

Unity verses diversity, the social disablement of UnAustralian national Cinema during the 1990s

By Katie Ellis

In 1999 when Bryan Brown won the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Pando in *Two Hands* (1999) his acceptance speech commended several Australian actors for contributing to Australian cinema and the 'Australian identity'. He begins with Jack Thompson and ends with "the great Chips Rafferty". Although the list is long he excludes Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman, the two most internationally successful 'Australian' actors at the time. Later that evening while presenting an award Crowe, who looked annoyed during Brown's speech, connects Australian cinema with Hollywood claiming that Australian actors who manage to succeed in Hollywood, are not any less Australian - they actually "amplify the broad nature - and infinite nature - of Australian screen culture."

It's an interesting exchange between two key figures in Australian screen culture. Bryan Brown the iconographic Australian character of the 1980s and Russell Crowe who represents the international aims of more recent Australian cinema. Brown values national identity while Crowe represents possibilities for international commercial success. As Australian cinema joined the global film economy in the 1990s, a greater diversity emerged within the industry with Australia continuing to be a cohesive imagined community. This diversity came at the expense of the representation of disability, which was used to rehabilitate other minority groups, previously excluded from the national identity. The idea that disability is used symbolically in cultural representations to make another social critique is not unfamiliar in disability cultural theorisation. For example, Clifford Chatterly, the crippled character of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, can be seen as the embodiment of D.H. Lawrence's dislike of modern industrial society (see Kriegel).

A renegotiation of national identity throughout the 1990s in the face of globalisation and selling Australia overseas was manifest through the emergence of the term UnAustralian in the popular vernacular. This way of thinking about national culture often sees ideas of unity in opposition to cultural diversity (see Alberts and Millner). Indeed Chalke chronicles a list of Australian values he sees as persisting in spite of "minority groups" who have attempted to "mould Australian values to their causes" (online). I suggest the term can also be applied to national cinema and the representation of groups, such as the disabled, who do not fit into the broader national identity to illuminate constructions of nationhood and ideals of 'us' and 'them'.

Promoting a sense of nationhood is one of the functions of cultural policy (see Rowse).

However, there is no such thing as Australianness, and nations are imagined communities. The relationship between the constructed national identity and marginalized communities illustrate the relationship a national cinema has with itself when constructing a national identity. The notion of Un-Australianness while used by politicians is not something Australians seems to take too seriously (as opposed to Americans being accused of being UnAmerican during the cold war). Some consider UnAustralianness to be something Australians would not do (see Mackay) while others describe it as much more complicated (see Ireland). It was during the 1990s that the term came to take on more political meanings as it was used in debates around Asylum seekers and multiculturalism. Joseph Pugliese sees it as a term used to exclude groups from the national identity;

it [is] a term used to discriminate between individuals and groups that refuse to conform to the dominant culture. I see it as a divisive term, one that's predicated on an 'us and them' mentality. (Ireland online)

It has recently been used to exclude vegetarians, the Indonesian government, the upper classes, and people who don't follow sports. At different periods in Australian national cinema's post-revival history, certain minority groups have been presented as UnAustralian. For example, in both the ocker and male ensemble cycles, women have been demonstrated to be beside the point. Nationhood was an important focus during the 1990s in Australian national cinema where previously excluded minority groups were rehabilitated while a social/cultural (as opposed to medical) disability identity remained UnAustralian.

Several theorists have noticed the prevalence of disability in Australian national cinema during the 1990s and its symbolic value (see Ferrier; O'Regan; Rayner; Goggin and Newell; and Gillard and Achimovich). However, few have proceeded from a minority group standpoint that views disability as a viable identity, or indeed a minority group. These theorists often argue that characters who 'overcome' their disability are examples of diversity. The Aussie Battler certainly fits into notions of Australianness. However, these Australian critiques continue to locate causality for disability in the body, while the social model recognises that vulnerability associated with impairment is a cultural construction. Throughout this article I will consider the way disability is presented as an UnAustralian national identity in a number of Russell Crowe's Australian films made during the 1990s.

Russell Crowe – do you have to be Australian before you can be UnAustralian?

While my *Little Aussie Fact Book* lists Crowe as an Australian actor, there is some contention as he was born in New Zealand. At various moments in recent history Australians have accepted (when he won an Oscar) and rejected him (following numerous physical fights and other 'bad behaviour') as one of our own. Perhaps it is the characters he has played that has made Crowe 'Australian'. I will consider a selection of these roles to position a disability identity as beside the point in relation to an Australian national identity.

