

TRACEY MOFFATT

born 1960 Meanjin / Brisbane

Night cries is a very personal piece of work and has to do with the love-hate relationship I had with my mother and, yes, there is a religious and ritual component, but the film haunts me and ten years later it hurts me to talk about it.¹

Tracey Moffatt’s semi-autobiographical short film *Night cries: a rural tragedy* 1989 depicts a fraught and complex relationship between a frail, white woman and her adoptive Aboriginal daughter, played by academic and activist Marcia Langton, who ministers to her disabled, toothless mother in a studio set of an artificial homestead. Screened as part of the Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival in 1990 and exhibited at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York in 1997–98, this 17-minute film melds photography and filmmaking in stylised scenographies comprising an outback station against an incandescent desert with an oppressive interior framed by window apertures. Here, mother and daughter are trapped in a cycle of care, resentment, beauty, duty, loneliness, religion, belonging and ultimately, loss.

Night cries: a rural tragedy commences with the shrill sound of forest creatures, a shrieking woman and a chugging train amplifying a quote from Rosalind Russell’s film *Picnic* (1955) about keeping the night-time from ‘creepin’ in’, eerily followed by a song about faith, *Royal telephone* (1963), by the Aboriginal crooner Jimmy Little that links to Christian missionaries’ attempts at assimilating Aboriginal communities. Dialogue or spoken word is replaced with vivid and haunting sounds as part of Felicity Fox’s melodramatic soundscape, including a baby crying and squeaky doors animating taut scenes of feeding, bathing and tending to the mother’s night terrors.

The first film Moffatt saw at age five was Disney’s *Mary Poppins* (1964) with its technicolour renditions influencing the staging and fantastical elements of *Night cries*.² Moffatt’s narrative spins a yarn with disturbing and theatrical vignettes, carefully constructed scenarios, accentuated staging and unsettling psychodramas. Steven Curtis’ claustrophobic, painted set design with its lurid interior is contrasted with a desert palette of pastel shades that references Albert Namatjira’s watercolour landscapes.

By recreating aspects of the foster mother and Aboriginal daughter relationship, Moffatt’s wordless tale is a sequel to Charles Chauvel’s film *Jedda* (1955), with its pivotal scene of an orphaned Aboriginal infant crying in pain and anguish before the white mistress of the house. As Moffatt says: ‘I was raised by an older white woman and the script became quite a personal story. The little girl who appears in some of the flash back sequences looks a lot like me. That was quite intentional.’³ The final, aerial image of the Aboriginal daughter shuddering with grief alongside her deceased mother alludes to the cataclysmic impact upon the Stolen Generations of the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families. Herein lies a family obligation drenched in loneliness and loss.

NATALIE KING

- 1. Marta Gili, ‘An interview with Tracey Moffatt’, *Tracey Moffatt*, Fundacio ‘la Caixa’, Barcelona, 1999, p107.
- 2. Natalie King, ‘Fall into my fiction’, *Tracey Moffatt: My horizon*, 57th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Thames & Hudson, Melbourne, pp2–9.
- 3. Moffatt quoted by Scott Murray, ‘Tracey Moffatt. Night cries – a rural tragedy’, *Cinema Papers*, no 79, May 1990, p22.

Tracey Moffatt *Night cries: a rural tragedy* 1989, colour 35mm film transferred to video, sound, duration 17 min, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1989

