

Cinematography Screenwriting and Performance in *Lion*

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Introduction

Garth Davis's *Lion* adapts Saroo Brierley's memoir *A Long Way Home* into a film about childhood separation, adoption, memory, technology, and the difficult meaning of return. The story follows five-year-old Saroo after he becomes trapped on a train that carries him far from his home in India. He survives in Kolkata, is adopted by an Australian family, and later uses fragmented memories and Google Earth to search for his birthplace. The film's emotional impact depends on three closely connected achievements: Greig Fraser's cinematography, Luke Davies's screenplay, and performances that communicate experience across language, age, and geography. Together, these elements transform a remarkable true story into a restrained study of belonging. (Brierley; Davies)

Visual Storytelling in the Childhood Sequence

The first half of *Lion* relies heavily on images because young Saroo cannot explain his situation to adults who speak different languages. Cinematography therefore carries information that dialogue cannot. Wide shots make the child appear small within railway stations, streets, institutions, and crowds, while close views of his face preserve his individual perspective. The camera often remains near Saroo's height, allowing the audience to experience confusion rather than observe it safely from an adult distance. Greig Fraser uses movement, depth, sound, and available light to create a world that is both visually rich and threatening. The result avoids reducing India to a picturesque background; landscape and infrastructure become forces that shape the child's vulnerability. (Australian Cinematographers Society)

The Train as a Cinematic Turning Point

The train journey provides the film's central rupture. Saroo enters an empty carriage expecting a temporary rest and wakes to find the train moving through unfamiliar territory. Repetition of tracks, windows, darkness, and passing stations creates a sense of irreversible distance. The train is not portrayed as evil; it is an ordinary system whose scale overwhelms a child without information or protection. Editing compresses a journey of many hours while preserving physical exhaustion and panic. The sequence also establishes a theme that returns through maps and digital imagery: modern networks connect places, but connection does not guarantee that a lost person can identify where he belongs. Infrastructure can produce mobility and separation at the same time.

Kolkata, Scale, and Vulnerability

In Kolkata, the film uses crowded compositions and contrasting spaces to show how a child can be visible yet socially lost. Saroo moves among thousands of people, but linguistic difference and institutional confusion prevent recognition. The camera alternates between overwhelming public scale and moments of intimate danger, including streets, platforms, the river, and the orphanage. This visual strategy avoids relying on constant exposition. Viewers understand that survival depends on observation, caution, and chance. The film has been criticized for presenting poverty through an outsider's gaze, yet its strongest scenes keep attention on Saroo's limited knowledge rather than turning suffering into spectacle. His viewpoint organizes the city's complexity.

Color and the Division between India and Australia

The film creates a noticeable visual contrast between Saroo's early life and his Australian home. Indian scenes often emphasize warm earth, crowded movement, textured darkness, and intense sensory detail. Tasmania appears cooler, spacious, orderly, and surrounded by water and sky. This contrast communicates safety and displacement simultaneously. Australia offers affection, education, and stability, but visual calm cannot erase Saroo's earlier attachments. As an adult, he inhabits elegant rooms and open landscapes while carrying memories of narrow paths, water tanks, trains, and his mother's labor. The cinematography does not present one country as authentic and the other as false. It makes both environments emotionally real and shows why belonging can be divided.

The Screenplay's Two-Part Structure

Luke Davies's screenplay divides the narrative between childhood survival and adult investigation. This creates a major casting transition, yet the script maintains continuity through recurring images, sounds, and habits. The first section is immediate and physical; the second becomes psychological and procedural. Adult Saroo must convert sensory fragments into searchable evidence. The screenplay avoids revealing the hometown too quickly and lets repeated failures build obsession. It also gives the audience information that Saroo lacks, creating emotional tension around his mother and brother. The structure is effective because the search is not only a mystery to solve. It forces Saroo to confront gratitude, guilt, adoption, and the fear that finding one family may betray another.

Memory as Fragment rather than Record

The screenplay treats memory as partial, embodied, and unreliable. Saroo remembers sounds, landscapes, food, a station, a water tower, and the approximate length of a train journey, but he does not possess an address or accurate spelling. These fragments are emotionally powerful without functioning as a complete archive. The search requires inference, maps, probability, and repeated

testing. Flashbacks do not simply reproduce the past; they interrupt adult life and reveal how unresolved memory shapes present behavior. The jalebi scene is especially effective because taste and sight trigger childhood longing more forcefully than abstract reflection. The film understands that autobiographical memory often survives through sensory associations before it can be organized into language.

