

Rehabilitating 1990s Australian National Cinema

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Several theorists have noticed the prevalence of disability in Australian national cinema during the 1990s and its symbolic value. (1) However, few have proceeded from a minority group standpoint, that views disability as a viable identity, or indeed a minority group. Perhaps this is because, when it comes to the Australian media, producers are encouraged not to view people with disability as a discrete group. Indeed, the Australian Press Council has argued that “people with disabilities are most empowered when they are treated as fully participating members of the wider community” (2). Yet the *Disability*



Discrimination Act 1992 stipulates indirect discrimination to demonstrate that expecting people with disability to participate as non-disabled without any special consideration can amount to discrimination. (3)

Normalcy is communicated through the public sphere. (4) Impairment is considered abnormal. (5) Therefore, if people with disability should not be considered a discrete group, the only option left is for people with disability to deny their impairments in a kind of semblance to normality that can never really be achieved. Thus, people with disability are encouraged by the Australian media to pass as non-disabled; their impairments have been individualised.

In Australia, disability remains outside the “social construction of political power”, it is pre-social. However, other movements have recognised the body as post-social including gender, sexuality and colour. (6) Australian cinema has been criticized in the past for its bias toward male-centred stories that valued strength and perfect bodies.

Currently, the marker of power in Australia is white heterosexual bourgeois masculinity. (7) Sophie Watson and Rosemary Pringle argue that for a long time films marginalised women in the national myths of Australia. (8) The successful integration of feminism in Australian filmmaking provided a precedent for the criticism of the representation of other minority groups and a call for:

[f]irstly, a multicultural cinema; secondly, an Aboriginal and Islander cinema; and thirdly, gay and lesbian film making. In each the same logic can be discerned of establishing separate public spheres, special consideration, and governmental acceptance of the evidence of discrimination as the basis for action to facilitate future contributions to storytelling in its diverse forms. (9)

As a result of these movements, Australia’s cinematic output throughout the 1990s incorporated what Ian Craven has described as a “remarkable diversity” (10). These movements argued that Australia cannot have a simple identity and different socio-cultural identities both compete with and complement each other. (11) It was not until the 1990s that this was recognised, as Australian national cinema redefined itself as a diverse cinema bringing minority perspectives to bear on film. (12) Despite this reputation, disability is not valued as a point of diversity. The 1990s saw an increasing number of Australian feature dramas using disability as a representational device. (13)

The character of choice in the ‘diverse’ Australian cinema of the 1990s was, according to Tom O’Regan, quirky,

eccentric and an individual. (14) Many Australian films have depicted the quirky, eccentric individual as disabled. Often this is a conscious cinematic link made for greater visual power – *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995), *Dead to the World* (Ross Gibson, 1990) – or verisimilitude – *Angel Baby* (Michael Rymer, 1995), *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (Cherie Nowlan, 1997), *Heaven's Burning* (Craig Lahiff, 1997). In an interview with Andrew Urban, Michael Rymer comments that he made his characters in *Angel Baby* schizophrenic because they were quirky, “[a]t some point, these two quirky characters, these extremely strange people [...] somehow it occurred to me they might be described as mentally ill” (15). Liz Ferrier, in the most prominent article on disability in Australian national cinema during the 1990s, makes the claim that films depicting disabled character constitute a subgenre in recent Australian cinema. She makes the further link with the quirky character other theorists are concerned with:

[d]riven by character rather than plot, they demonstrate a spatial rather than temporal logic, and attend to quirky details which particularise character and place rather than opting for emblematic locales less likely to distract from the onward progression of the narrative. In many ways the films thus develop distinctively Australian narrative traditions, even when working with Hollywood genres. (16)



Character-driven narratives are a feature of Australian national cinema, particularly as they relate to the representation of disability. *Paradise Road* (Bruce Beresford, 1997) is one exception in which disability is used for both plot and atmospheric reasons, with little continuity from shot to shot. Alternatively, *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) features a quirky character while working within a Hollywood stylistic paradigm. By locating disability within a ‘problem body’, these films are again valuing strength and perfect bodies in a similar way to the

male ensemble cycle that excluded a number of marginalised groups. This paper will consider the basis and implications of this trend by looking at a number of Australian films made during the 1990s before examining several key scenes in *The Sum of Us* (Kevin Dowling and Geoff Burton, 1994), a film which individualises disability for the purpose of rehabilitating a previously marginalised minority group.

