

films represent a new thematic departure. Certainly do we have an interesting metaphoric pattern here, underlining the trend towards Australian diversity and signifying the need to do something about the as yet thwarted potential of the marginalized individual in Australian society. These films challenge an important component of the Australian Legend; the image of the masculine Australian man, safe in his battler reputation created by the Lawson/Furphy school of nationalist writing, who was heterosexual, laconic, resilient and rugged, healthily tanned, and of course a good 'mate'. We need to remind ourselves just how strong the presence of this stock character in Australian films of the 1970s and 1980s was. Think of Bryan Brown for example, in *A Town Like Alice*, *Breaker Morant*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *Newsfront*, or *Blood Oath*. Think of Mark Lee and Mel Gibson in *Gallipoli* trekking across the W.A. outback and sprinting to the Pyramids. Think of every single male and stereotypically bronzed character in *The Coolangatta Gold*. Think of Jack Thompson as hard-drinking, hard-working and strike-organizing shearer in *Sunday Too Far Away*, as honest footie coach in *The Club*, as battling explorer in *Burke and Wills*, or as lawyer for the hopeless defence of the Breaker in *Breaker Morant*. Think of Mel Gibson as *Mad Max*, in a film that was a radical departure regarding genre, but with a title character who still fitted traditional paradigms of Australian mateship. Think of, if you can bear to do so, Paul Hogan, a.k.a. *Crocodile Dundee*. All of these characters had internalized what any man growing up in 1960s and 1970s Australia knew: that there are behavioral norms that need to be strictly observed to be included in a brotherhood of real men. To deviate only slightly from such norms meant vilification as a *poofter* and exclusion from a vital support group. The Australian film industry in the 1990s radically deviated from proven formulas, thus signalling more than just sheer boredom with the national identity trope.

### Hollywood Movies Made in Australia

The broad picture of the Australian film industry from the late 1980s on includes an acceptance of international trends, *Hollywood* trends in particular. Elizabeth Jacka argued that if the trend of the Australian national economy, of which the film industry is but a part, has to be towards globalization, then a dogged insistence on nationalist tropes would be regressive. And so she welcomed the swing towards international trends, calling *Australianness* in the new Australian movies an *anachronism* (Jacka 1993). One significant worldwide trend of the late 1980s and 90s has been an erosion of orthodox repre-

sentations of masculinity. Macho behaviour is increasingly seen as irrelevant and antiquated. There is a good example for this in *As Good as It Gets*, in which Jack Nicholson, who has always been seen as the embodiment of modern American masculinity, is transformed, like George Eliot's Silas Marner one might say, by his love for a sick child into a caring, warm person, and who builds a friendship with his gay (!) next-door neighbour. John Wayne may have been *the Duke* in his lifetime, but today he is a mere footnote of movie history, a stock character exposed to ridicule. You only need to compare Tom Hanks in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (who teaches English) in a small-town high school in his civilian life) with traditional war epics and their 'Waynesque' heroes, such as in Daryl Zanuck's *The Longest Day* (1962) or David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). Or consider the still continuing spate of rape movies, such as the big-budget *The Accused* (John Kaplan, 1988, starring Jodie Foster), which was followed by a veritable wave of made-for TV movies. In this context, it is worth mentioning there are three recent Australian films of the same genre: *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1992), *Blackrock* (screenplay: Nick Enright, 1994) and *The Boys* (screenplay by Steve Sewell, 1997). Clearly, the very genre of the rape movie in itself "subverts mythical masculinities" (Holland/O'Sullivan 1999).

But the clearest indication that traditional modes of sexual orientation are no longer viewed as normative are the so-called 'queer' movies. Queer sexuality has inspired a number of box-office successes such as *The Crying Game*, *Orlando*, *Philadelphia*, or *Swoon*. The French *La Cage aux Folles* (1978) was turned into the enormously successful *Birdcage* (starring Robin Williams) in 1996. Ang Lee made *The Wedding Banquet* in 1993. And there are quite a number of lesser-known cineastic gems where 'queering' is the main theme: *My Private Idaho* for example (Gus van Sant 1992), *For a Lost Soldier* (Roeland Kerbosch, NL, 1993), *Late For Dinner* (an independent US production, 1991, dir. Brian Wimmer), or the British release *Get Real* (Simon Shore, 1998). Just as prominent has been the trend towards lesbian movies: *Erotique* (thriller, dir. Lizzie Borden, 1994), the German production *Aimee und Jaguar* (Max Färberböck 1998, based on a true story that happened in 1944), the Australian movie *The Well*, based on Elizabeth Jolley's novel, (Samantha Lang 1997), and the Hongkong made *The East is Red* (Siu-Tung Ching and Raymond Lee 1992), in which the hero is originally a man, but who turns into a woman, re-living a series of lesbian encounters that took place over a period spanning several centuries. Even India has weighed in with the release of *Trial by Fire* (writer/director Deepa Mehta, 1996), a touching story of lesbian love and tragedy. Clearly, alternative sexual orientation has gained a lot of ground