Crowe, an international actor who identifies as Australian, was featured in a number of culturally and commercially successful Australian films throughout the 1990s. His progression through a series of ‘unexpected’ Australian film successes such as *Proof* (1991) and *Romper Stomper* (1992) (see Reid) to become a Hollywood star yet continuing to accept Australian roles such as *Heaven’s Burning* (1997) typifies Verhoeven’s arguments around the commercial and cultural focus of 1990s Australian national cinema and the role of international stars. Many of his films included the image of disability in ways relevant to a discussion of Australian national identity *and* the wider international individualisation of disability in cinema. An understanding of Australian national identity is crucial to appreciation of a disability culture, as it remains peripheral to an otherwise culturally diverse national identity.

Disability as Culturally Defined

Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell argue that disability is an unexplored angle from which to examine 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. (1)

They conclude by suggesting that the lack of a ‘diversity’ approach is a key barrier to access to the Australian film industry for disabled people, and argue that disability must be thought of from a critical diversity perspective (12). Such a minority group model will see a shift in emphasis to social/cultural/political paradigm where physical or psychological causes will not be seen as the sole determinants of disability (see Pfeiffer and Yoshida).

Mike Oliver was integral in establishing a social model of disability by deconstructing the ‘personal tragedy’ theory of disability. This theory refers to the widely held belief that disability is a tragedy that occurs at random to individuals, requiring them to adapt; the ‘problem’ can be located within the individual. The social model recognises disability as a civil rights issue in line with class, gender, race and sexuality. Oliver’s redefinition of disability has formed the basis for further discussion on disability that has used a social framework. He focused only on social factors and described disability as a form of social oppression:

we define impairment as lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body; and disability as the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the main stream of social activities. (22)

Disability refers to oppression, not impairment. Words such as ‘Ableism’ and ‘Ableist’ organise ideas relating to a ‘nondisabled’ view of the world. Ableism describes the discrimination experienced by people with impairments. Fiona Campbell defines ableism as a network of beliefs that describes disability as “a diminished state of being human”

(44f). The concept is similar to sexism and racism and describes the focus of the medical model of disability.

The cultural origins of the medical model are being highlighted as disability is recognised as a social construction. Impairment is often used as an icon in Australian cinema to compress information about character and plot. This can be seen in *The Piano* (1993), where Ada who has 'no say' in her life is mute. Impairment is implicated stylistically as Campion makes a social critique of the patriarchy 'silencing' women. Films like *The Piano* which may not specifically deal with 'disability issues' yet use disability as a storytelling mechanism should also be examined under a social model of disability.

A number of 1990s Australian films presented minor characters with an impairment to reveal information about other characters or a wider social critique. This introduces the idea of film as a visual medium that must adopt visual methods of storytelling. These impairments operate as icons as physical impairments have become a part of film language, and have thus become another variable of meaning within the shot. This meaning is reliant on pre-existing social prejudice.

Ill-equipped figures

Heaven's Burning is an Australian road movie which uses the figure of the impaired male to critique Australia's masculinist outback identity. In order to get out of a stifling marriage, newlywed Midori, originally from Japan, fakes her own kidnapping while honeymooning in Australia. On the road she meets Colin who is running from an Afghani family whose son he killed following a bungled bank robbery. They negotiate the outback, revisit painful and disappointing memories and people and eventually fall in love.

Throughout *Heaven's Burning*, an atmosphere of mystery, menace, and deprivation is created as the protagonists negotiate the outback while escaping from various dangerous characters. This atmosphere is often invoked through characters with impairments. For example, Colin and Midori offer a ride to a man in a wheelchair who has been dumped in the desert because he has annoyed the other men in the pub one too many times. Rather than viewing his eccentric behaviour as a reaction to the way disabled people are positioned in Australian society, he becomes merely a very irritating person. When he is not playing his accordion or mouthing off, his wheelchair is implicit in his annoyance as it emits an annoying whirring sound. He even remains defiant in the face of the barmaid who insists the chauvinist men use good manners with her or get a beer in the face. He is identified problematically as an outback Australian man he used to shear, and now he is not welcome in the pub, yet he still wants to be there. His impairment UnAustralianises his otherwise generic Australian national identity.