During the 1990s, the disability rights movement in Australia attempted to take the focus away from the traditional medical aspects of disability and concentrated instead on the contribution people with disability could make to society. As a result, an environment emerged where we were encouraged to “see the ability, not the disability”. While this framework removed the focus from medicine, it remained under the same ideological umbrella as disability remained an individual’s problem and people with disability were encouraged to deny their impairments in order to fit into an ableist society. Disability is individualized in Australian society; it is still considered a medical pathology, rather than a social construction. As a result, despite the focus on cultural diversity in Australian national cinema during the 1990s, disability continues to be largely unproblematised it is an under explored angle from which to examine diversity. As Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell suggest in *Imagining Diversity*:

[d]iversity discourse often features identities and categories such as ethnicity, culture, race, class, and sexuality. As yet, however, policy analysis, and just ‘talk’ on diversity do not conjure up ‘disability’, in the minds of many. (17)

The 1990s was a significant decade in Australia’s history in terms of opening debate around the issue of disability. After 26 years of anti-discrimination legislation in Australia, the Federal *Disability Discrimination Act* was introduced in 1992. Further, debates about euthanasia were prominent during the 1980s and 1990s, when each Australian state and territory discussed voluntary Euthanasia bills.

This was reflected in ‘90s Australian cinema which featured an abundance of characters with disability. The narratives often did not centre on these characters, as seen in *Doing Time For Patsy Cline* (Chris Kennedy, 1997), *Heaven's Burning*, *The Nostradamus Kid* (Bob Ellis, 1993), *Siam Sunset* (John Polson, 1999), *To Have and To Hold* (John Hillcoat, 1996), *Sirens* (John Duigan, 1994), *Muggers* (Dean Murphy, 1999), *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, *Dead To The World*, *Black Robe* (Bruce Beresford, 1992), *Golden Braid* (Paul Cox, 1991), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1997), *Wendy Cracked a Walnut* (Michael Pattinson, 1990), *Welcome to Woop Woop* (Stephan Elliott, 1997) and *The Craic* (Ted Emery, 1999).

However, the character’s impairment remained essential to the plot and relied on cultural myths and ideologies to present information about the protagonists or whatever social problematisation was being made. There were also a

number of features that had disabled protagonists – *Hammers Over the Anvil* (Ann Turner, 1994), *Struck By Lightning* (Jerzy Domaradzki, 1990), *Romper Stomper* (Geoffrey Wright, 1992), *The Sum of Us*, *Proof* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991), *Muriel's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1994), *Metal Skin* (Geoffrey Wright, 1995), *What I Have Written* (John Hughes, 1995), *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), *Lucky Break* (Ben Lewin, 1994), *Shine*, *Cosi* (Mark Joffe, 1996), *Angel Baby* and *The Well* (Samantha Lang, 1997). Rather than projecting a disability culture or encouraging pride in a disability identity, these films (depicting both minor and major characters with impairments) most often encourage the subordination of the disabled in order to rehabilitate another minority group. For example, *Metal Skin*, *Cosi*, *The Nostradamus Kid* and *Doing Time For Patsy Cline* each take youth culture 'seriously', while *The Sum of Us* offers pride in a gay identity and *Muriel's Wedding*, *The Piano* and *Lucky Break* attempt to renegotiate a place for women in Australian national cinema.