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## 1. Introduction: Problematizing Australian Film

Problematization is synonymous with the 'application of knowledge' more generally. It not only represents and so defines the problem facing say Australian cinema, but it develops solutions for it. (O'Regan, 1996, 37)

To borrow from another declaration, this Committee holds certain truths to be self-evident. Namely, that it is in the interest of this nation to encourage its local film and television industry so as to increase the quantity and improve the quality of local material in our cinemas and on our television screens. (Vincent Report, 1963)

As anyone engaged in 'Australian Studies' soon finds out, discourses "of the nation" are unusually strong and lively in Australia, more so than in Western European countries. The passage from the Vincent Report quoted above, co-opting as it does the 'sacred language' from no less a document than the American Constitution for such a trivial-seeming matter as Australian film policy, is evidence for the nation's tendency to take itself most seriously. For example, "Australianize everything" was a motto of the Australian Ministry of Education in its bid to revise its school syllabuses in the 1990s. Many explanations for this phenomenon of intense debate surrounding the notion of a 'collective identity' have been put forward. Australia, so it is said, is still a 'young' nation, naturally paying more attention than others to the 'discovery' of its social and cultural make-up. Australia is said to be an "anxious nation" (Walker, 1999) poised at the edge of civilization, far from its European origins. Being insecure and anxious, the nation naturally debates with more dedication than others (such as the British, who were enviously perceived by Australians as calm and self-assured about their identity)<sup>1</sup> how it is constituted. Then there is the colonial trauma. The first settlers were convicts, criminals that the motherland had banished as undesirable and third-rate. From such inauspicious origins it was difficult to construct a self-image which allowed for national pride and identification with a community. Even though early references to Australia's interior included promises that a "lost Eden" might lurk beyond the desert,

<sup>1</sup> Since the 1980s, Britain, too, has been engaged in exploring its changed nature. The influx of immigration and the increased visibility of Asian and Caribbean cultures, the various crises in the Royal family, the joining of the European Union, all of these have broken up the erstwhile certainties that were envied by Australians.



## 6. No More 'National Identity': Issues of Ethnicity and Alternative Sexual Orientation in Australian Movies of the 1990s

The Australian Film Revival owed much to the nationalist sentiments that were in vogue in the 1970s, when national self-expression and the 'Australianness' of all the arts took centre stage in the cultural policy debate. A good, albeit late example of this discourse occurs in *Emerald City* (dir. Michael Jenkins, 1989), the film based on David Williamson's play of the same title. In a key sequence, the main character Colin (a scriptwriter, probably a self portrait) argues with an agent about the financial feasibility of his movie project. The agent (Mike) asks if there have been any Australian backers for the project, and when Colin grudgingly says no, offers to arrange American financing. The ensuing controversy is a typical example of an Australian cultural policy debate:

Colin: Why would the Americans be interested in the plight of our Aboriginals?

Mike: We've relocated it.

Colin: Relocated it?

Mike: We've reset it in Tennessee, and all the characters are black Americans. (*Pregnant pause*)

Colin: Mike, do you have the faintest idea why I might not be interested in doing this job?

Mike: The story is universal! Poverty stricken black girl grows up to be human rights lawyer!

Colin: There are vast differences between Australian Aboriginals and American blacks!

Mike: People are people, wherever they live. This is the age of the global village!

Colin: Not quite. Hundreds of years of separate histories and environments are not swept away just because *Sesame Street* teaches our kids to say 'have a nice day'.

Mike: Nationalism (*pause*) is the most destructive of all human forces, caused countless wars and billions of deaths!

