

R representing Class Dynamics in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*

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Abstract

This article explores the class dynamics in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* and discusses how both the narrative and the characters in the film are surrounded by constant change, movement and transitivity. It analyzes the multi-layered narrative of the film in order to determine the class dynamics between the characters and to discover their shifting positions. Throughout the analyses, the article refers to how social inequalities, colonial exploitation and cultural imperialism are represented in the narrative of *Australia* and questions how Baz Luhrmann's cinematic approach and the features of Hollywood historical epic as a genre are related to the representation of those issues in the film.

Keywords

Class, colonialism, historical epic.

Australia (Baz Luhrmann 2008) conveys the story of an English aristocrat, Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman), who inherits a cattle station in Australia in 1939 and struggles against the monopoly of the cattle baron, King Carney (Bryan Brown), by resisting his domination and pressure. Parallel to this struggle, the story revolves around Lady Sarah Ashley's protection of an Aboriginal child, Nullah (Brandon Walters), from the colonialist powers and her love affair with a lower class man named Drover (Hugh Jackman), who helps her to manage the station. Just like Karl Marx's words in the beginning of *Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," (Marx and Engels 1969 [1848], 99) the narrative of *Australia* is based on class struggles. As a historical epic that takes place at the beginning of World War II, the film brings an aristocrat lady, an Aboriginal child and a drover together to stand against a tyrant baron.

This article explores the class dynamics in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* and discusses how both the narrative and the characters in the film are surrounded by constant change, movement and transitivity. By using the methodology of political economy, film and genre theory, it analyzes the multi-layered narrative of the film in order to determine the class dynamics between the characters and to discover their shifting positions. Throughout the analyses, it refers to how social inequality, capitalist establishment, colonial exploitation and cultural imperialism are represented in the narrative of *Australia*. Regarding Baz Luhrmann's cinematic approach and the features of the Hollywood historical epic as a genre, *Australia*'s production process and its relation with Hollywood historical epic, which provides the film with the necessary atmosphere to spread its initial message, are discussed in the article. It is claimed that *Australia*, which seems to be resisting and criticizing capitalist powers in the first place, actually ends up affirming the establishments of capitalist system by disguising, transforming and reshaping the earlier forms of capitalism.

Australia is set in a "territory" called Darwin, Australia which, as described in the prologue of the film is "a land of crocodiles, cattle barons and warrior chiefs" and also "a place where the Aboriginal children of mixed-race were taken by force from their families and trained for the service in white society". With the help of the iconography of western genre, Darwin is presented as a pre-industrialist land. During the sequence where Sarah arrives in the harbor of Darwin and Drover first appears, the costumes of the characters, the horses that are seen all around, the desert-like environment and the lousy bar with the swing door refer to the Western genre, which usually takes place in the Wild West of the 19th century. When Magarri (David Ngoombujarra) warns Drover about the plane's arrival, the plane interrupts the frame as something bizarre and out of this world because although the prologue prepares the spectators for a romantic, adventurous and pre-industrial fairytale, the spectators acknowledge that at the time of the narrative, the rest of the world is living in a post-industrialist era in which big metropolises and huge capitalist industries have already been established and where free competition reigns. Therefore, with the interruption of the plane, the hybrid and layered character of the film is revealed right from the beginning.

In the opening scene of *Australia*, when Nullah's voiceover notifies the spectator that the story of the film is not beginning in Australia, but a place called England, the hybrid character and the layered narration of the film become much more stratified. The use of telegram, airplanes, automobiles, firearms, along with the horses and spears at the beginning of the narrative all support the layered character of the film and invite change and movement. In this way, the narrative proves that it contains the aristocratic background of England, the colonialist era and the post-industrial society altogether and declares that this combination carries the spectator to a constant struggle, transformation and change.

Sarah Ashley is one of the most significant characters to support this changing, multi-layered and transformative narrative of the film. She comes to Australia to catch her husband, Lord Ashley, in action with "native" women and convince him to sell their property in Australia and go back to England. However, when she arrives in Darwin she finds out that her husband is murdered and their cattle station is without a boss. Just after she buries her husband and gets ready to go back to her country she realizes that the manager of the cattle station, Neil Fletcher (David Wenham), has been making the station look infertile and stealing money from her in order to lower the value of the property and provide King Carney with the opportunity to buy the station at high profit. Following this, Sarah Ashley fires Neil Fletcher and everybody who works in the station starts to call her "Mrs. Boss".