Neo-liberal structural adjustments during the 1980s and 1990s encouraged a questionable 'mutual obligation' view of disability. The Disability Reform package of 1991 sought to curb the growing number of recipients of the Disability Support pension without addressing factors such as unemployment, age, and education. Its Active Society philosophy conformed with neo-liberal beliefs that individuals are responsible for their own solutions to society's problems, branding those who fail to succeed as 'lazy'. Thus making people with disability responsible for their own suffering and salvation.

This neo-liberal aesthetic is a contributing factor toward the contradictory reactions to disability and what to do with people with disability in Australian society. The Richmond report of 1983 recommended the closure of large institutions caring for people with developmental impairments and psychiatric illnesses. (18) Although a move that appeared to encourage the equality of people with disability in the community, the motivations were visibly in line with the neo-liberalist tendency to cut public expenditure on social services.

However, the report also offered the alternative of community-based care, an ideal in direct opposition to neo-liberalism, which in fact eliminates the concept of the community. So, community came to mean the family home, mothers operated as unpaid carers, and people with disability were not provided with adequate housing and accommodation. Such issues remained peripheral to a number of Australian films that adopted an individualised view of disability, including *Amy* (Nadia Tass, 1998), *Death in Brunswick* (John Ruane, 1991), *Muriel's Wedding* and *The Sum of Us*. In each of these, a family member opts to care for an impaired relative. Other films see family members remove impaired relatives from institutions, believing the best care could not be provided in a hospital: for example, *That Eye, The Sky* (John Ruane, 1995), *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998), *Hammers Over the Anvil* and *Angel Baby*. Finally, impaired individuals may display enough consciousness to remove themselves, as seen in *The Sugar Factory* (Robert Carter, 1998), *A Woman's Tale* (Paul Cox, 1991) and *Spider & Rose* (Bill Bennett, 1994). However, these individuals may be rejected in the family home, requiring them to adapt alone. Thus, while the concept of community may have existed in Australian cinematic representations during the 1990s, the idea remained subversive and peripheral to the national identity. Indeed, most of these narratives operated within a multicultural community, which gained strength by overcoming the stress that comes with caring for an impaired family member.



Re-entrance into the community is a process and, when introduced in Australian cinema thematically in films such as *Dance Me To My Song* (Rolf de Heer, 1998), *Lilian's Story* (Jerzy Domaradzki, 1995), *Struck By Lightning* and *Bad Boy Bobby* (Rolf de Heer, 1994), the social obstacles are identified. However, in other films such as *Cosi*, *The Sugar Factory* and *Angel Baby* social obstacles are forfeited for entertainment's sake. Entertainment works by individualising problems and creating simplified worlds.

This holds significance to an analysis of the representation of disability in Australian national cinema, where disability is widely accepted as an individual's problem.

Multiculturalism was valued in Australian cinema during the 1990s. However, traditionally disability has been recognized as a medical condition, without much cultural significance or responsibility. This is aptly demonstrated in *The Sum of Us*, when Harry Mitchell (Jack Thompson) is not rehabilitated following his stroke and is sent home to live with son Jeff (Russell Crowe), as he is no longer 'sick'. Despite this, and the fact that Harry (according to Jeff) always wants to go out to the park, he is most frequently depicted lying in bed – a medical setting. People with disability should be recognized as another group within a multicultural society, especially if we define multicultural society as being made up of different groups, each with their own contribution to make to society. Historically, a disabled group has been considered unable to make a significant contribution, at times being called

'useless eaters' (by the Nazis in Germany and, more recently, in Australia by Peter Singer, who has made a similar argument suggesting a drain of resources). (19)

