

## **How useful is the label ‘National Cinema’ in describing Australian film? A critical evaluation of the usefulness of the term with a look into four Australian films.**

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The term national cinema has continued to suspend itself in the same old and familiar disputed territory circumscribed by debates surrounding the reasons and rationale of its usage and its significance (or insignificance). The idea of associating an industry or cultural institution such as the cinema with national identity and the construction of that identity stems from mainly two notable occurrences. The first being the pervasiveness and popularity of cinema which has been either embraced by or forced upon the global community; and the second, (to some extent) a result of the first, is our prevalent conceptions of the critical and political dimensions of cinema and the arts<sup>1</sup>. From this transpires the instinctive act of connecting art with community, an act underpinned by the habitual trust given to cinema and to its assumed ability to explain the structures of society to its viewers<sup>2</sup>. This form of interpretation accompanying films marketed to the global audience creates the avenue for cultures or more specifically images of cultures to permeate borders while simultaneously giving its local viewers the opportunity to identify with the reality depicted on screen. It is, at least on paper, an ideal and effective way to establish a national identity in the watchful eyes of local and international communities, which is why Australian films have been made to prod through those channels while riding on the ‘National Cinema’ bandwagon. However, like all theories, this, which proposes the amicable correlation between films and identity, suggesting the former as reflective of the latter and therefore legitimizing the label ‘National Cinema’, has lured its fair share of exponents as well as opponents.

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<sup>1</sup> Monaco J. (1981), *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media* (revised ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University) p.6.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 2

In the effort to investigate the feasibility of the mentioned theory and evaluate the usefulness of the term ‘National Cinema’ as a label for Australian films, this essay will look at the films *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981) and *Lantana* (Ray Lawrence, 2001) to seek validity for that branding and proceed to explain what constitutes the claims that oppose the use of that label with a view into the films *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002) and *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003).

*Gallipoli* is Peter Weir’s 1981 film and one of the products of the Australian Film Commission’s emphasis on more ‘culturally respectable’ projects which many believe was a move away from more commercial productions. It showcases the experiences of a young Australian teenager named Archy Hamilton and his friend Frank Dunne who enlist in the Australian army and are sent to Turkey to take part in the Gallipoli Campaign. Archy’s character is one that resembles the classic Australian individual’s story – the ‘battler’ or underdog, striving against the odds for success. He overcomes the challenge of the long trek across the desert, discounting the warnings of an aboriginal who informs him of the impossibility of survival in the dessert. The vast Australian landscape which, in itself and in its own ways, is a huge part of Australian culture and identity, is presented just as formidable and erratic as any Australian would testify. As popular belief goes, the best Australian defies authority to serve the greater good, and uses his innate skills and the resources of the land to define himself and defeat the distant enemy<sup>3</sup>. Moulded as a representation of the national stereotype, Archy enlists in the Australian army despite not being of age, fooling the authorities in the desire to fight for his country. The film begins with Archy getting ready to sprint down a track in one of his training sessions with his uncle. He is established as a skilful sprinter who idolises the 100 meter world champion Harry Lasalles. His ambitious attitude is introduced to us immediately in this first scene and it is this skill and ambition that drives him

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<sup>3</sup> Rayner J. (2000), *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) pg. 12

on throughout the film. Loyalty, pride and ambition centred on one's self as much as on one's country are themes and characteristics shared by the majority and that, once again, prides Archy as a reflection of the populous. The theme of 'mateship' is also exhibited through the relationship between Archy and Frank who meet for the first time not long before their involvement in Gallipoli. The film ends, quite abruptly, with a running sequence reminiscent of the one at the very beginning. Archy's run this time, in the face of enemy gunfire is the most overt portrayal of sheer bravery, motivated by ambition, identity and history.

