

You Look Normal To Me:
*The Social Construction of Disability in
Australian National Cinema in the 1990s*

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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“You Look Normal to Me: the social construction of Disability in Australian National Cinema during the 1990s”

Abstract

This thesis examines the social construction of disability in Australian national cinema throughout the 1990s. During that decade, disability was an issue that remained in the background of many film narratives and is (still) under-theorised in academic scholarship. Disability continues to be tangential to many social critiques, particularly in relation to cultural diversity and national identity. When it is foregrounded, as in Liz Ferrier’s (2001) work, its theoretical premise is chiefly located in a damaged body, rather than examined through the lens of cultural construction.

The growing number of culturally diverse filmmakers in the Australian film industry during the 1990s initiated a critical focus on diversity, multiculturalism and minority group interests. However, an examination of the social construction of disability is conspicuously absent. I argue that a disability identity that focuses attention away from the body and onto society should be incorporated into notions of diversity concerning Australian national cinema.

In this thesis I investigate both thematic and stylistic representations of disability with reference to socio-political contexts and influences. A disability identity — as it is included or excluded from Australian national identity — is explored through a variety of close readings of local films. I examine the methods filmmakers employ to problematise diversity in relation to the limitations of dominant representations of disability.

This thesis recognises the historical lack of scholarship in relation to disability as a diversity issue in Australian national cinema of the 1990s and is an attempt to open up this field to new modes of criticism.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	
0.0 A personal beginning	2
0.1 Problem statement and aim of thesis	4
0.2 Disability, the damaged body and cinema	5
0.2.1 Australian national cinema during the 1990s: a discourse of diversity	11
0.2.2 Disability and cinematic diversity	13
0.2.3 Disability in Australia during the 1990s	13
0.3 Outline of chapters	14
0.4 A note on methodology	20
Chapter One	<i>Cultural Changes</i>
1.0 Introduction: contextual identity formation	22
1.1 Disability	24
1.1.1 Disability in Australia during the 1990s	28
1.2 Encapsulating the Australian film industry	32
1.3 Globalisation and neoliberalism	34
1.4 Multiculturalism	40
1.5 Euthanasia and pluralism	45
1.5.1 Nazi Germany	49
1.5.2 Singer's euthanasia discussions	51
1.6 Immigration policies in Australia	59
1.7 1990s National leadership: from Paul Keating to John Howard	63
1.8 The Australian Disability Discrimination Act	66

1.9 Australian Bicentenary 1988	73
1.10 Disability creation	74
1.11 Reproductive technological change	77
1.12 Conclusion	80
Chapter Two	<i>Disability Debates</i>
2.0 Introduction: Disability as Diversity in cinema	85
2.1 Disability as culturally defined	87
2.2 Barnes and ‘misrepresentation’	109
2.2.1 Pitiable and pathetic	110
2.2.2 An object of violence	110
2.2.3 Sinister and evil	112
2.2.4 Atmosphere or set dressing	113
2.2.5 Super cripple or inspirational hero	114
2.2.6 Object of ridicule	115
2.2.7 Own worst and only enemy	116
2.2.8 Burden	118
2.2.9 Sexually abnormal/nonsexual	119
2.2.10 Unable to participate in community	120
2.2.11 Normal	122
2.3 Norden’s <i>Cinema of Isolation</i>	123
2.4 Darke’s ‘normality genre’	130
2.5 Conflicting readings	133
2.6 Australia	135
2.7 Conclusion	142
Chapter 3	<i>Australian National Cinema</i>
3.0 Australian films portray ‘embattled’ characters during the 1990s	145
3.1 National cinema	147
3.2 Identity politics	154
3.3 Developing identities	159

3.4 Australian national cinema	175
3.4.1 European derived	179
3.4.2 Diaspora	182
3.4.3 New World	186
3.4.4 Multiculturalism	193
3.5 Rationale for film analysis to follow	196
3.6 Conclusion	207
Chapter 4 <i>This Film is not About Disability</i>	
4.0 Introduction: impairment in the plot	210
4.1 Rehabilitating one group at the expense of another	212
4.2 Key films	214
4.3 <i>Lucky Break</i>	215
4.4 <i>The Well</i>	237
4.5 <i>Romper Stomper</i>	248
4.6 Conclusion	275
Chapter 5 <i>This Dance Ain't no Pretty Waltz</i>	
5.0 Introduction: what do we want to be positive about?	278
5.1 Social construction of 'positive' representations	280
5.2 Auteur theories	283
5.3 <i>Struck By Lightning</i>	304
5.4 <i>Bad Boy Bubby</i>	315
5.5 <i>Dance Me To My Song</i>	323
5.6 Conclusion	323
Conclusion	336
Bibliography	347
Filmography	36

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