This film uses impairment to rehabilitate a multicultural woman in outback Australia and give her power in changing the course of her life. Despite initially being 'rescued' by Colin, Midori is more active in rescuing him throughout the course of the film: stealing a truck, staging a bank robbery and driving him to the beach their final destination.

Simultaneously the film repositions Australia in the Asia Pacific region and suggests a reworking of identity as it UnAustralianises the outback identity in a global world through impairment. Crowe's Colin in particular highlights dissatisfaction with the identity laid out by the men (particularly fathers) who came before him.

Likewise, *Blood Oath* (1990) uses Asia and America as points of reference, as the action takes place in Asia (Indonesia) where both Asia and America are implicated in the losses Australia experienced by entering World War Two. As Britain lost its dominance in Australia, films began to favour other diasporas and considered different sides to the Australian identity in terms of loyalty. In particular, Australia's national cinema reflected a shift from Britain to America as the dominant power. Impairment has been used in this context as a punishment for the dominant power making mistakes. While films such as *Breaker Morant* (1980) and *Gallipoli* (1981) used a war setting to define an Australian culture and identity in opposition to a British one, *Blood Oath* shifted the focus to America as the dominant power sacrificing Australia for political gain. While the earlier films used death to critique Britain, *Blood Oath* uses impairment to make a similar criticism of American politics.

In this film, Captain Cooper is the prosecuting lawyer for the war crimes trials on Amdon Island after World War Two. He is attempting to prosecute high-ranking Japanese officials who ordered the execution of several hundred Australian soldiers. Although he is convinced of their guilt, he is encouraged to forfeit justice to politics. Japanese honour, American politics and the impact of trauma on the surviving soldiers silence the facts. This criticism is informed by medical advancements allowing seriously impaired individuals to remain alive when they would otherwise have died. In *Blood Oath*, Jimmy Fenton is experiencing shell-shock trauma due to the war-time atrocities he witnessed. Although his life is considered unfairly prolonged by the other characters, he does finally 'overcome his impairment' to become the prosecutor's key witness. These portrayals ignore the argument that disability is socially constructed as they continue to individualise impairment.

Jimmy Fenton is the only surviving witness to the crimes, yet is so impaired as to be unable to communicate and participate in the trial. Captain Cooper is driven by the desire to prosecute "the bastards that did this" and Jimmy, in an individualised ('stiff upper-lip') portrayal of disability, commences recovery for the love of his brother Eddie who was murdered. Despite entering the courtroom with his arm closely pinned to his chest, Jimmy is able to raise his right hand and put his left hand on the bible. Immediately following his testimony, Jimmy dies. In this way an invisible impairment is made more visible for cinematic viewing (a visual exercise).

When characters are represented as 'super cripples' who 'overcome' their disability, the gulf between the disabled community and the non-disabled community is widened (Barnes *Disabling Imagery and the Media* 13). Although there were no 'super cripples' as such in Australian national cinema during the 1990s, impairment was nevertheless

individualised in the same way with characters being encouraged to ‘overcome’ their impairments. For example, Andy says to Martin in *Proof*, “handicapped people shouldn’t sit around feeling sorry for themselves. They should have a hobby.” Likewise in *The Sugar Factory* (1998), Sam, the therapist, operates from a similar ideological position, blaming individual characters such as Stephanie for ‘choosing’ their impairments and, Gabe’s father in *Romper Stomper* implies that she is a drug addict when chastising her for not taking her anti-epileptic medication.

This is not Your Country

In *Romper Stomper* a group of neo-nazi ‘skinheads’ fight against a Vietnamese gang for supremacy on the streets of Melbourne. *Romper Stomper* is about the implosion of this neo-nazi street gang. The story centres on Hando, the gang’s charismatic leader, and the changing relationship he has with his best mate, Davey, and quasi-girlfriend Gabe. Gabe has epilepsy and this impacts on her relationships with Hando, Davey, and her father. Her impairment compacts character information in a similar way to *mise en scene*; conveying information about story, theme and plot. The filmmaker’s acknowledge on the DVD director’s commentary that Gabe’s seizures are indicative of the changing character arc of Gabe and Davey’s relationship. Gabe’s epilepsy is an aspect of her characterisation, especially with regard to her sexuality, and is depicted at three crucial moments to drive the story forward and comment on Davey and Hando’s changing relationship.

