

# ***Jasper Jones* as a Window into Australia's Aboriginal history**

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*Jasper Jones* (2017) is an Australian film adaptation of Craig Silvey's 2009 novel of the same name. The film is directed by Arrernte woman Rachel Perkins, who founded Blackfella Films in 1992 and has since been heading the initiative to include more Indigenous representation on screen. With an Aboriginal character, Jasper Jones, at the forefront of the story, the film presents a window into the lives of Aboriginal people living in 1960's white Australia.

The film is set in the small town of Corrigan in Western Australia during 1969. The story follows 13-year-old Charlie Bucktin, who learns about the murder of Laura Wishart one night when Jasper Jones visits his window and takes him to the crime scene. Like most small towns during the 60s, it's a tight-knit group of white elitists who remain set in their prejudiced ways, and with Jasper being the only Aboriginal resident in town he is most often the subject of their racism and bigotry.

This story is told from a white perspective but having been brought to screen by an Indigenous director, the audience are given strong historical connotations between white Australians and Aborigines to look at. Jasper is introduced in the first few minutes of the film when he taps on Charlie's window, asking the boy to follow him. Charlie's first observation about Jasper, whom he has never actually met until this moment, is 'people in town say he's dangerous, but I've always wondered what he's really like'. This kind of off-hand comment enforces the engrained belief that Aboriginal people are believed to be 'treacherous beings devoid of mercy or pity' due to the colonial representations of them (Morris 1992, p. 85). Charlie's comment of 'wondering what he's really like' also ties in with the fact that the audience doesn't get a great insight into Jasper. The fact that the film's title is 'Jasper Jones', but is told from a white viewpoint, just highlights that it's 'a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape' (Stanner 1969, p. 24-25),



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reminiscent of the commonly learned white version of Australia's history, and echoing the notion of disremembering Aborigines. van Nerveen also supports this observation, adding that using 'place as a character' isn't presented strongly in the film in order to show the lack of respect given to Jasper, and contextually, to Aboriginality as a whole (2017, p. 8). She notes that the minimal bushland scenes 'are charged with an exuberance that diminishes when we leave the forest', as they 'cannot be elevated within the context of settler Australia's disconnection with country' (van Nerveen 2017, p. 8). These themes carry on throughout the first scene, when the hanging body of Laura Wishart is revealed, and Charlie begins to crawl away from Jasper. This instant blame that Charlie lays on Jasper continues to reflect the deep-rooted racism in place against Aboriginal people in the town, because 'in Corrigan, a girl goes missing, and the Indigenous Other is blamed – because, just as the crime is unfamiliar, so is Jasper Jones' (White 2018, p. 120).

The film also offers insight into the relationship between Aborigines and the police force. While some advancements were made between Indigenous Australians and the police force in the 70s, such as the development of the Aboriginal Legal Service in Sydney in 1971, police harassment towards Aboriginal people was still a highly prevalent issue in Australian society during the 60s. Charlie's immediate instinct to tell the police about Laura Wishart's death is countered by Jasper's 'no we can't. They'll say it was me'. Charlie tells him that 'they're the police, they won't', and it isn't until Jasper challenges him, refuting with 'who did you blame first? I can't tell them the truth. This is Corrigan. Nobody will believe me', that Charlie's eyes begin to open to the prejudices rife in his own town. There are many scenes throughout the film where Jasper is being roughly handled by the police. 40 minutes in, Jasper is shown with a bloody nose and a limp in his step after having been thrown in jail under mere suspicion. It goes back to the colonial representation of Aborigines as barbaric savages giving white Australians an excuse to retaliate against them with force, they see 'the exercise of violence and intimidation as the only effective means to control them' (Morris 1992, p. 78).

The film, ultimately, was not made with the intention of showing how 'racism is bad and bigots are villains' (van Nerveen 2017, p.10), but to present an image of how such prejudices thrive in everyday society. About 13 minutes into the film, Charlie tells his Vietnamese-Australian friend, Jeffrey Lu, not to take his new ball onto the cricket pitch with him, as he knows it'll subject him to bullying. This scene of coercing someone to change themselves in order to be accepted also has direct connotations towards forcing Aborigines to assimilate into white culture. Aborigines have always wanted 'a decent union of their lives with (white Australians) but on terms that let them preserve their own identity' (Stanner 1969, p. 27-28), whereas white Australians have always maintained their sense of superiority over Aborigines. It usually isn't until they conduct a heroic act, that Aborigines are given any sense of respect from the whites. This notion is clearly seen in the film when Jeffrey ends up winning them the cricket game, and finally gaining his teammates' respect. This is an echo of the expectation for Aborigines to prove themselves to colonists. We see this slightly executed in the film when Jack Lionel, who turns out to be Jasper's grandfather, tells Jasper that he 'disowned (his) son when he married your mum', simply because she was Aboriginal, and it

wasn't until she started helping Jack that he began to like and gain respect for her. When prejudices like these are engrained in the everyday so thoroughly, it means that hope for change in the future becomes harder and harder. This message has been clearly communicated by the film's end. After the murder has been solved, and Charlie's been more exposed to the racism in his own home, he is still able to go back to a civilised, privileged life with no repercussions. Whereas Jasper, regardless of the overarching plot of the film, is still left as the outsider, and is still forced to leave Corrigan by the end of it, continuing to face 'ongoing dispossession and racial oppression' (van Neerven 2017, p. 11).

The film offers an insight into the everyday racism aimed towards Aboriginal people in Australia during the 1960s, with themes that are still relevant in today's society. With an Arrernte woman at the head of the project, who is continuing to strive to represent Indigenous voices in film and television, a future with a change in the representation seen on Australian screens is already in sight.

## References

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