Although Sarah Ashley is an English aristocrat she embraces bourgeois values when she comes to Australia. As the accountant Kipling Flynn (Jack Thompson) suggests she plans to continue what her husband has planned to do in the cattle station; drive the cattle to Darwin, sell them to the army, break Carney's monopoly, use the profits to put the cattle station Faraway Downs back on its feet, go back to London and continue her life. However, in order to execute this plan, Sarah Ashley has to learn how to be a "true" capitalist first.

After Ashley fires Neil Fletcher, Drover comes into the scene because the cattle station needs a proper manager. Sarah begs Drover to take charge and help her. But Drover is a character who just works for himself. He refuses to be an employer since his life motto is "no man hires me, no man fires me." He accepts Sarah's proposal only because she offers to give him her Capricornia, which is a very special, pure English-blooded horse in exchange of his labor. It can be said that Drover tries to withdraw himself from the capitalist society by being devoted to rural life, horses and soil. He does not belong to the post-industrial society and consequently he prefers to work with barter instead of money. Drover owns nothing for himself. The spectator never sees a house or any personal ties that bind him to a property except horses and soil. Drover just drives other people's properties and he has nothing for his own in the end. He sells his labor to the landowners in Darwin to make a living, but he always refuses to admit that he is a laborer, which indicates that in this sense, he has no class consciousness at all.

The main characters live their lives as if they are under the command of a feudal landlord. King Carney has no competitor in meat business and owns most of the property in Darwin. For the properties that he does not own he sets up traps and conquers them. When the

camera focuses on an auction for charity at the missionary ball where the man who gives the highest price deserves the first dance with Sarah Ashley, King Carney gives the highest price and the host says "Let the King take his prize." Beginning with this sequence, King Carney is represented in the film as a character who can invade anything. This is why when he dances with Sarah he also starts to bargain with her in order to buy the cattle station. As a true capitalist Sarah says that she has workers in the station for whom she is responsible. However, as a feudal landlord prototype, Carney says that he can also buy the workers with the station and put this provision into the contract. This shows that 'King' Carney, who can buy everything with his money and power appears to be the only authority in Darwin until Sarah Ashley's arrival.

"Exploitation" as a Marxist term opens a major discussion about the representation of class dynamics, power figures and division of labor in *Australia*. The term first comes into question when Drover explains Sarah his determination to breed a bush brumby (a feral horse) with an English filly (a pureblooded, female horse). Sarah misunderstands Drover's words and thinks that he is coming on to her. She says that Drover "wants to have it on her, just like he exploits the poor, native girls." After this conversation, the word 'exploitation' is used once again when Sarah explains to Drover why she dismisses Neil Fletcher. Within a moment of anger, Drover suggests that Sarah might have fired Fletcher because he tried to exploit her. When Sarah says that Fletcher has been stealing from the station in favor of King Carney, exploiting as a term finds the right meaning for itself in a Marxist analysis. Although Drover makes a joke about "exploiting", Fletcher has been really exploiting the profit of the station as well as the labor of the workers in it.

"Exploitation" turns into the main subject of the discussion when Drover explains to Sarah how white stockmen take Aboriginal women on the drove by shaving their heads and making them look like boys in order to use them as 'company' at nights. While Drover is explaining the situation he refers to Sarah's word choice in the earlier scenes and uses the term 'exploitation' on purpose to clarify the act of white men. In this way, although Drover uses the term as an expression of sexual exploitation it is clear that white men also use the labor of Aboriginal women on the drove for nothing and exploit them both sexually and materially.

