

Limits in complexity; the contextual boundaries of Peter Carstairs' *September*

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Peter Carstairs' 2007 film *September* is a quiet, intimate contemplation of friendship, coming of age, and 'the subtle side of racism' in 1968 Australia (Carstairs in Robertson 2007, p. 16). In the Wheatbelt of Western Australia, Ed Anderson (Xavier Samuel) the son of a wool and wheat farmer, and Paddy Parker (Clearance John Ryan) the son of an Aboriginal labourer on the Andersons' property, navigate the strains placed on their relationship by complex long-standing prejudices and the changing nature of the Australian political world.

Carstairs explores the lives of Paddy and Ed through a series of moments, relying primarily on diegetic sound, soft, building music, and a heavily character-driven plot. Ed and Paddy's friendship develops in the in-between times; after Ed has finished school, after Paddy is relieved from duty, and the walks to and from these places in long, naturalistic scenes. This creates the sense that we are observing only a small section of a series of long, messy lives, rather than consuming an orchestrated narrative. Carstairs' impersonal approach largely lends itself to the complex and interconnected nature of the themes the film deals with, but can a film ever be completely impersonal, when we are all inherently bound by our own limits in experience?

One of the key themes explored relates to the boys' fascination with boxing, which quickly becomes more than a simple fascination for Paddy in particular. Through Paddy, Carstairs explores the importance of the sport in 'overcoming circumstance' (Carstairs in Robertson 2007, p. 17). Boxing as an industry, and boxers of both Aboriginal and African-American heritage have historically given Aboriginal people both 'identifiable black icon(s) of great celebrity to cheer' and 'something to aspire to' (Maynard 2005, p. 4), and in cases such as Paddy's, an escape from 'the way things are' as Rick, Ed's father puts it. However, as tension builds in Ed and Paddy's relationship due to unspoken issues and the growing influence of external politics in their in-between bubble, their practice-fights lose their cushion of playful goodwill. At the crux of the film, Paddy voices his view of boxing as a way out of poverty



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and reliance on Ed's family, and Ed shuts down the idea of Paddy's departure, straying from their usual supportive dynamic. A taste of 'adulthood' and the social tensions that come hand-in-hand with it threaten to fracture their bond, like it did with the friendship between their fathers, who also grew up together. However, the film closes with reconciliation, a silent apology, and the beginnings of open-ended growth for both boys as they go their respective ways; Paddy to join Jimmy Sharman's boxing troop, and Ed back to the farm to work out his future. The loose threads left drifting gently at the end of this film encourage the audience to string together the long-term impacts of the conflict for themselves. As a result, Carstairs effectively inspires a deeper interpretation of contextual tensions.

Another theme key to the plot of *September*, and one of the contributing factors to the boys' falling out, is the changing of federal Australian law in 1968 to ensure that Aboriginal workers were paid for the work that they had previously done in return for favours and the right to live on their home country. While Carstairs hints at a close bond between Rick (Kieran Darcy-Smith) and Michael (Kelton Pell), Paddy's father, in the past, their relationship in adulthood is strained by the social and political climate of the time. Whispers of this former closeness surface here and there in the beginning of the film however, this comes to an abrupt end when Michael finds out that Rick is unwilling to pay him the wages he is now legally entitled to. Moreover, that Rick had been hiding this legal right from him for some time. This is no simple matter, and rather than approaching this from any particular political angle, Carstairs perceives his story as one about 'men and their inability to communicate on [an emotional] level' (Carstairs in Robertson 2007, p. 16). Both Rick and his wife express a sense of guilt and turmoil about their reluctance to properly pay the Parkers. However, their precarious financial situation and long-ingrained subtle prejudices; 'the way things are', provide Rick with a sense of concrete justification, which also extends to his warning Ed against Paddy's friendship. These characters, according to Carstairs, are 'just two families that feel the ripple effect of decisions being made a long way from them', and this 'non-judgemental' approach to character development has created a wider lens through which complexity in storytelling has been achieved (Carstairs in Robertson 2007, p. 17).

However, while we get a good snapshot of some of these ripple effects, and a general sense of the poverty and hardships of Aboriginal people in this period of time, we do not get a comprehensive sense of the deep 'affiliations to land and kin' that prevented Aboriginal people from moving away to other opportunities 'despite the economic changes' of the period (Goodall 1995, p. 91). We also only receive a surface-level representation the struggle of juggling conflicting senses of identity in a society that holds Aboriginal people under equally conflicting scrutiny. While this wider lens has facilitated a degree of complexity, perhaps its effect is limited by Carstairs own gaps in knowledge and experience as a white writer and director?

What initially drew Carstairs' interest toward this particular time and this particular story was his own lack of education in Indigenous history. 'The thing that amazed me most,' he says, 'was that I knew nothing about [the stolen wages] until I was in my late twenties' (Carstairs in Robertson 2007, p. 16). In the 1990s the stories of The Stolen Generations shifted from

pain contained within Indigenous communities to a ‘historical narrative so widely disseminated that this history is now central to Australian historical consciousness’ (Atwood 2001, p. 183), and with it, public understanding of broader Aboriginal political history also shifted. While Carstairs felt it was important to address the fact that ‘no one knew about’ this history due to the ‘suppression of information’, this suppression of information inherently limits Carstairs himself from expressing complexity to the extent he desires (Carstairs in Robertson 2007, p. 16).

Turner observes, in his critique of Aboriginal representation in film, that:

If we are invested in films which challenge rather than simply reproduce existing racist ideologies, we must realise how important it is for black Australians to have access to the media of representations, and to the means of distributing their own representations. (1988, p. 137)

So perhaps Carstairs is inherently doomed to unknowingly reproduce the ‘subtle side of racism’ by simplifying what he has not been able to personally experience? Or perhaps he could have combatted this by seeking Aboriginal co-writers to provide an authenticity that he was unable to provide alone?

The fact that *September* was the winner of the inaugural Tropfest Feature Program demonstrates the growing thirst for Aboriginal stories in the early 2000s, and Carstairs’ interest in exploring these stories demonstrates a growing eagerness among white creatives to facilitate education on Aboriginal history. Furthermore, the naturalistic, subtle tone that Carstairs has adopted poses a promising method of potentially combatting white defensiveness encouraged by the Howard government in power during the conception of the film. However, we each, as creatives and consumers, carry a lens forged from our own individual experiences, and it is impossible to ignore the limits we face when attempting to capture complex identities that we have not, ourselves, lived.

While the ‘Great Australian Silence’ of Bill Stanner’s generation has long-since dissipated, we now face the question of how to best talk about what has happened, and what needs to happen in the future. Thus, despite its downfalls, and, in part due to its downfalls, Peter Carstairs’ *September* provides an important contribution to this conversation.

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