Colin: Those are *our* stories, Mike, we have a *right* to them. We need to feel important enough to have fictions written about us, otherwise we'll always think

that life happens somewhere else, and is spoken in accents other than our own. (*My transcription.*)

*Emerald City* is probably the last movie made in Australia in which that hoary chestnut of 'Australian films for an Australian audience' is tossed around. It is curious to see that the correct assessment of what nationalism implies is given to the utterly dislikeable agent, who smokes a fat cigar, wears a Tee-shirt under his jacket, and tennis shoes without socks. In other words, his iconography is that of a heartless, uncultured Californian yuppie, whereas Colin, who is clearly out of touch with the globalization of the film industry, is made to look like a homely, sensible 'Aussie' bloke.

A few years later, Graeme Turner diagnosed a new trend in contemporary Australian movies. The strained search for a "national identity", the belaboured concept of "daydreams of our own" and "film as national self-expression" (Weir 1958), which had been championed by Australia's intellectual élites of the 1960s and later on by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, simply no longer mattered to the movie directors and producers of the 1990s. Pointing at such films as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Death in Brunswick*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, *Spider and Rose*, or *The Big Steal*, Turner argued that the "revival of a dated and nostalgic version of Australian nationalism" had come to an end, that the emphasis was now on Australia's diversity (1995, 32). And indeed, a merely superficial glance at some of the film titles of that era provides some evidence. *Strictly Ballroom* celebrates the Spanish community, and was referred to by Paul Keating in his famous "Creative Nation" policy speech (1988) as proof for Australia's "unashamed enthusiasm" for "the creative life of the nation" that manifests itself in the new multiculturalism. *Death in Brunswick* has a typically middle-aged Anglo-Aussie (played by a prominent representative of Australian maleness, Sam Neill) immerse himself in the Greek and Lebanese communities, where he is redeemed by a youthful Greek beauty and absorbed into her family. *The Heartbreak Kid* has an Adonis of a Greek high-school lad do the same to his lady teacher, though she is half-Greek already. *The Big Steal* portrays an example from an ethnic community that has become so rare as to be truly exotic and mysterious – they are Geordies. These as well as other new 'feel-good' releases, such as *Muriel's Wedding*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *The Sum of Us*, or even the violent and controversial *Romper Stomper*, no longer offer "a singular version of Australian identity" (Turner 34).

Similarly, and to some extent overlapping with the previous category, there has been a number of films involving a key protagonist who is either physically or mentally handicapped: *Bad Boy Bubby*, *Shine*, *The Sum of Us*, *Angel Baby*, *Cosi*, *Sing To Me My Song*, *Muriel's Wedding*. It is possible to argue that these



in the past decade, rendering the old 'mainstream/margin' polarity increasingly tenuous.

Two Australian films that were released in 1994 deserve our attention. One was the outback drag extravaganza *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (Stephen Elliot), the other a more sober family drama titled *The Sum of Us* (dir. Ken Dowling and Jeff Burton). Both movies represent conscious efforts by the Australian film industry to introduce a range of transgendered lifestyles into mainstream movies, and to foreground alternative sexual orientation. Both movies are "voyage[s] of self-discovery" (Brooks 1999, 85). *The Sum of Us* tells the story of the widowed Harry and his gay son Jeff; played by Jack Thompson and Russell Crowe respectively, the choice of these prototypically masculine actors is an aspect of the movie's gender-blending message. Jack Thompson, who ever since his portrayal of a champion shearer in *Sunday Too Far Away* has been perceived by cinema audiences all over the world as an Australian icon of masculinity and heterosexuality, is represented in this film as a type that represents a radical departure from a masculinist Australian norm. He is not homophobic and he does not assert his power over his son, as head of the family. Similarly, Russell Crowe's image was and is that of a heartthrob 'hetero' male; the film part which he had just before *The Sum of Us* was that of a tough neo-Nazi in *Romper Stomper*. Both father and son seek love: Jeff finds it in Greg, but the strain that is imposed on the relationship by Harry's meddling on the one hand, and by Greg's problems with his overbearing father on the other, is too great. Harry at least seems to have found romantic love in the divorcée Joyce, but Joyce walks out on him when, stumbling across a pile of gay magazines in Harry's toilet, finds out about Jeff's gayness and Harry's tolerance of it. Harry has a stroke that leaves him crippled and in a wheelchair, a symbolic gesture deflecting the AIDS scare, and reintroducing dangers of *heterosexual* rather than homosexual desire. What cripples Harry is the societal prejudice towards gays invested in Joyce, and so the blame rests on a well-known intolerance syndrome. Thus, the film turns societal fears about the 'typically queer' AIDS disease upside down: heterosexual Joyce causes Harry's collapse, and the homosexuals Jeff and Greg now come to the rescue. Script-writer David Stevens has explained that this bitter-sweet ending was designed to "blunt such negativity towards gays to invert the [AIDS] syndrome" (qut. in Brooks, 86). Moreover Greg, responding to the crisis in Jeff's household, cuts himself loose from his straight and overbearing father, thus rendering the Lacanian 'law-of-the-father' obsolete.

