Satellite Boy
Catriona McKenzie, 90 mins, Australia, 2013

Education Resource
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Satellite Boy
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Satellite Boy is about a boy whose grandfather says to him, ‘You are always running away – who are you?’ It is a metaphor for a boy who is like a satellite moving through the stars. At the end of the film he knows where he is from. He knows his place in the Milky Way.

Catriona McKenzie¹

Set in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, Satellite Boy tells the story of Pete (Cameron Wallaby) who lives in an abandoned drive-in with his grandfather Jagamarra (David Gulpilil), whom Pete calls Jubbi. Jagamarra is determined to pass on knowledge and culture to his grandson, but Pete is a reluctant learner. However, when Pete and his friend Kaimain get lost in the remote country of the Bungle Bungles, their survival depends on the lessons Pete’s grandfather has taught him.

Before Visiting ACMI

Country

This is a story about country and about place.

- Explore the significance and concept of country by looking at a language map of Australia:

The film begins in the Wyndham area of West Australia and the boys travel across country to Kununurra.

- Locate the two points of the boys’ journey on the map.

Satellite Boy is the first feature filmed in the region of the Bungle Bungles in Purnululu National Park.

- Find out more about this World Heritage Site and its significance to its traditional custodians the Kija people.

Jagamarra tells Pete that Wyndham, the place where they are living, is not their country. Jagamarra comes from Yolngu country – and the language he speaks is one of the Yolngu Matha languages of northeast Arnhem Land.

• Find Yolngu country on the map and note its distance from the country where the film is set.

Within the world of the film, viewers are not expected to know exactly where Jagamarra comes from, but because place and country are such a significant part of this film, this extra knowledge will enhance an understanding of the story and the significance of language and country.

**Connection to Country**

Find out more about connection to country: In the documentary *Kanyini*, Uncle Bob Randall explains the connection to country as “oneness” He says, “If you’re alive, you connect to everything else that is alive.”

• Watch this clip and explore the ideas communicated:  
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0sWIVR1hXw

• Connection to country is interrelated with what has become described in English as the Dreaming. Rachel Perkins introduces this complex cultural and spiritual belief system in her documentary *The First Australians*. What is particularly interesting about this interpretation is the way that Perkins uses film language to communicate the ideas she is representing. After watching this clip, discuss the way film language adds to the storytelling process:  

Note: Teachers as you explore this concept with your students, be aware that it has been “tidied up” in mainstream discussions. Read this article to gain insight into the complexities of using a single idea to discuss the many, many Indigenous cultures within Australia: “‘Dreamtime’ and ‘The Dreaming’ – an introduction”, Christine Judith Nicholls, *The Conversation*, Jan 23 2014  

**Culture and Knowledge**

*Satellite Boy* director Catriona McKenzie highlights respect for Elders in her discussion of the film’s purpose:

> *I wanted to say: listen up kids because this knowledge won’t be around forever.*

• Why are stories so important?

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2 “Catriona McKenzie Director of *Satellite Boy*, Mumbrella, 28 June 2013,  
• What is communicated through stories?

• What kinds of stories do Elders from all cultures have to share with the generations that follow?

• What is lost when these stories are not passed on or are forgotten?

• Reflect on the passing on of stories in families and communities.
  o Share significant stories in groups and explain to others in the group why they are so important.
After visiting ACMI

Share your response

- As a class share and compare immediate responses to the film – single word answers are an effective and unintimidating way of starting discussion.

- Extend these responses.

- In pairs, identify the main themes of the film. Share these with the class as a whole.

- In pairs, discuss what you think is the key message of the film. With your partner, write a single sentence that you feel communicates the message. Share your ideas as a class and compare responses.

Narrative

Catriona McKenzie has described Satellite Boy as an allegory.

- What is an allegory?

- In what ways could Satellite Boy be considered an allegory?

- Allegories are often used to make people think. As a class share what you learnt from Satellite Boy. (The scene in which Pete decides to go back to Jagamarra could help prompt discussion. We see him draw the circles in the dust and then rub them out again and, because of what we have learnt as viewers, this small gesture is imbued with an enormous amount of meaning.)

When the end of a film refers back to the beginning, it is called bookending. The storytelling technique of bookending is used to highlight what has changed between the opening of the film and the end.

- Watch the beginning and the ending of Satellite Boy and reflect on Pete’s journey and the viewers’ journey.

- Join together in groups and discuss what has changed – not only in the lives of the characters but in our own understanding as viewers.

- What are some of the storytelling techniques used to communicate this change?

Catriona McKenzie has described Satellite Boy as a “universal story”.

- What aspects of this story could be considered universal?

McKenzie’s original script was much more action-packed, but she decided to throw this away and begin again with the story of Pete and his grandfather. She decided to create a simpler story that gave viewers the space to think and see:
Satellite Boy is a sculpture, à la Brancusi, a bird in flight. It's the essence of a thing. It needs to be viewed with space around it - so familiar, yet with enough surrounding space to allow it to take on the highest stakes possible. It needs to be familiar, yet simple so we can feel!

