimes.

*A romantic melodrama begins in peacetime and continues amid the smouldering ruins of war.*

Here of course the most obvious precursor is “Gone with the Wind” (1939), which moreover shares with “Australia” a scene in which men bid against one another in an auction for the privilege of dancing with the leading lady. “From Here to Eternity” shares with “Australia” a setting at the brink of the Second World War, with Japanese planes attacking at the end.

*An aristocratic European lady goes to a wild and beautiful country, meets all sorts of challenges, and finds love in the arms of a tough, adventurous white man.*

In this department Nicole Kidman has a worthy predecessor in Meryl Streep in “Out of Africa” (1985); Karen Blixen’s move from Denmark to Kenya to join her husband anticipates Sarah Ashley’s move from England to Australia. And Hugh Jackman’s combination of dreamy handsomeness, European ancestry, and a frontiersman’s toughness and integrity match Robert Redford’s.

*The hero makes a journey through wild country with a woman who at the beginning is comically inept but soon rises to the challenge; they fall in love*

“The African Queen” (1951) and “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom” (1984) offer two elaborations of this theme, both of which resonate in “Australia.” Near the end of “The African Queen,” Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn find themselves involved in a world war (in their case the First World War), confronting a German gunboat. In “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” Harrison Ford and Kate Capshaw are accompanied on their adventure by a Chinese boy who is almost as cute and loveable as Nullah. At the end of the movie they rescue a group of children.

*The cattle drive as epic adventure*

“Red River” (1948) is the archetypal cattle drive movie, while “City Slickers” (1991) offers a comic variation on the theme, with amateur cowboys generating some of the comedy exploited at the beginning of the cattle drive in “Australia.” There is a little bit of John Wayne and Jack Palance in Jackman’s Drover.

No cinematic cattle drive, including those “Red River” and “City Slickers,” is complete without a stampede, but such stampedes are rarely started on purpose, as is the one in “Australia.” Scar, the wicked lion in “The Lion King” (1994) orders his hyena henchmen to start a herd of wildebeasts charging into a canyon. Mufasa, king of the lions, is trampled to death after saving his son Simba.

*Protest against Australia's treatment of mixed-race children*

In alluding to the “Lost Generations”—mixed-race children taken from their aboriginal mothers to be raised in orphanages--“Australia” brings to a wide audience a theme explored much more effectively and realistically in a film that relatively few have seen: “Rabbit-Proof Fence” (2002).

*Throughout the movie, a single man, living alone in the wilderness, in touch with nature and personifying goodness and wisdom, oversees everything.*

The old aboriginal whom Nullah calls Grandfather has a counterpart in Rafiki, the wise monkey in “The Lion King.” “Sheep may safely graze where a good shepherd watches”: perhaps Hirschfelder’s quotation of Bach’s setting of these words alludes to Grandfather’s constant, beneficent presence.

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