Despite being consistently represented during this period, characters with disability were not involved in the wider celebration of diversity, as social restrictions were rarely addressed. Although *Death in Brunswick* offered a more inclusive multicultural national identity, impairment was used to punish bad parenting. Many films depicting disability blame the individual for their own suffering and salvation in order to give characters from other minority groups an opportunity to rehabilitate their marginalised position. In *The Sum of Us*, a young gay man is presented as a loving and caring son whose whole world does not begin and end with being gay; in contrast, his father is not taught basic independence following a stroke. In this film, Harry lives with his gay son Jeff in a very "domestic" existence. This puts off potential lovers on both sides. After each suffers romantic disappointment, Harry has a stroke and together they find strength in the face of adversity, and things begin to look more positive for Jeff. So, impairment acts as a cinematic shorthand or narrative device. Harry's stroke and consequential impairment works together with the other cinematic elements, such as cinematography and mise en scène, to denote vulnerability and offer more information about Jeff.

An ideology has been created in Australian national cinema to rationalise fears about disability and explain (the socially created) 'inferiority'. The repetition of stereotypes (e.g., not powerful, unattractive, evil, vulnerable) produces a construction of normality that excludes people with disability. Martin Norden has compiled a number of stereotypes around the representation of disability, which are commonly found in Western Cinema. (20) One that seems to apply quite specifically to the Australian cinema landscape during the 1990s is the "comic misadventurer". Norden defines this stereotype in relation to the general strategy of isolation reinforced by representations of disability:

[a] disabled person victimized by one or more able-bodied people, and a disabled person whose impairment leads to trouble, whether self-directed, other-directed, or both. All in the name of comedy, of course. (21)

The comic-misadventurer characterisation Norden describes can be seen in the spate of 'quirky' comedies featured throughout 1990s Australian national cinema. O'Regan and Rayner separately note that marginalised identities around differences in age, gender, race and sexuality were foregrounded throughout the 1990s to encourage diversity. (22) Rayner contends that both individual and communal rites of passage narratives were common in Australian national cinema during the 1990s; in these, characters search for meaning and national identity while struggling against authority figures. (23) While other peripheral identities distinguished by age, gender, race and sexuality take communal rites of passage, the disability identity remains marginalised as rites of passage are individualised. Further, the identity most characters with disability eventually strive for is one in which their impairment, culture and difference are denied.

In *The Sum of Us*, following his stroke, Harry ascribes to the comic-misadventurer stereotype, although he appears to have a certain degree of control over it as he embraces the comic-misadventurer identity. He claims, "The trouble with having a stroke is the people that treat you like a fuckwit afterwards." Harry's stroke is intended in the film to consolidate the love between father and son, and to make the contention that love takes many forms. Jeff is gay, but Jeff does not want his whole world to begin and end with being gay, and "even likes women". By depending totally on Jeff for his basic survival – including "going to the lav" – one minority group (queer) is rehabilitated at the expense of another (disabled).



Following Harry's assertion to the audience that he is being treated like a fuckwit, the scene cuts to a close-up of Harry's face as Jeff wheels him through the supermarket. He looks half-awake and barely conscious, perhaps even dribbling saliva. Thus, stylistically, Harry is a fuckwit and the film proceeds along the comic-misadventurer format. Harry sees Greg (John Polson), Jeff's potential lover, and begins to beep incessantly on the bell Jeff had rigged up to the chair so that Harry could still communicate despite the loss of his language function. Harry then knocks the shopping basket off his lap, with his affected arm no less! This leads me to believe Harry was a candidate for rehabilitation who could have learnt to wipe his own bum at the very least. However, as Paul Longmore argues, when it comes to movie images, most of the time they strive to reinforce the notion that disabled people have nothing to live for. (24) Rehabilitation threatens this widely held belief, so in films such as *The Sum of Us* rehabilitation never begins. In this way, movies present a totally one-sided argument and distort the alternatives. (25)