Hando is fanatical about maintaining a ‘pure’ white race, citing *Mein Kampf* as his inspiration. To Hando, Gabe’s epilepsy represents impurity to this perfect race. She has a seizure after Hando criticises her pasta as ‘bloody wog crap’. Hando and Gabe talking about her epilepsy are later juxtaposed with the group discussion about shooting the ‘head gook’, thereby likening her to the ‘impure’ Vietnamese. Gabe, while sitting behind a transparent curtain that has generic Asian characters printed on it, tries to reassure Hando of her ‘normalness’. The curtain separates her but its transparency includes her, the calligraphy reinforces her connection with impurity within the context of the narrative. While the Vietnamese are ultimately given an important position in a multicultural society, Gabe is not afforded a cultural identity and seems to redundantly fulfill cultural expectations as a vulnerable woman. Although an equally violent gang, the Vietnamese display a link to the community as they easily mobilise and come to each other’s aid in the riot scene. Gabe, on the other hand, relies on the protection of Davey and Hando. Although Gabe and the Vietnamese represent the same thing to Hando, they do not receive equal weighting in O’Regan’s multicultural projection of nationhood. Gabe is not afforded the opportunity to adopt a hybrid identity and rejects her impairment throughout the course of the film. She moves from one man to the next offering her sexuality as capital while attempting to pass. Her passing is an unrecognized aspect of the overall critique of a mono-Australian identity in which diversity is rejected.

Arguably, this is in line with the ‘see the ability, not the disability’ mantra of much of the disability human rights movement of the 1990s and, therefore, considered inclusive. It would be UnAustralian not to “give it a go”. This tendency is ultimately ableist due to the lack of pride in identity that it displays and its similarity to the integration aesthetic of

previous Australian immigration policies.

Comic Misadventurer – disability stereotypes

In *The Sum of Us* (1994), a young gay man (Jeff) is presented as a loving and caring son whose whole world does not begin and end with being gay; in contrast, his father (Harry) is not taught basic independence following a stroke. Harry and Jeff live together 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. Impairment acts as a narrative device as Harry’s stroke and consequential impairment works together with the other cinematic elements such as cinematography and *mise en scene* 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, and 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. One that seems to apply quite specifically to the Australian cinema landscape of ‘quirky’ characters 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 (20).

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. His son 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” a gay identity is rehabilitated at the expense of a disabled one.

Following Harry’s assertion to the audience that he is being treated like a fuckwit, the scene cuts to a close-up on 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, 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 suggests Harry was a candidate for rehabilitation who could have learnt to “go to the lav” independently. However, most of the time movie images strive to reinforce the notion that disabled people have nothing to live for. 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 (Longmore 119). While an international tendency, the film expresses this value in a very Australian way.

An intertextual reference to the male ensemble cycle is made in order to renegotiate Australian masculine national identity in a 90s context. Russell Crowe (indicative of a new Australian masculinity) joins with Jack Thompson; a quintessential outback man. As Harry, Thompson reworks his nude clothes scrubbing scene of the shearing shed in *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975) to the kitchen complete with an apron and sink full of dishes. The male ensemble features working class masculinity as the marker of Australianness. Gill Valentine links masculinity, class and disability when he argues, for working-class men, their ability to endure physical hardship is crucial to their identity and livelihood. Thus hegemonic masculinity is predicated on the absence of impairment (169). Likewise, Australianness is predicated on hegemonic masculinity. Although *The Sum of Us* questions and reworks this identity, disability is not afforded opportunity within the film to be seen as a viable Australian identity.

Morris looks to social stereotypes of masculinity when considering the representation of disabled men, which include strength, perfect bodies, not being vulnerable, a celebration of youth, and taking bodily functions for granted. She cites the examples of *My Left Foot* (1989) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) to illustrate the contention that “dependency is hell for a man”. These films, she argues, rely on stereotypes of heterosexual masculinity (937). They are about masculinity, not disability.

An Exploration of masculinity

Unlike these international films, representations in Australian national cinema do not (for the most part) explore the impact of vulnerability (as demonstrated by impairment) on hegemonic masculinity. It is rare to see impairment represented within a masculine context. *Hammers Over the Anvil* (1991) appears to be the stand-alone exception; however, impairment occurs at the end of this film as a way to tie up loose ends. This film is an exploration of being weak in a world of strong Australian men and the consequences of not playing by the rules. Alan has polio and walks with crutches; he wants to be like East. East is a great horseman who lives alone with his horses, every woman in town wants him but he is happy with his horses. An affair develops between East and Grace, the beautiful aristocratic woman on whom Alan has a crush. Alan witnesses the developing affair and promises to keep it a secret, even acting as a go between and cover up for them.

