

Confused and cold-hearted

The Goddess of 1967, directed by Clara Law

Richard Phillips
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The Goddess of 1967 is the second and latest film made in Australia by Macau-born filmmaker Clara Law. Regarded by some critics as an innovative director, Law, now based in Melbourne, studied English Literature at Hong Kong University before moving to London in the 1980s to attend the National Film and Television School. Since graduation in 1988 she has made nine films, including *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* (1989), *Farewell China* (1990), *Fruit Punch* (1992), *Autumn Moon* (1992), *Temptation of a Monk* (1993) and *Floating Life* (1996). Some have won prizes at European and North American film festivals.

Floating Life, perhaps the most successful, was selected as the official Australian entry in the Best Foreign Film category of the 1997 Oscars. It centres on the difficulties confronting an elderly Hong Kong couple who migrate to Australia and the modern suburban home of their ambitious and highly-strung daughter. The film, which is set just before Beijing's takeover of the former British colony, builds its story through a series of perceptive vignettes about different members of the family.

Unfortunately, *The Goddess of 1967* lacks any of the subtlety and sensitivity of this earlier work. Despite its experimental approach and occasionally interesting visuals the movie is a confused, pretentious and essentially coldhearted work. It touches on a range of questions—urban isolation, incest, murder, love, redemption and revenge—but never seriously explores them.

The film's storyline verges on the ridiculous. It opens in Tokyo where JM (Rikiya Kurokawa), a rich young IT worker and sometime computer hacker, is attempting to purchase a 1967 model Citroën DS, or Goddess, as it is known to French car aficionados. JM lives in a pristine but unfriendly hi-tech apartment. The smog filled city is blue-grey and bleak. He rarely speaks to his live-in girlfriend and is preoccupied with other possessions—his latest underwater scuba gear as well as the pet snakes and other exotic reptiles he keeps in the flat. After tracing, on the Internet, a perfectly restored Citroën owned by a couple in Australia, JM

abandons his job and flies out to purchase the rare car, which he thinks can fill the emptiness in his life.

No one meets JM at the airport but he eventually finds the home where the car is located and meets BG (Rose Byrne), a blind and emotionally unstable young woman. BG, who is minding a young child, explains that the couple did not actually own the Citroën and that the husband shot his wife and then killed himself after a violent argument over money. She shows him the car and tells him, after he has test driven it, that she can take him to its real owner, who is somewhere in the outback, a five-day drive away. Intoxicated by the vehicle, JM agrees. BG abandons the young child at the blood-splattered house, instructing her not to trust anyone.

As BG and JM journey into the spectacular but harsh landscape, the viewer is taken on a series of complex and often confusing flashbacks which attempt to illustrate the dark tragedies that have shaped their respective lives. JM, we learn, became fabulously wealthy after a friend gave him the computer password to a major bank. But his friend was soon run over and killed by a passing truck. JM's infatuation with the car is apparently an attempt to fill the emotional gap created by his friend's death and the barren life he leads in Tokyo, which, he tells BG, is alien and “just like Mars”.

Most of the flashbacks, however, concern BG. She was sexually attacked three years earlier by a young boxer from a travelling circus but escaped into the bush where she was protected by wild dingoes. As a young child, she was also sexually abused by her grandfather (who is her blood father) and traumatised by Marie (Elise McCredie), her disoriented and deeply religious mother. Grandpa (Nicholas Hope), who was a hippie, a wine maker and then an opal miner, believes his outback existence frees him from all moral constraints.

BG's favourite radio show is the obituary notices program and she is infatuated by the sound of insects splattering on the Citroën's windscreen, which, she explains to JM, is the “sound of death”. Although blind, BG carries a revolver which she fires occasionally: the first time at two sinister men who pull alongside the car during JM's test drive and later, in the outback, to destroy the satellite phone JM uses to

call his Tokyo girlfriend. Unbeknownst to JM, BG's grandfather owns the car and she is leading JM to him not to consummate the car's sale but in order to kill the old man.