The film *Lantana* is a more recent example of an Australian film that could be used here. Released in 2001, it is a mystery drama that revolves around the complex relationships between characters set in suburban Sydney. The film explores the nature of relationships between middle aged working class individuals in contemporary Australia, using gothic elements in its illustration of suburban life. It succeeds in covering many aspects of social and more specifically married life involving many different characters of various historical backgrounds, ethnicities and identities, which could be taken as reflective of the complexities in culture and lifestyles in real – life, modern day Australia. The character Leon is a blend of the bits and pieces of all the elements present and conveyed in the film. His relationship with his wife is somewhat fractured by his own doing, his feelings are caught up between his job as a police officer, his love for his wife and his affair with Janie. The complexities within his character are difficult to discern and comprehend but can be sympathised as easily as he can be related to or identified with. As a representation, he is an annoying tease as well as comfortingly accurate. He embodies an important message that is equally important to be resonated throughout all angles of the viewing community – that identity is more complex than what can be shown on a movie screen, and yet all aspects of it are part of and driven by all that is universally human. The inadequacies he is marred by is seen throughout the film and arguably most apparent in one of the last scenes where he is seen lying in the symbolic

foetal position, refining Leon's character as the sway away from the usual stereotypical portrayals of Australian masculinity. He is an outright depiction of reality, a complex individual who no doubt carry in him some attributes of the stereotypical Australian male, but also the more deeper and intricate characteristics and emotions which are always familiar in reality. The film also reminds of the significance of the Australian landscape and the powerful role of nature in Australian life and culture. The lantana bush serves as a metaphor for the inter-twined stories between the characters and the complexities between and within them. The land itself becomes a driving force for a large portion of the narrative as most of the second half of the film is focussed on the disappearance of one of its characters, only to be revealed in the end that she fell off a cliff after running through the bush in the dark.

Interestingly, *Lantana* has many scenes in which Leon and his wife Sonja join other white Australians for salsa dance lessons. In fact the film ends with the two dancing alone in front of a plain white backdrop as if behind curtains that separate them from the rest of the diegetic world and that calls on the audiences' to focus their views on only one aspect or side of the world. The implications concerning the complexities of life and culture are once again apparent. Despite the richness in culture and lifestyle that is portrayed in the film and through its main characters, it seeks to remind us that it is only right to acknowledge the fact that there are still many different aspects of Australian life that many are not aware of. And although some may be willing to embrace it, it very often remains blanketed from the screen and is not able to access the right channels for proper reception.

Australia prides itself as a multicultural society but the difficulty in addressing this aspect of Australian society and culture (the culture of multiculturalism) through film lies in the need to serve and appeal to not only local audiences but also the rest of the world. The many sub – groups that make up the Australian society define various different identities and their role in Australian films are usually suppressed or blotted out by the broad strokes of

generalization or generalized representations<sup>4</sup>. The mission under the Australian New Wave cinema was that film was to serve the identification and refinement of essential Australianness<sup>5</sup>. Yet even in the late 1980s and possibly even later than that, the images of which Australians were referred to or recognized by were that of white men of the typical ‘ocker’ type or those not so different from Michael J. ‘Crocodile’ Dundee. The definitive version of Australianness has, at least in terms of film representation and portrayal, been somewhat elusive<sup>6</sup>. There is no denying that in more recent times, women, aboriginal Australians, and other ethnic minorities have been seen to have more significant roles in Australian films. However, commercial prospects and basic narrative practices in films do at times pose the threat of presenting an exaggerated or inaccurate portrayal of this fraction of society and their respective cultures. Moreover, exaggeration and inaccuracies are not reserved only for these particular groups. Films like *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972), *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986) and the more recent *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003) deliver exaggerated portrayals of Australian males and females that are not reconcilable by the majority and yet they are the images that are painted, under the ‘National Cinema’ tag, as the defining picture of the average Australian. Films employ narratives and characters that preferably can be identified with, and as a result of this basic story-telling practice, there lies a difficulty in distinguishing whether a character’s attributes are representative of the entire populous, one fraction of society or just his own. The same could be said for the film’s narrative – does it tell the story of an isolated individual, a small fraction of a particular society, or the entire nation? The tag or brand of ‘National Cinema’ would only serve as a burden that further blurs the lines between the

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<sup>4</sup> Rayner (2000), *Contemporary Australian Cinema*, (Manchester university Press) Pg. 2

<sup>5</sup> Dermody S., Jacka E. (1987), *The Screening of Australia Vol. 1: The Anatomy of a Film Industry*, (Sydney: Currency Press) pg. 35

<sup>6</sup> Rayner (2000), *Contemporary Australian Cinema*, (Manchester university Press) Pg. 7

mentioned distinctions and that makes accurate interpretations and representations all the more difficult to accomplish.