The emphasis on family relationships in a gay context can be seen both as a strength and a weakness of the film. Detractors of *The Sum of Us* (apparently

Sydney's organizers of the *Mardi Gras* festival called it a "sexist and homophobic narrative", qut. in Farrell, 162) have argued that the foregrounding of familiar and familial codes of behaviour serve to sanitize gay relationships, and indeed the film is remarkably chaste when it comes to the depiction, or rather non-depiction, of what physical homosexual love actually looks like. But I fail to see why one cannot praise the film for its departure from well-known and constricting codes, why one has to bemoan the film's imperfection without giving it credit for its newness. The glass is half full as well as half empty. The 'normalization' of gayness in *The Sum of Us* represents a significant advance towards the breaking of a typically Australian taboo; would the inclusion of a steamy homosexual love-making scene really have added that much to its significance? I would argue that both the choice of well-known 'hetero' film stars as homosexuals or homophilics, as well as the portrayal of gay family life as no different from straight family life, deliver to us the *culturally constructed nature* of our understanding of what is normal and what is not. This message is supported in a side-plot when Jeff remembers, in b/w flashbacks, his marvellous relationship to his grandmother who, as it turned out, was a closet lesbian until the death of her husband.

*The Sum of Us* has been belittled as a film "lacking balls" and as "a 'gay' film for a 'straight' audience", a put-down which Lorraine Mortimer calls "depressing" and involving "the creation of seemingly self-explanatory categories which are, in fact, problematic" (1994, 22). Karen Brooks (1999, 88) has similarly argued in relation to the lesbian component that the social and cultural role of grandmother is privileged at the expense of lesbianism. However, where does it say that 'grandmother' stands in opposition to 'lesbian'? We all know examples of terrific 'grandmothers' who were not biologically related to their grandchildren, but who brilliantly assumed that social role. It seems more plausible to argue that the concept of grandmother as applied to a lesbian further challenges conventional gender constructions. Jeff speaks truer than he knows when he says, "lezzo, dyke, what's the diff"? And the implied answer is – there is no difference to 'grandmotherdom'. Heterosexuality does not a good grandmother make. Family relations are only through societal assumptions and norms related to sexual orientation. Radical gay activists as well as academics tend to go for the "all or nothing" paradigm, resentfully finding fault in a movie that can be successful as a "mainstream" production, simply through its life-affirming energy. Even Chris Berry, Vice-president of the Melbourne Queer Film and Video Festival, admitted in an interview that

queer film is not oppositional in the old sense of a cinema that sought to overthrow the mainstream cinema. It's more insidious than that, which I like. It's



about osmosis ... and about gradually seeping into the mainstream somehow, creating a situation where the mainstream is no longer the mainstream, but one among many cinemas. (Stoney, 37)

*The Sum of Us* is clearly no radical, fringe-audience film, but it is a highly political film for all that. It treats the 'unconventional' central love story as natural (Mortimer, 19) and contributes to our understanding of the arbitrary nature of what is marginal and what is central.

### Priscilla, Queen of the 90s

*Priscilla* is about a trio of karaoke drag queens: Tick/Mitzi and Adam/Felicia (each character has a male and a female name in this film) are gay cross-dressers, whereas their partner Bernadette/Bernice/Ralph is a transsexual. The variety of first names is an indicator of the fluidity of identities. These three protagonists take their show from inner-city Sydney (a subtitle tells us: "Sydney, Australia") to the heart of the continent, to Alice Springs, in a bus which they christen Priscilla. The characteristic arrow that shows us their journey to the heart of the continent (as in so many explorer films) tells us that this is also a movie of self-exploration. Two of the songs which Mitzi and Felicia perform in the opening sequence underline the theme: "It Had to Be Me" and "I've Been to Paradise, But I've Never Been to Me", sung by Charlene, in 1980. (The song was re-issued in 1995 on a CD with the title *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*.) On their journey they meet an ensemble of Aussie types: small-minded small-town citizens, unhelpful hick kangaroo hunters, a helpful clan of Aborigines, some aggressive opal miners and a gentle Aussie mate aptly named Bob. Under the cover of darkness, homophobics deface Priscilla's exterior by spraying AIDS FUCKERS GO HOME on it. After a series of successful shows in Alice (where Tick/Mitzi is given an opportunity to re-bond with his ten-year estranged old son), the group separates; the transsexual Bernadette stays with Bob, whereas the other two return to Sydney.