In the course of their journey through an unrelentingly hostile world inhabited by cruel outback men and women, the couple become friends and, after JM teaches BG how to dance, tentative lovers. BG eventually finds her grandfather and confronts him in his rundown opal mine. She had planned to shoot him but, having reconciled her past in the course of the trip and found someone who genuinely cares for her, decides not to go ahead with it. The film ends with BG and JM travelling off together in the Citroën, the message being that humane relationships are only possible when people come to terms with their past.

According to Law, *The Goddess of 1967* is an attempt to portray the dysfunctional character of contemporary life and personal relations. But there is a world of difference between acknowledging aspects of this malaise—in this case, sexual abuse, incest and other inhumane personal relations—and being able to portray it in a way that deepens viewers understanding or convinces them that they should explore some of the underlying social causes. *The Goddess of 1967* does none of this, the director almost entirely preoccupied with the immediate appearance and style of the film.

Rose Byrne, who won the Venice Film Festival's Best Actress prize as BG, gives an accomplished performance. Byrne's dance sequence about halfway through the film is alluring and contains some interesting camera work. But one striking scene, which will no doubt be copied endlessly by rock music video producers, cannot disguise Law's superficiality and failure to create characters that connect on a deeper emotional level.

Apart from BG and JM the rest of the characters are horribly disfigured individuals and almost beyond redemption. Nicholas Hope, as the grandfather, provides some dark and mysterious expressions for the camera but little else and no attempt is made to examine what produced his anti-social behaviour. Viewers are left to conclude that these are either inborn traits or something produced by the Australian desert.

Another particularly irritating aspect of this film is the mystical properties Law gives to the Citroën DS. At one point documentary footage appears explaining that the car was an icon of contemporary auto design and engineering. This model Citroën, viewers are told, attained a cult-like status when it successfully escaped a hail of gunfire during an assassination attempt on French President De Gaulle. French structuralist philosopher Roland Barthes, who described the car as “the supreme creation of an era” and claimed it had the craftsmanship of a Gothic cathedral, is also quoted. While this may be of interest to Citroën

collectors it adds nothing to the characters or the story, which meanders on to the final melodramatic confrontation between BG and her grandfather.

While the vehicle and its journey is an obvious device for connecting the past with the present, Law uses various techniques, including bleach bypass processing and back projection, to give the outside world a surreal, impenetrable and even menacing quality. By contrast, the luminous pink car exudes warmth and security—a safe environment for its two passengers. All this is heavy-handed and tiresome.

In a recent interview Law declared that contemporary existence was “cold and inhuman and incomplete” because humanity was “probably very fulfilled in our material need” but “cut off from its spiritual and emotional side.” This extraordinarily complacent attitude towards the difficulties confronting the majority of mankind stands reality on its head and points to some of the underlying problems in the film.

Contemporary existence for millions of people is cold, inhuman and incomplete precisely because they do not have their material needs fulfilled. Moreover, the staggering growth of social inequality and the resultant acute social and political tensions give rise to a sense of alienation among large numbers of people—including some who are relatively well-off.

Law's comments echo the thinking of the most self-satisfied and self-absorbed layers of the middle class, who feel something is missing from their lives but never question the established order and engage instead in a rather futile personal quest into the “inner world”.

This approach permeates *The Goddess of 1967* and explains the director's offhand attitude toward the film's plot, the unconvincing character development and the lack of seriousness about the issues raised. Either she does not care about the issues—incest, abuse and violence—or simply regards them as dramatic devices for her own self-indulgent ruminations.

The Goddess of 1967 fails not because of its experimental visuals, non-linear narrative or choice of subject matter but because it does not address, let alone question, the social context that gives rise to feelings of alienation. As a result, the film contains no fresh insights and is a cold and misanthropic work.



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