Google Earth as a Narrative Tool

Google Earth could have become a convenient technological miracle, but the screenplay presents it as an instrument requiring patience and reasoning. Saroo estimates the distance a train could travel, traces rail lines, compares landscapes, and searches for visual features remembered from childhood. Technology expands the field of possibility but does not replace memory, judgment, or persistence. The interface also creates a striking cinematic relationship between scale and intimacy. Satellite images view the earth from above, while Saroo searches for a path known from the level of a child's body. The sequence demonstrates how digital maps can reconnect personal memory with global geography, yet success still depends on the meanings attached to ordinary visual details.

Sunny Pawar's Performance

Sunny Pawar's performance as young Saroo carries much of the film with limited dialogue. He communicates curiosity, pride, fear, calculation, and exhaustion through gaze, movement, and timing. The performance avoids turning the child into a passive symbol of suffering. Saroo makes decisions, learns from danger, refuses some adults, and seeks work and food. His vulnerability is clear, but so is his intelligence. Pawar's natural presence also supports the cinematography's close attention to the child's face without making scenes feel staged for sentiment. Because the first half establishes such a complete personality, the adult character later feels connected to a real childhood rather than to a plot device.

Dev Patel's Adult Saroo

Dev Patel portrays adult Saroo as socially capable but increasingly divided by the search. His performance develops through restraint: distracted attention, guarded conversations, insomnia, and sudden emotional intensity reveal a private obsession that strains relationships. Patel does not imitate Pawar superficially. Continuity emerges through alert observation, physical tension, and the return of childhood vulnerability beneath adult confidence. The character's guilt is complex. He worries about the family left behind, feels indebted to his adoptive parents, and fears appearing ungrateful. Patel's performance makes the search ethically difficult rather than purely inspirational. Finding home requires him to acknowledge pain that his Australian life could not cure and gratitude could not silence. (Lion)

Nicole Kidman and the Ethics of Adoption

Nicole Kidman's performance as Sue Brierley adds moral depth to the adoption narrative. A less careful film might present the adoptive mother only as a generous rescuer or as an obstacle to Saroo's biological search. Kidman instead portrays love, fear, resilience, and imperfection. Sue's explanation that adoption was an intentional choice complicates assumptions that adoptive families merely substitute for biological children. Her relationship with Saroo is secure enough to survive his search, although the family's difficulties with Mantosh reveal that love alone cannot resolve trauma. The performance resists competition between mothers. Sue and Kamla occupy different histories in Saroo's life, and recognizing one does not invalidate the other.

Rooney Mara and the Function of Lucy

Rooney Mara's Lucy is a composite character who helps externalize Saroo's adult conflict. She provides emotional support but also confronts the secrecy and withdrawal produced by his obsession. The role is less developed than those of Saroo and his mothers, and some viewers may see Lucy primarily as a narrative device. Nevertheless, Mara gives the character patience without unlimited self-erasure. Their relationship demonstrates that unresolved trauma affects present intimacy even when the partner did not cause it. Lucy cannot complete the search for Saroo or decide what family means. Her function is most effective when she represents the limits of support: love can accompany another person's reckoning but cannot perform it on their behalf.

Music, Editing, and Emotional Restraint

Dustin O'Halloran and Volker Bertelmann's score supports longing through repeating piano and string patterns without dominating every scene. The music links geographical spaces and helps transitions between memory and present action. Alexandre de Franceschi's editing maintains clarity across decades, locations, and two lead performers. The final reunion could easily become manipulative, but the film earns its emotion through delayed recognition, silence, touch, and the presence of villagers who remember the lost child. Archival images at the end connect dramatization with the real people represented. The film's restraint is crucial because the story already contains extraordinary coincidence. Excessive explanation or music would weaken the authenticity created by performance and accumulated visual detail.

Limitations and Critical Questions

Lion is emotionally powerful, but its perspective is primarily Saroo's and therefore cannot fully represent Indian child welfare, poverty, international adoption, or the experiences of children who are never reunited. The film condenses events and simplifies some relationships to create narrative focus.

Its success can also encourage a comforting belief that technology and individual determination solve structural problems. Saroo's reunion was exceptional, while many missing children face limited records, unsafe institutions, exploitation, and unequal access to digital tools. A critical response should appreciate the film without converting one outcome into a general model. Its deeper value lies in humanizing separation and showing the long duration of childhood loss. (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; United Nations Children's Fund)

Conclusion

Lion succeeds because its cinematography, screenplay, and performances tell the same emotional story through different means. Fraser's images place viewers within a child's scale and later visualize divided belonging. Davies's screenplay turns memory fragments and digital maps into a structure of search while preserving the ethical tension among biological and adoptive families. Pawar, Patel, Kidman, and Mara communicate relationships that cannot be reduced to exposition. The film is not simply about locating a town. It is about integrating identities formed across loss, rescue, love, and return. Its final reunion moves audiences because the technical craft has made both homes real and refused to treat either as disposable.

Works Cited

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