As a result of these discussions, it can be said that Sarah's position in the dynamics between the exploited characters and the exploiters becomes complicated. At the beginning of the film Sarah, whose profit is exploited by Neil Fletcher and King Carney, is positioned on the side of the exploited characters, but she is not necessarily very different from the white exploiters in the diegetic world because she is the one who brings the free competition of capitalism to Darwin. Her relation with Nullah and her association with "mother" England make her position complicated as well. It can be said that Sarah is the only character who is exposed to most of the changes and transformations throughout the whole film. Therefore, her changing position and role in the course of actions place her in different positions in different levels of the narrative. Sarah is a significant figure through whom the establishment of capitalism in the diegesis can be analyzed.

The sequence where Drover teaches Sarah how to drive the cattle is a good example for starting to explain Sarah's changing position. During the sequence she acts like an amateur land owner who learns how to manage her capital and private property. She shouts at the cattle, rides her horse onto them and tries to rule them. In this way, she learns how to survive in capitalism on her own. Sarah's struggle with the cattle also signifies her survival in the rural establishment of Darwin. She studies the land and tries to be a part of the natural Australia as a cultural subject. Even though the film gives numberless clues to identify Sarah with nature and the soil the dichotomy between nature and culture is complicated in Sarah's case. On the one hand, her infertility prevents her from identifying with nature's fertility although the film leads the spectator to think in that way. On the other hand, her inability to reproduce fits in her English descent figuratively and reveals many aspects of her symbolic position in the history of colonialism.

As an island, United Kingdom cannot expand/reproduce its land organically. There is no way for United Kingdom to create a territorial integrity (i.e. an umbilical bound) with another land. An island can only adopt/colonize other countries in order to spread out its hegemony, which makes it physically infertile and Australia as another island is a perfect candidate for this adoption. Similarly, Sarah's physical inability to reproduce corresponds with this condition and brings her colonialist character into the surface.

There is no simple explanation to describe the history of English colonialism in Australia from which Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* takes its inspiration. It can be said that England started to colonize Australia in the last quarter of 18th century when the country was ruled by King George III. The first fleet under the command of Captain Arthur Philips, who had been employed by the Royal Navy, arrived in Australia in 1786. Australia was an open prison in the first days of colonization. The English prisons were too crowded for the convicts at that time and the government thought that it was a good idea to use the convicts for the preparation of the settlement in the Australian colony (Clarke 2002, 23).

It is not clear how and when Australia became a completely independent country, separate from England. It seems to be a very long process, which lasts until the 1980's but it can be said that the first separation occurred during the World War II when Winston Churchill, who was the leader of the United Kingdom during World War II, "regarded the war in the Pacific as a side issue and took the view that the most important task was to defeat Hitler. [...] Naturally, this view did not recommend itself to the Australian government, and in December 1941 the prime minister made a historic declaration in which he refused to accept that the struggle in the Pacific was a secondary importance or that Australia was dispensable." (Clarke 2002, 136)

Winston Churchill's declaration was made after the Japanese attack to the harbor of Darwin which is represented in the second half of *Australia*. It is significant that the film contains a part of Australian history which is a breakthrough for the rising independent spirit in Australia. However, it should be remembered that the film ends at the point where Darwin is completely ruined by the attack, so it does not indicate how and when the independent

spirit rises and strengthens in Australia. Therefore, the characters in the diegetic world only obey and respect England as a “mother” country.

The issue that grows around the notion of motherhood is important in the narrative of *Australia* because there are only two more characters in the film who are specified as mothers like England. The first character is Nullah’s Aboriginal birth-mother, Daisy (Ursula Yovich), who works and hides with Nullah from legal authorities in Faraway Downs. Although Daisy is an important figure in the narrative she is drowned in the water tank in the cattle station during the first act of the film while she tries to hide from the police officers with Nullah. After Daisy’s death Nullah becomes an orphan and Sarah takes him under her protection.

When Nullah loses her mother Sarah starts to take care of him and happens to be the ‘new’ mother figure in the narrative. After a while their relationship gets closer and Sarah takes Nullah under her wings as if he is her own child. She dresses Nullah like a European boy, she teaches him how to play tennis and they all celebrate Christmas together. Along with Sarah’s attempts to transform Nullah into a European subject ‘with good intentions’ Nullah’s grandfather King George invites him to go to a ritualistic journey called ‘walkabout’ during which male Australian Aborigines trace the paths of their ancestors and live in the wilderness for a period of time. Although Drover constantly warns Sarah about the fact that Nullah is an Aboriginal child and has to go to walkabout with his grandfather Sarah insistently ignores him by saying that Nullah is only a little boy and cannot survive in a long journey like walkabout.

