

Landscapes provide challenges but offer rewards

Gillian Armstrong's romantic drama *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997), based on Peter Carey's 1988 Booker Prize-winning novel, uses the cinematic medium to reveal how real, remembered and re-imagined landscapes can be physically and emotionally challenging, but ultimately provide reward through fulfillment and the shaping of identity once the challenge is overcome. The film explores how the physical challenges of real landscapes can provide reward by shaping the characteristics of individuals, with these landscapes transmuting into remembered and re-imagined landscapes to also provide emotional reward. On the other hand, Armstrong demonstrates how the lack of engagement with the challenges of real landscapes prevents rewarding experiences by contrasting White Australia's unwillingness to connect with the landscape with Indigenous peoples' strong relationship with the Australian land.

Armstrong constructs two character counterpoints to demonstrate how landscapes can physically and emotionally challenge individuals, but provide ultimate reward through fulfillment and the shaping of identity once overcome. The film's linear yet proleptic structure illustrates how the challenges of the physical landscape can shape an individual's identity from a young age, depicting the childhoods of Lucinda and Oscar, before transmuting these real landscapes into remembered and re-imagined ones which further challenge individuals as they transition into adulthood. Armstrong emphasises how the challenges of the remote Australian landscape provide Lucinda with rewarding independence once overcome, represented through the close-up shot of Lucinda floating alone in the Parramatta River. This overcoming of the challenges provided by the rural Australian landscape allows Lucinda to defy Victorian conventions for women, highlighted through the costuming choice of Lucinda in parts. Lucinda's liberating experience after overcoming the challenges of the Australian landscape is juxtaposed with the severe, uptight upbringing of young Oscar, whose house is depicted with a dull colour palette of greys and browns, as well as a spare and frugal mis-en-scene, highlighting British sensibility. Armstrong juxtaposes the visual metaphor of Oscar's enclosure and his "phobia about the ocean" through his emergence from a closed thicket of trees with Lucinda's freedom, demonstrated through the panning shot of the ocean, to represent how physical landscapes can offer fulfilling rewards. Armstrong also illustrates how human relationships can influence an individual's relationship with the landscape through Oscar's decision to conquer his fear of water and traverse the rugged Australian landscape for the sake of "winning a woman's heart", being rewarded by becoming a more courageous individual after overcoming this challenge. Oscar's great grandson's voice over narration "I would have no story to tell you if any great grandfather had not wagered everything" reveals the self-reflexive nature of Armstrong's representation, suggesting that after overcoming the challenges of landscapes, individuals are aware of the fulfillment it provides. Armstrong also emphasises that overcoming the challenges of physical landscapes has long-lasting, generational reward through the parallel shots of Lucinda and her son immersing themselves in the river, suggesting that these real landscapes can become remembered and re-imagined landscapes for younger generations and also shape their identities. Armstrong uses the cinematic medium to convey the fulfilling rewards and shaping of identity that overcoming the challenges of real, remembered and re-imagined landscapes can provide for individuals.

While she explores the rewards that are provided from overcoming landscapes, Armstrong also demonstrates the unrewarding experiences that result from a lack of engagement with the challenges of the Australian landscape. In particular, Armstrong explores the post-colonial tensions between European missionary zeal and the Indigenous connection to land, juxtaposing their respective relationships with landscape to emphasise the significance of engaging with the challenges of the landscape. Armstrong uses the allegory of the glass church, a symbol of human impracticality and fragility, to critique the missionary zeal of

White Australians in attempting to force their constructions and ideas into the natural landscape. The juxtaposition of the loud fanfare and cheering as Oscar and his travel guide leave urban Sydney with the suddenly quiet, mysterious music accompanying the montage of the vast landscape highlights the complete separation and lack of engagement of White Australians with the challenges of the physical Australian environment. The ominous voice-over in “He had not known there were six rivers to cross... he was sick with fear” emphasises the White Australians’ ignorantly imagined perception of the Australian landscape. Armstrong visually juxtaposes the bright red costuming of the White Australians with the Indigenous tribe who blend into the trees to demonstrate White Australians’ unwillingness to engage with the challenges of the landscape, and to suggest that as the Indigenous have done so they are rewarded by being united with the natural landscape. Armstrong demonstrates that White Australia’s inability and unwillingness to overcome the challenge of the Australian landscape prevent them from being rewarded through fulfilment and shaping identity.

Overall, Armstrong’s Oscar and Lucinda (1997) demonstrates the fulfilling rewards and shaping of identity that result from engaging with the challenges of real, remembered and re-imagined landscapes as well as the unrewarding experiences and lack of understanding that arises from the failure to do so. In this way, Armstrong emphasises the significance of properly engaging with the Australian landscape in order to overcome its challenges and be enriched by the rewards.