This movie is Australia's answer to the American road movie. There are a number of points of contact with the Hollywood paradigm: the escape from a constraining environment, the encounter with backwards rural people, the encounter with an enchanted alternative-lifestyle group (in this case, outback Aborigines), the successful quest for the self, and a denouement that allows a return to the starting point. The *Australian* elements, which the film reviewers found more striking than its sexual politics (Robertson, 273) have to do with

visual poetry. *Priscilla* is the first departure from the Australian cineastic norm which forever represents the Australian landscape as a problem, as "ideologized by the colonial perspective of the European settler" (Collier/Davis, 28). Here, the outback is unproblematic, happily existing just for its visual splendour. Except for a brief scene in which the bus breaks down on a back road (leading to an epiphanic encounter with a tribe of Aborigines, who, unlike white homophobes have no trouble at all with the drag acts that the trio puts on for them), the land is presented in a joyful visual liaison with a series of bizarre cross-dressing acts. There are dazzling shots of a drag queen performing atop a bus hurtling through the outback, trailing a cloud of dust just as Felicia is trailing a 100-foot long silvery flag. The show put on in Alice Springs presents a visual feast, a sensuous poetics based on outback fauna and some other Australian icons which, it must be admitted, smothers some of the more serious concerns that might have been explored. But it would be churlish to criticize the film for what else it might have done and didn't do, when it explodes powerful orthodoxies. As my witnesses I call Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka. In their final chapter of *The Screening of Australia*, they complain of the orthodoxy into which the Australian film industry has slipped, asking "where in Australian film is the appetite and readiness for the marvellous, the appeal to exaltation, impatience with the sham of official public culture?" (1988, vol. 2, 241). It is all there, so I would think, in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

The movie opens with a series of shots that all suggest constriction – the claustrophobic interior of clubs and dressing rooms, a telephone booth, and some cluttered domestic spaces. The first exterior shot is of a funeral of Bernadette's friend in the showbusiness who has committed suicide. These opening scenes relegate the three protagonists to the margins of society and even the margin of life – a corpse, as we know, has the power to infect life. So when the trio decides to leave Sydney and thus the margin of the continent, when it opts for the open road and the outback, in other words for Henry Lawson's 'real Australia', it adopts a behavioural pattern for its 'aberrant' characters that we find in dozens of narratives dedicated to the Australian Legend. By borrowing from Australia's mythical past, the film attempts to "normalize" transgenderism and strikes a first blow for a blurring of the boundaries between traditional and non-mainstream Australian sexual identities. Movement is further foregrounded when the trio gets stuck somewhere along the route. Instead of wringing their hands about this piece of bad luck, Tick dresses in a lurid outfit in which he practices a dance act for the show in Alice, Bernadette dresses in bridal white and walks off into the wilderness, and



Adam uses the time to paint Priscilla in the typically 'gay' colour, lavender. By embracing a "trash aesthetic" (Quinn 1995, 23) they defiantly establish their identities. In postmodern-speak, they carve out a cultural niche for themselves, in other words they open up a liminal space, and from that space or niche, uncontained by any frames binary or otherwise, they establish their legitimate speaking sites. In any further trouble that they encounter, the solution is not to stand still, not to engage with a traditional discourse that is a no-hoper, but to depart from it, to advance towards Alice and the mythical heart of the continent. En route they find Bob, the 'faithful mate' of all Australian-Legend narratives, whom they liberate from his duplicitous, sexually promiscuous Filipina wife (a double whammy of mysogyny and racism, but that is my only criticism of the film). Another cheap but highly popular co-optation of a traditional 'Aussie' trope is the effective application of physical force. When a hick opal miner beats up Mitzi and then challenges Bernadette with a sneering "come on, are you going to fuck me", Bernadette knees him in the balls and walks away muttering, "Now you are fucked". The message is clear – just because a man looks like a queen does not mean he is un-Australian, the marginalized other, the helpless object of male aggression. She can be a female mate and a 'knock-out', in more sense than one.