Sarah always speaks for Nullah without asking his own ideas. She always thinks of him as a little boy who cannot have his own wishes and decisions. She also does not allow his grandfather to speak for him and acts like he does not exist at all. She refuses Nullah’s own traditions and cultural background and becomes one of the missionaries herself although she constantly criticizes them. That is why Sarah’s branding of cattle, Drover’s domesticating Capricornia and Nullah’s rejecting his grandfather’s offer to go to walkabout were indicated in parallel editing to emphasize that all of those scenes have a mutual meaning. Sarah tries to domesticate Australian traditions and nature. She attempts to possess them by putting her own brand/flag on. In this way, Sarah develops into a character who comes to Australia as a cultural subject and grows into a strong mother figure that captures and transforms both the nature and the culture of the land inorganically.

On the other hand, Sarah’s attempt to be a family with Nullah and Drover also support her bourgeois position. By keeping Nullah away from his own traditions and culture for the sake of being a “family”, she does not only turn into a cultural imperialist but also becomes committed to bourgeois family values. Sarah considers both Nullah and Drover as her possessions and properties. She also thinks that if she can break Nullah and Drover’s connections with their cultural backgrounds she can possess a part of Australia as well.

It is very strange that *Australia* makes Sarah’s attempts look like a revolutionary act. It can be said that this assumption has to do with the director’s personal history and the film’s genre. Baz Luhrmann is an Australian director who works on co-productions with

Hollywood film industry. In *Altıyazı Monthly Cinema Magazine*, Nadir Öperli says that Baz Luhrmann emphasizes one specific motto throughout his career which is “Just because it is, doesn’t mean it should be.” (Öperli 2009, 50)

As a Luhrmann character, Sarah literally embraces this motto in one of the most important scenes of the film where she urges Drover to come to the missionary ball with her but Drover turns her invitation down by saying that he is as good as black to the people who would be at the ball. He also says “I mix with dingoes, not duchesses” but Sarah replies to him by saying “Just because it is doesn’t mean it should be.” What is understood from this conversation is that Sarah always craves for change and transformation which can come only if people from different classes contact, clash, and get into a struggle with each other just like in a missionary ball where people from Australian high society come together with a person from lower class like Drover.

The same idea repeats itself throughout the whole film. The struggle of Sarah, Drover, Nullah, Magarri and Bandy (Lillian Crombie) all together during their trip from Faraway Downs to Darwin is a proof of how clash of different classes can lead the narrative to movement and change. On the other hand, it cannot be said that the class struggle and the changing social conditions that are indicated in the diegesis of *Australia* lead into the victory of proletariat as predicted by Marx. Instead they are used to form another social system.

Öperli says that at the entrance of the website of Baz Luhrmann’s production company, an assertive logo and slogan which says that “A life lived in fear is a life half lived” greet the visitors. According to Öperli, this logo and slogan reflect the spirit of Baz Luhrmann’s cinema, which focuses on the characters who do not give up on their dreams despite the obstacles and emphasizes the director’s constant interest in searching for new narrative techniques. He points out that Luhrmann always tries different narrative techniques in cinema and re-interpret old genres. (Öperli 2009, 50) The essential features of Baz Luhrmann’s cinematic approach come into surface in *Australia* as well.

Australia is a film which imitates the iconography and narrative techniques of Hollywood historical epics defined by Vivian Sobchack as a mixture of “sartorial extravagance” with “extravagance of action and place.” Sobchack says “there are all those chariot races, all those stampedes and crowd scenes, all those charges and campaigns on land and battles at sea, all those horses and slaves and Christians and wagon trains. There is also the vastness of deserts, plains, and oceans, and the monumentality of Rome, the Pyramids, Khartoum, and Babylon.” (Sobchack 1990, 25) All the scenes in the great mountains and deserts where the crowded cattle and horse herds are seen as well as the excessive sequences that indicate the Japanese attack to the harbor of Darwin prove the extravagance of *Australia* which is produced by 20th Century Fox. Along with this, the film’s use of maps, voiceovers, historical costumes and items as well as Hollywood stars makes *Australia* a Hollywood historical epic.