As a class, look at some images of Brancusi's Bird in Flight sculptures so that students can reflect more thoughtfully on McKenzie's approach to storytelling. Then, discuss the following questions:

- How is Satellite Boy different from other films you have seen?
- Satellite Boy doesn't have any subplots, and doesn't fill in all the gaps in the story, including details about Pete's mother. How does this affect your response to the film?

**Visual language**

- How does the visual language of the film communicate important elements of the story? Consider elements such as:
  a. the use of the dissolve at the beginning and the end
  b. time lapse after Pete connects with Jagamarra via the stars
  c. the shots of the stars
  d. the framing of natural and manmade objects and landmarks.

- What do the wide shots communicate about the characters and the landscape? (Use screenshots to prompt students' responses.)

- When Pete arrives in the town of Kununurra, the wide shots are replaced by much tighter framing (where there is little space around the character or object).
  - What is the effect of this way of filming?
  - What is it telling us about Pete?
  - How does this way of filming prepare us for Pete's decision to return to Jagamarra?

**Sound**

- Listen to the sound of the film.
- How important is the sound design to the experience of the film?
- How does it add to the story that is being told?
• Focus on a particular scene and track the use of sound effects, silence, voice and music. To highlight the significance of the soundtrack, listen to the scene without video. What is being communicated through the soundtrack?

**Storytelling**

This film is about stories and storytelling as a way of understanding the world.

• What are some of the stories that Jagamarra shares with Pete?

• Many of these stories are told in language. Why has Catriona McKenzie chosen to include so much language in this film?

• Stories are not only communicated through words but are shared in many other ways as well – what is important is knowing how to read them. What are some of the other forms of storytelling we (and Pete) learn about in the course of *Satellite Boy*?

**Symbolism**

The plot (story details) is simple in *Satellite Boy* but the story it tells is layered and filled with meaning. One of the ways that we are asked to think more deeply about the message of the film is through the use of symbols.

• Explore the idea of using symbols in storytelling to express big ideas and complex meanings that can't always be put into words.

In *Satellite Boy*, the drive-in screen, projection booth and satellite dish stand out as strange objects in the landscape. They are a bit like Brancusi's sculptures as the space around them makes us wonder why they are there and what they mean.

• The drive-in where Pete lives with his grandfather was built for the film and was an important part of the story from the very beginning.
  
  o Why do you think McKenzie chose this setting for the story?
  
  o How did you respond to it as a viewer?
  
  o What did it make you think about?

• Think about the projection booth and its depiction as Pete’s home.

  o Describe the way the outside of the booth is shot and what this communicates to viewers.

  o What about the inside of the projection booth – what does it look like? Consider lighting, décor, the way it is shot, the way that Pete is framed within the space. What is being communicated about this space, its meaning for Pete and its meaning within the story?
• The satellite dish emerging out of the remote Kimberley landscape is so strange that we are forced to think about what is being communicated by its appearance at this moment in the story. It also draws attention to the title of the film and makes us wonder about its meaning.

  o Share ideas about the presence and role of the satellite in the film narrative.

  o What about the title of the film? What does it mean? What does it add to our understanding of the story being told?

At other moments in the film narrative, sound and image combine to give a particular moment significance.

• Ask students to identify those moments where what we see has greater meaning because it’s connected with Jagamarra’s voice (for instance, the night sky, the power lines, the rock paintings).

• What is being communicated in these moments?

• What is it about the soundscape that makes it so meaningful?

Setting: The Importance Of Place

The filming techniques used in Satellite Boy communicate an enormous amount about country and its connection to the people who inhabit it.

• Describe the various locations in the film and their role in the story.

Satellite Boy is the first feature film to be shot “on the ground” in the Bungle Bungle Range in the Purnululu National Park in the Kimberley.3

• How important is this setting to the story?

• What is communicated through this landscape?

• Other films have featured this landscape but have been filmed from above. Why do you think McKenzie considered it important that her film should take place on the ground in country and not feature sweeping helicopter shots?

We never see Jagamarra’s country. However, at the end of the film narrative, we see Jagamarra and Pete going back to country.

3 Filmed entirely on location in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, Satellite Boy was made in consultation with Ballangarra Aboriginal Corporation and the Yawoorroong Miriuwung Gajerrong Yirrgeb Noong Dawang Aboriginal Corporation.
• How has the importance of country been communicated throughout the film narrative? Provide examples of key moments.

Characterisation

Many stories feature a main character who learns more about her/himself as s/he grows to meet the challenges that life throws up. This kind of story might be described as a ‘coming of age’ story.

• How does Pete ‘come of age’?

• Use the sheet at the back of this resource to track the development of Pete’s character.

• Join together as a class to discuss and extend your ideas about how Pete has changed and what he has learned.

Explore Further


Find out more about the making of the film from the director of photography, Geoffrey Simpson: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpWnXpx1gwE

Production Designer Sam Hobbs explains some of the challenges here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwpKXj-N0EY
Name of Character: ________________________________

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<th>BEGINNING</th>
<th>END</th>
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<tr>
<td>What do you know about this character at the beginning of the film?</td>
<td>What more do you know about the character at the end of the film?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide an example that explains what the character is like in the beginning.</td>
<td>Has this character changed by the end of the film? Explain your answer.</td>
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