What connects *Priscilla* with *The Sum of Us* is the claim for familial ties that is made in a crucial scene towards the end of the movie. Adam meets his estranged son and asks him if he is bothered by his queer-ness. The boy dismissively shakes his head. Something else is on his mind: "Mummy says you are the best in the business?" And when Adam puts on his garb and shows him exactly why they are "the best in the business", a perspective of fairly normal father-son relationship within a queer cultural context is offered. Here as in *The Sum of Us*, Australia is depicted as unproblematically multicultural, of which the diversity of sexual orientation is presented as a given.

What is, moreover, striking about *Priscilla* is its cineastic 'intertextuality', the way it consciously quotes from and refers to well-known Australian films. Sometimes to send them up, sometimes to self-consciously place itself in a tradition of representing the collective Australian self. The journey to the interior of the continent is framed like the *Burke and Wills* movie (Graeme Clifford, 1984), with an arrow sliding across the map towards the centre. When the trio leave the main road and take a dirt-road short cut, the bus promptly breaks down, leaving them stranded in the interior. This sequence has been borrowed from *Backlash* (Bill Bennett, 1986), right down to some of the dialogue. In *Backlash*, the female police officer reproaches her male counterpart in these words. "Now what are we gonna do. It's a hundred k's one way and a

hundred k's the other. I *told* you to stay on the main road, I *told* you not to go on the dirt track." Bernadette's reproach of Adam sounds like an echo: "Why didn't we stick to the main road? Jesus. What are we gonna do?" Bernadette then walks off into the outback, and a series of pull-back shots reveal its vastness – just like in the central episode of *The Back of Beyond* (1954), the episode of the two children who "walked into the sand" and were never seen again. Even the "coo-ee" sung against the nearest mountain by one of the girls, with the mountain cruelly returning the call, is quoted in that scene. The same pull-back shot features in *Walkabout* (Nick de Roeg, 1971), after the two children have run away from their murderous father, losing their orientation in the outback. This sequence relies on "the excessive use of .. metonymic background detail" (Kuna 25) so typical for Australian period films: the inevitable lizard makes a prominent appearance, then we look at ants and a scaly goanna, just as in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* or in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. In the next scene two hunters in a pick-up truck full of fly-blown Kangaroo carcasses drive up – a reference, it seems, to the coarse kangaroo-hunting pack of Ted Kotcheff's *Wake in Fright* (1971). And the clearest reference to a 'classic' Australian film occurs when the drag trio don their most outrageous clothes and stumble up a mountain slope to emerge on top of King's Canyon; a send-up of that crucial scene of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) when the three virgins climb up and then disappear into the Rock.

### **Toward the Postmodern: *Love and Other Catastrophes* and *Head On***

Emma-Kate Croghan's 1996 film about campus life at Melbourne University represents a further advance into a culturally diverse future. While *The Sum of Us* and *Priscilla* may have their funny moments, they nevertheless treat sexual orientation as something to be problematized, to be taken seriously. *Love and Other Catastrophes*, however, no longer offers up sexual orientation or diversity of ethnicities as issues – they are just there. The Jewish campus heart-throb Ari ("oh, everyone wants to bonk *him*," says Alice) talks about circumcision the way one used to talk about the weather, and his part-time job as a male prostitute never interferes with the story line or is critically engaged with. In another scene, Ari and Michael find themselves in a toilet and heavy breathing emanates from a cubicle. But then we hear a hissed and familiar "if it's not on, it isn't *on*". Out comes a student rushing towards a condom



dispenser; finding he has no dollar coin he accosts the two for small change. Michael obligingly dips in his pocket, gives him the coin, and seeing a ten dollar bill waved before him declines the offer, saying "that's cool." Which seems to be the motto: every form of sexual or ethnic diversity is "cool". The student then sprints back into the cubicle and we hear him say to his gay partner, "I got it!" Another storyline has the bi-sexual graduate student Mia wishing to switch her departmental affiliation, but she finds the highly bureaucratized switch considerably harder to make than the switch from a straight to a lesbian partner. She is saved in the nick of time by the "Head of the Course Enrolment and Change Department", who is called, naturally, Mr Papadopoulos.