An examination of the film *Japanese Story* is necessary to prove how character representation in film can be exaggerated to such great lengths in the hunt for effective storytelling and wider audience appeal. The film *Beneath Clouds* by aboriginal filmmaker Ivan Sen has many underlying messages and themes that imply the status of minority cultures and identities as well as his ideas on where and how they stand in society today. It is a good way to see how far Australian films have come in its acknowledgement of the roles of ethnic minorities and aborigines as well as how well and accurate their stories and representations can be told to the global audience.

*Japanese Story* is Sue Brooks' 2003 internationally acclaimed romantic drama about an unlikely relationship between an Aussie geologist in Western Australia and a businessman from Japan. The representation of the female Aussie who had till then been bereft of adequate screen time is showcased quite vividly here for its world wide audience. The idea and appeal of the story was the fact that two distinct characters of extremely contrasting characters could come together and fall in love. The intended affection for the story and the success of its idea could only be achieved through explicit portrayals of extremely stereotypical characteristics that border on, if not defined by exaggeration. The Australian female geologist Sandy is the epitome of the stereotypical Australian living in the outback. In fact, one could agree that many of Sandy's characteristics are modelled on the already established and cliché male features that had served the global appetite for Australian representation and culture in films of the past. Her initial dislike for Hiromitsu, the Japanese businessman could be taken, on one hand, as understandable considering their polarized characteristics, and on the other, understood as a community lacking awareness, recognition and portrayal of the culture of the

other. However, their eventual coming together proposes a more positive future where the mentioned awareness and recognition are concerned.

Ivan Sen's film *Beneath Clouds*, released in 2002, shows the experiences of Lena, a daughter of an Irish father and aboriginal mother and that of Vaughn, an aboriginal Australian teenager during their journey to Sydney in the search for Lena's father and Vaughn's mother. The film reflects the lives of teenagers of mixed race and of aboriginal descent in Australia like few or no films have done before. It presents an immediate exposition of this one facet of the multicultural Australian society without ever exaggerating or at least showing any signs of exaggerating the two main character portrayals within the film. Lena's and Vaughn's characters seem sophisticated despite their young age and bits and pieces of their characteristics are revealed patiently and quite subtly to the point that it achieves believable accuracy. However, once again audiences and interpreters alike are in need of the reminder that the two may not and most probably do not represent the entire population of the groups or cultures they are seen as belonging to.

The characters of Lena and Vaughn who are in search of their father and mother, the symbol of their identity and security are metaphors as much as they are lessons alluding to the search for the identity, surety and significance that are associated with Australian culture. The two characters throughout the film do not say much but audiences are able to learn a lot from every few words uttered, leaving them to ponder how much they do not know of these cultures and to realize that too much have been suppressed. Pictures of factories sitting on the vast Australian landscapes seen in previous films as untouched or unsullied not only proves the frequency of inaccurate portrayals but also symbolizes the changing society imbued with more than one native culture and people.

Australian films have been one of the culprits in proliferating the stereotypes associated with white male Australians as well as the guilty party in suppressing the images of women, aborigines and other ethnic minorities in the past. They vary between overtly exaggerative portrayals of the mentioned stereotypes to attempts at subtle and more realistic depictions of reality. To brand and rein them all under the same banner of 'National Cinema' would seem unfair and unwise. However, the emergence of films and filmmakers who are beginning to bring the stories and cultures of various other fractions of society to the big screen spells a more positive and enlightening future for Australian Cinema. The term 'National Cinema' can and have been a form of narrow generalization. But it is not at all useless nor is it indispensable provided its application be appropriated to films bearing accurate portrayals of what the people of this country would want the world to see them as. The time when audiences' image of Australian culture exceeds the borders that the 'ockers', 'yobbos' and 'bronzed males' have set up is not too far away. The only fathomable consolation attainable from continuing to include all and sundry under that same 'National Cinema' banner, would be the given ability to reminisce the changes in perception that the world has taken on Australian culture throughout time and films. Evaluating the usefulness of hindsight in that respect would be cause for another debate altogether.



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