On the other hand, Vivian Sobchack says “the Hollywood historical epic is not so much the narrative accounting of specific historical events as it is the narrative construction of

general historical eventfulness.” (Sobchack 1990, 28) *Australia* is a film which makes no attempt to be historically accurate either. As a historical epic it is praised “not for its historical accuracy or specificity but rather for its extravagant generality and excess – of sets, costumes, starts and spectacle, of the money and labor that went into the making of such entertainment” (Sobchack 1990, 28).

Sobchack also emphasizes that “in its particular representation of the “production” of History, Hollywood historical epic depended upon a celebration of rationalism, humanism, the unity of historical agents, the progress, continuity, and coherence of centralized “production” process availing itself of labor’s surplus value to produce excessive temporality as a fixed commodity, a stable and coherent narrative: History” (Sobchack 1990, 41). In this context, she explains how the Hollywood historical epics are proudly promoted according to their extravagant use of labor, big budget/capital and box office/surplus value. In reference to Vivian Sobchack’s theories on Hollywood historical epics, it can be said that these films including *Australia* are proud to be a part of the capitalist system because they are benefiting from it although sometimes their narratives and narration spread anti-capitalist messages which means that even the Marxist way of thinking can turn into a commodity in the Hollywood historical epics to get benefit and profit. This is why although Sarah is a character who brings the free competition of capitalist system to Darwin and exploits other characters in many different ways, the narrative shows her every act as if they were revolutionary footsteps. Although Sarah defeats the monopoly of the tyrant baron, King Carney, she creates new ways of exploitation, alienation and suppression at the same time. Simultaneously, the means of production of Hollywood historical epic allows, supports and leads her to her goals.

The change and movement that come to Darwin with Sarah’s arrival enables the disappearance of King Carney’s feudal monopoly and ends the war between Sarah and King Carney in *Australia*. However, this disappearance also causes new wars and new struggles. For that reason, it is really significant that *Australia* ends with a sub-story that focuses on the Japanese attack to Darwin during the World War II and people’s escape from Darwin after the attack. In this way, the film reflects the idea that the war is never ending. Although the film concludes, the spectator knows that World War II continued to give a new shape to the material conditions of people and the world has kept changing as long as the class conflict has existed and that capitalism has survived.

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Öz

Baz Luhrmann yönetmenliğindeki Avustralya’da Sınıf Dinamiklerinin Temsil Edilmesi

Bu makalede Baz Luhrmann’ın *Avustralya* filmindeki sınıf dinamikleri araştırılmakta ve filmin anlatısı ve karakterlerini çevreleyen daimi değişim, hareket ve geçişkenlik tartışılmaktadır. Makalede, karakterler arasındaki sınıf dinamiklerini belirlemek ve karakterlerin değişen sınıfsal pozisyonlarını saptamak amacıyla filmin çok katmanlı anlatısı incelenmektedir. Bu inceleme boyunca, makalede sosyal adaletsizliğin, kolonyel sömürünün ve kültürel emperyalizmin *Avustralya*’nın anlatısı içinde nasıl temsil edildiğine değinilirken Baz Luhrmann’ın sinema anlayışının ve Hollywood tarihi epiğinin türsel özelliklerinin film içerisinde tüm bu konularla nasıl bağdaştığı sorgulanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Sınıf, sömürgecilik, tarihi epik.

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Yazar Hakkında

Ayşegül Kesirli 1983 yılında İzmir’de doğdu. İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Reklamcılık (ana dal) ve Sinema-Televizyon (yan dal) Bölümleri’nden mezun olduktan sonra aynı üniversitenin Kültürel İncelemeler Bölümü’nde yüksek lisans eğitimini tamamladı. Halen Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi Sinema ve Medya Araştırmaları Bölümü’nde doktorasına devam ediyor. Doğuş Üniversitesi Görsel İletişim Tasarımı Bölümü’nde araştırma görevlisi olarak çalışıyor.