*Head On* (Ana Kokinos 1997) is based on the most successful 'grunge' novel of the 1990s, *Loaded* by Christoph Tsiolkas. Starring the sultry Adonis-like Alex Dimitriades, is a very different film. If *Love/Catastrophes* was a prototypically "feel-good" movie, then *Head On* aims to disturb, to offend, to present a warts-and-all image of gay culture. To extend a metaphor: if *The Sum of Us* was accused of "lacking balls"; *Head On* exhibitionistically flaunts them.

The blurb on the videocassette says: "*Head On* is a film that goes all the way and never looks back." There is some truth in the first part of the claim: this is a film that looks at the seediest aspects of urban culture: male prostitution, explicit gay sex scenes, gay violence, police violence, drugs, cross-dressing, and street language that is so foul that even a medical doctor is likely to feel uncomfortable.

Ari, the 19-year old hero of this film, is the unemployed, drug-dealing, fellatio-providing son of Greek immigrants who became political refugees in 1967, when the fascist colonels seized power in Greece. But this is just a vignette of the past, and Ari has as little understanding for his father's politics as he has respect for the Greek migrant culture in Melbourne. From which, so it seems, he can never get away: the film opens with scenes from a traditional Greek wedding with the familiar strains of 'mouzak' and equally familiar attractive dance scenes. And how does Ana Kokinos comment on that culture, via Ari's behaviour? Ari walks away from the dancing and the wedding party, locks himself into his bedroom and begin to furiously masturbate. He has not derived any 'satisfaction' from it, is the crude message. Dancing (which in this film is predominantly male) becomes a recognizable *leitmotif* for the film. When we do not have men gently swaying and bending their knees, accompanied by traditional songs and string instruments, then we have, in stark contrast to the group ritual of the Sirtaki, gay men gyrating singly in violent, thumping movements accompanied by heavy metal disco sounds. Ari is not only alienated

from his father, and disconnected from his ethnic background (when spoken to in Greek he always replies in English), he is also unemployed, has no aims in life, is an occasional heroin user, a regular cocaine sniffer, and a compulsive sex addict. In a memorable scene of sexual orientation foibles, Ari is allowed to provide oral sex to his lesbian friend! But in the end she slaps him. You can't get more troubled than that.

Indeed, there are so many drug-using scenes in this film, intercut with fellatio scenes, that just to go the distance of the movie requires some effort. The film is relentless in its assault on our sensibilities, and offers not a shred of a hopeful ending. The final words spoken by Ari, as he rather incongruously dances the Sirtaki in front of Melbourne's dockland, after another night of gay sex, drugs, and violent blows with one of his casual lovers, are:

I am a whore, a dog, a cunt. (Pause.) My father's insults make me strong, I accept them all. I am sliding towards the sewer, I can smell the shit, but I am still breathing. I am gonna live my life, I am not going to make a difference. I am not going to change a thing, no-one's going to remember when I am dead. (Cut to: 1950s migrants arriving in Port Melbourne in b/w.) I am a sailor and a whore, and I will be to the end of the world.

Surprisingly, the film found a very positive response in Australia's gay community, particularly in Melbourne, where the film is set. The despair about being a young 'poofteer', which is almost as bad in traditional Greek society as it is in Australia, was deemed well expressed. The same-sex sex scenes that (for this hetero viewer at least) very soon begin to grate on your nerves, were found to be 'authentic'. Heterosexual viewers will assume that anal intercourse is practiced only by homosexuals. But Ari's lesbian friend has an ethnic 'take' on it: Of course you take it in the ass. All Greeks take it in the ass, don't they? This is indicative of the low esteem in which the Greek community is held in Melbourne. Greeks are seen to be arrogant and aggressive, unable to accept criticism or the Australian cultural mainstream. Ari's arrogance is undeniable: it comes across in his off-hand ways with his parents but also with his recently-engaged Greek 'mate'. There is an argument between them in the pub, and even though it is clear that the 'mate' has won, Ari cannot accept defeat. His arrogance also spills over into ideas of his own sexuality. He has sex with men, but he still has to maintain a macho image and is never really able to relate to other gays. When his mother tells him that it is his responsibility to "look after" his 18-year old sister (who has a sexual relationship with a young Greek, but must keep this from her parents though not from her brother) Ari actually accepts the order. In the middle of the night he goes in search of his sister, drugs her and her beau from a car, threatens the lover with violence – in short,



postures as the warden of traditional morality. Then he goes back to the pub, follows an older man, a total stranger, outside – and fellates him.