Representations of characters with disability as the living dead (*Death in Brunswick*, *The Sum of Us*, *The Well*, *Hammers Over the Anvil*) or actually dead (*Angel Baby*, *What I Have Written*, *Metal Skin*, *Envy* (Julie Money, 1999)) have cathartic meaning for an ableist society that fears death and mortality. These representations serve both to reassure able-bodied audiences of their normality and disavow the possibility of impairment. Disability was not included as a diversity issue in Australian national cinema during the 1990s. Instead, disability was used to open up discussions around other minority groups that are striving for equal opportunity. These social problematisations that excluded disability were frequently premised on constructions of nationhood. The rehabilitation of ethnic minorities occurs in *Romper Stomper*, *Death in Brunswick* and *Traps* (Pauline Chan, 1994), while women are welcomed into a European settler aesthetic in *The Well* and *In the Winter Dark* (James Bogle, 1998). Impairment is used in *Lucky Break* and *Angel Baby* to Australianise the romantic-comedy genre alongside and in opposition to international interpretations. In *The Sum of Us*, Jeff achieves equal status in a masculine society when his father Harry suffers a stroke and becomes unable to care for himself. Opportunities for marginalized groups are created in these films at the expense of a social problematisation of disability, which remains located in the body.

Endnotes

1. See Liz Ferrier, "Vulnerable Bodies: Creative Disabilities in Contemporary Australian Film", in Ian Craven (Ed.), *Australian Cinema in the 1990s* (London: Frank Cass, 2001); Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996); Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, "Imagining Diversity: Disability/Film", July 2003; Deb Verhoeven, *When Familiarity Breeds: Ken G. Hall, Disability and the Problems of Origins* (Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 1999); and Garry Gillard and Lois Achimovich, "The Representation of Madness in Some Australian Films", in *Journal of Critical Psychology Counselling and Psychotherapy*, No. 3:1, Spring, 2003. ↑
2. Andrew Jakubowicz, "Wheeling Free? Disability Studies Meets Media Studies and the Australian Media", *Australian Journal of Communication*, No. 30.3, 2003, p. 107. ↑
3. Available: <http://scaleplus.law.gov.au/html/pasteact/0/311/top.htm>. May 2004. ↑
4. Jakubowicz, p. 104. ↑
5. Paul Darke, "Cinematic Representations of Disability", in Tom Shakespeare (Ed.), *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 1998), p. 184. ↑
6. Helen Meekosha, *Communicating the Social Australian Journal of Communication*, No. 30.3, 2003, p. 62. ↑
7. Meekosha, p. 61, and Fiona Campbell, "Inciting Legal Fictions: 'Disability's' Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of the Law", *Griffith Law Review*, No. 10.2, 2001, p. 46. ↑
8. O'Regan, p. 295. ↑
9. Ibid, p. 302. ↑
10. Craven, p. 1. ↑
11. O'Regan, p. 305. ↑
12. O'Regan, p. 167; Craven, p. 1. ↑
13. Ferrier, p. 64. ↑
14. Tom O'Regan, "Beyond 'Australian Film'? Australian Cinema in the 1990s", in Peter Tapp and James Sabine (Eds), *Australian Feature Films* (Melbourne: Informit Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology & The Australian Catalogue of New Films and Videos, 1995), p. 9. ↑
15. Andrew Urban, "Making of: *Angel Baby* (1995)". May 2004. ↑
16. Ferrier, p. 61. ↑
17. Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell, "Imagining Diversity: Disability/ Film", in *ANZCA03: Designing Communication for Diversity*, Brisbane, 2003, p. 1. ↑
18. Mike Clear, *Promises, Promises: Disability and Terms of Inclusion* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2000), p. 60. ↑
19. See Helga Kushe and Peter Singer, *Should the Baby Live?: The Problem of Handicapped Infants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Henry Friedlander, "Step by Step: The Expansion of Murder, 1939-1941", in Omer Bartov (Ed.), *The Holocaust: Origins, Implementation, Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63-76. ↑
20. See Martin Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994). ↑
21. Ibid, p. 20. ↑
22. See Rayner, and O'Regan. ↑
23. Rayner, p. 162. ↑
24. Paul Longmore, *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (Philadelphia: Temple University