As East becomes too possessive of Grace and too comfortable in his quasi-father-figure role in the trio of himself, Grace (childless), and Alan (motherless), he suffers a serious

head injury and the paternal role is taken from him as is his hegemonic masculinity. In Australian national cinema the personal tragedy model of disability often works with bad parenting to punish the parents (*Death in Brunswick* (1991)). Within the Australian context, films such as *Romper Stomper*; *Muriel's Wedding* (1994); *Shine* (1996); *To Have and To Hold* (1996); and *Hammers Over The Anvil* identify fathers as the source of the problem (while internationally, mothers often receive the blame). There are some films such as *Proof* and *Envy* that identify bad mothering as the source of impairment.

Martin in *Proof* is one of the few impaired male protagonists of 1990s Australian national cinema. He is blind, and this impairment is made more cinematically visible through a walking stick, dark sunglasses and an almost totally immobile head. He interacts with his surroundings in a similarly revealing way. His impairment is individualised and operates as a cultural sign within the narrative to denote a loss of control and dependency on others.

Martin's inability to trust his mother explains the social restrictions he experiences later in life, such as his not being able to form a sexual relationship. When Martin was given a camera for his tenth birthday he thought it would help him see. He takes photos to prove that the world is as people describe it to him. However, he has never found anyone he trusts enough to describe the photos to him. His housekeeper, Celia, wishes he trusted her because she is in love with him. When Martin meets Andy, he thinks he can trust him enough to get him to describe his photos, but Celia manipulates Andy into lying to Martin.

Martin's attraction to Celia is hinted at, but not entirely explored within the narrative. However, they do engage in a kind of power struggle. Celia moves furniture so that Martin is constantly bumping into things; he is unable to control his environment. In these scenes the camera is framed on Martin's face, perhaps to reinforce his blindness as he stumbles. It is only after Martin has stumbled, that the film cuts to the obstruction on the floor. Martin attempts to regain power by refusing Celia sex, so that he can pity her.

At one point Celia almost succeeds in seducing Martin, but he pushes her away, telling her that he doesn't need anyone. The flashbacks portraying Martin's relationship with his mother are juxtaposed with his present relationships with Andy and Celia, locating the origins of his problems interacting with people in his relationship with his mother. Martin believes that he embarrassed his mother and that she lied to him about what was in the photos he took. At the end of the film Martin has fired Celia, and Andy describes the first photo Martin ever took exactly as his mother did. Throughout the film, Martin's mistrust of the people around him is individualised and the focus is on his relationship with his mother, who he falsely believes lied to him just because she could.

Conclusion

Andy Kimpton-Nye argues that representations of disability in cinema have more to do with the fears and desires of the filmmakers, who are often not disabled (35). Likewise, Norden suggests that society has a fascination with deformity and disability. The investigating gaze and the desiring gaze exist on a continuum and pleasure can be gained by watching disability on screen (6). In order to avoid discomfort amongst the audience, these images are aestheticised and made watchable. This is, according to Kimpton-Nye, due to the guilt experienced by filmmakers (35).

While Australian national cinema was committed to serving under-represented populations during the 1990s, its interest in disability was founded in a medical model and not a social one. The major emphasis of disability studies is shifting from a medical to a social model and this has implications for the film industry. However, with a few exceptions, such a shift was not evident in Australian national cinema during the 1990s where disability remained largely UnAustralian unless it ascribed to an individualized model. This is related to Ferrier's contention that:

[t]he image of the vulnerable body conveys anxiety about the shifting ground within and without Australia's cultural industries, and a sense of loss of control over cultural boundaries. Uncertainty about boundaries is linked with uncertainty about audiences – local, national and international. (63)

A consideration of disability amongst problematisations of Australian nationhood during the 1990s recognises the national and international concerns of the industry as it began to depend less on government support and sought funding from outside sources. The above quote from Ferrier suggests cultural stereotypes of disability as a weakness or lack of character and control both thematically and stylistically impacted the narratives being produced in the 1990s. The individualisation of disability is a national project which encourages the continued subordination of people with disability. Alternatively, the recognition of disability as being culturally constructed would extend the scope of analysis surrounding Australian national cinema as a diverse, national and international activity.

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