At this stage it is perhaps appropriate to make more than just a few superficial comments on (Australian) gay culture. Perhaps it is insufficient to label it sex-crazed and drug addicted. From what I have ascertained through a number of Melbourne's gay community I would say that it is indeed more willing to indulge in drugs and promiscuity. The latter co-exists with many loving long-term relationships: gays seem to be less possessive of their partners when it comes to sexual fidelity, and 'crimes of passion' – depressingly common amongst married couples – are virtually unknown in the gay community. Gay culture is, by definition, a sexual culture, and hence one that is predicated on pleasure. As sex no longer has a reproductive function, it is simply fun. As we all know, men are always wanting it, and when you put two men together, the urge is doubled. Gay men have always had more sex than straight men. Gay men are generally more inventive (or perverse?) when it comes to sex: whilst some heteros may have an interest in black leather, for instance, gays have made it into an integral part of their culture, and have codified the form of dress. If one looks at the classified advertisements of any gay magazine, one will see an almost endless variety of sexual practices. Gays do not have a monopoly on these practices, but they are an integral part of the culture, and they are not just pornographic fantasies as in hetero culture. And here we have a link to other manifestations of the hedonism of gay culture, viz. dancing and taking drugs. Hetero men, as we all know, are notoriously unwilling and inept dancers. In contrast, even when they are in their 50s and 60s, gay men will regularly go dancing on a weekend, and dancing has now been identified by medical experts as essential in preventing Alzheimer's disease. Real drug addiction is something that tends to occur in one's teens or twenties, while the gay community tends to have a make-up of considerably older men. With the hard-wiring of the brain at maturity, drugs are far less likely to interfere with a person's normal functioning.

For any hetero viewer, the 'gay' theme in *Head On* is the most distinctive theme, as overt gay sex is still very much a taboo subject for the film industry, and the novelty of these scenes is at first overpowering and repulsive. But a second viewing will reveal that gayness is only one of several themes. The film is not leastly about people who are entangled in cultures, Anglo-Aussie and Greek, gay and straight, hedonistic and socially responsible, politically smart and politically ignorant.

Viewed from that perspective, the "alienation-from-greek-origins theme" is equally distinct. The new generation, as always, does not share the parents'

values. Even Ari's likeable sister Betty says to mum: "This house is like a prison." Mum, fishing for a gesture of gratitude from her daughter, hints at her painful immigrant experience: "I have worked hard all my life, and you children have all let me down." The daughter's hard-nosed response is: "Lead your own life mum. Stop living it through us." (Violent response from the mother, she tips everything that has been laid out on the dinner table onto the floor. This is suitably spectacular, and in keeping with our clichés of passionate Mediterraneans.) No conciliation seems possible. Ari's nephew gets engaged ... but who to, a feckless obese young woman, who is more infatuated with Ari than her fiancée. But the couple are following traditional social/ethnic patterns, their place in the community is secure. Gay viewers have found the engagement scene as indicative for the valorizing of a 'hetero' lifestyle. How wrong! A 'hetero' audience will see a disaster in the making, the start to a quietly unhappy married life.

In a central scene set in a dance pub a group of Greek-Australian youths conduct a discussion about racism and immigration issues. A bright young woman named Mary, whose creed is "I fight racism any way I can", says: "that's what's wrong with this country: everyone hates everyone. The Skips hate the Wogs, the Wogs hate the Asians, and everybody hates the Blacks." To which a sceptical old man adds (in Greek, subtitles are provided): "but they *are* different from us. The Vietnamese spit in the streets". *Quod erat demonstrandum*. If we were thinking for a moment that this group of more tolerant, more enlightened group of young adults provided a glimmer of hope, then we are frustrated to find that the debate degenerates into petty squabbles and name-calling.

As indicated earlier, this is the exact opposite to a 'feel-good' movie. Perhaps this is the film's 'unique selling proposition': If you feel jaded by the somewhat saccharine elements of *Priscilla* or *The Sum of Us*, or in the 'ethnic' film genre, of *Looking for Alibrandy* or *Wog Boy*, then the teeth-gritting realism of *Head On* comes as a welcome antidote.



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Adi Wimmer

## **Australian Film**

**Cultures, Identities, Texts**

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