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

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
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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.
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.
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