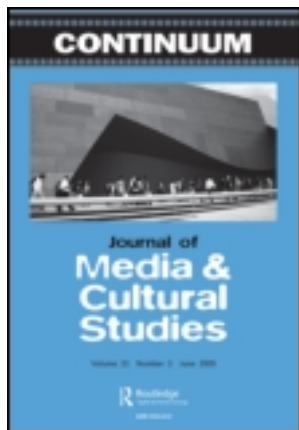


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Publisher: Routledge

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Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccon20>

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Published online: 29 Jul 2011.

To cite this article: Olivia Khoo (2011) Australian cinema up in the air: Post-national identities and Peter Duncan's Unfinished Sky, Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 25:4, 547-558, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2011.575212](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2011.575212)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2011.575212>

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Australian cinema up in the air: Post-national identities and Peter Duncan's *Unfinished Sky*

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This paper examines Peter Duncan's film *Unfinished Sky* as an example of post-national Australian cinema. Addressing dominant frameworks in Australian film criticism that focus on the concept of the national, the paper argues that the 'national' has in fact been reconfigured in the cinema of the new millennium, placing it within a post-national or regional environment. In several recent Australian films there has been an increased engagement with the region, both in terms of the representation of regional areas outside Australia, such as Asia and the Middle East, as well as demonstrating a growing sense of openness to global influences and connections in remote or regional settings within the country. Addressing these various shifts, the paper questions how relevant is it to continue to define Australian cinema in terms of the 'national', as has long been dominant in Australian film scholarship, when aiming to take into account different races, ethnicities, and identities appearing on screen today. This is especially worth reconsidering since the demise of multiculturalism from the mid to late 1990s as an official cultural policy situated squarely within the framework of the national.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of Australian and American films setting their sights on the stars. In 2007, Peter Duncan's *Unfinished Sky* was released, with Brad Haynes' *Broken Sun* following in 2008. In the United States, Ben Stiller's spoof, *Tropic Thunder*, was also produced in 2008, followed by two other highly successful films, *Up* (dir. Pete Docter), and *Up in the Air* (dir. Jason Reitman) in 2009. This turn of attention to the stratosphere might suggest several things about a post-9/11 atmosphere of aspirational cinema and the search for alternative points of view from which to question existing terrestrial borders and relationships. This paper looks specifically at what it reflects about contemporary Australian cinema as it goes up, up, and away from the national and becomes post-national, or as I shall elaborate, regional.

The release of Peter Duncan's *Unfinished Sky*, a remarkable film in many ways, passed quietly after a short run during 2008. Shortly after, Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder* bolted through the screens with a mass release fitting of its all-star cast. These films are an unlikely pair but both feature versions of 'Australianness' that reveal the extent to which Australian cinema has become globalized in the new millennium. Although *Unfinished Sky* is not directly concerned with Asian-Australian relations (unless the definition of 'Asia' is extended to Afghanistan or South-Central Asia), the film exemplifies a regional

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cinema that is of central importance to Asian Australian studies given the current dialogues in circulation concerning refugees, boat people, and asylum seekers from South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The regional cinema that I seek to characterize takes into account movements and connections between and across nations within a shared cultural or geographical area that cannot accurately be described as global. To plot this movement from the national to the post-national (and regional) in *Unfinished Sky*, I begin with an unlikely relation, Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder*.

It's raining identities

News of Ben Stiller's latest comedy spoof and first directorial effort since *Zoolander* was greeted with a mix of incredulity and excitement when it was announced that Robert Downey Jr would be in blackface, playing a five-time Academy Award-winning actor, Kirk Lazarus, who undergoes a controversial 'skin-darkening' procedure in order to play an African American Sergeant, Lincoln Osiris, in *Tropic Thunder*.¹ Downey Jr was reported as saying on *Entertainment Weekly*, 'If it's done right, it could be the type of role you called Peter Sellers to do 35 years ago. If you don't do it right, we're going to hell' (Vary 2008).²

With the controversy surrounding Downey Jr's portrayal of Lazarus playing the African-American Osiris, the fact that Lazarus was also nationalized as Australian was all but ignored. On the (fictional) website for the character created as part of the film's marketing strategy, Lazarus' biography states:

Born in Kalgorlie [sic], Australia, into a turbulent divorce, Kirk Lazarus was raised alternately by his father (an electrician and amateur boxer), his grandmother, and Child Welfare Services. Upon his father's release from prison, and as a result of the still unsolved disappearance of his biological mother, Kirk finally settled and was raised by his aboriginal half-sister Bree (three years his junior) and her boyfriend Angus, in a modest apartment bloc in Coober-Pedy. ... According to his half sister (now late) he had 'a real handle on catchin' and knockin' the piss out of the wallabies, and he was as wild as a one legged dingo with a rash...' (<http://www.kirk Lazarus.com/>).

With the film marketed towards an international audience, the aspects of Australian identity through which the comedy of the paragraph are inflected come through an exaggeration and conflation of low socio-economic status with racial miscegenation, in particular between white Australians and indigenous Australians. Australia as a rural backwater, indexed by the scarcely populated mining towns of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia and Coober Pedy in South Australia, is also lampooned. The racial politics of the film are further complicated (or simply confused) when the only African-American in the cast, Alpa Chino (played by Brandon T. Jackson, parodying the actor Al Pacino), insults Lazarus by calling him 'Crocodile Dundee'.

Lazarus: Pump your brakes, kid. That man is a national treasure.

Chino: I just wanted to throw another shrimp on your barbie.

Lazarus: That s— ain't funny.

Chino: I'm just f—ing with you, Kangaroo Jack! I'm sorry a dingo ate your baby.

Lazarus: You know that's a true story? Lady lost her kid

In one brief exchange, the two characters manage to collapse an iconic Australian film star, a cinematic blockbuster and national tourism campaign, with the 'crime that gripped the nation' in the Azaria Chamberlain case, as a set of clichés standing in for Australia.³

Under the weight of these stereotypes, and with his character threatening to overtake him, Lazarus teeters on the brink of a nervous breakdown, questioning, 'who am I?' For Lazarus, wondering where the bloody hell he is, the answer is that he is in fact an Australian, and with that realization, he suddenly regains a broad Australian accent towards the end of the film.

The multiple displacements leavened upon Australian identity in Robert Downey Jr's character in *Tropic Thunder* point to a larger trend of the globalization of Australian cinema, magnified in the context of Hollywood, albeit in this case involving the superficial portrayal of a static Australian identity reduced to Crocodile Dundee and outback Australia. *Tropic Thunder* is playfully, although perhaps insultingly, acknowledging of Australian cinema and identity as it has become internationalized (no doubt aided by the success of Australian actors in Hollywood). While Australian identity is parodied in *Tropic Thunder*, it is taken far more seriously in Peter Duncan's *Unfinished Sky*, representing a changing era of globalized Australian cinema not only from within Australia but also from a European, specifically Dutch, perspective (the film is an Australian-Netherlands collaboration).⁴ In *Unfinished Sky*, another stratospherically titled film, we see Australian cinema's attempts to stretch its boundaries made all the more significant because the film is placed in a remote or regional setting, instead of the (already globalized) urban centres, internationalized through the figure of the refugee. A far cry from the urban comedies and dramas of the 1990s, *Unfinished Sky* represents an Australian cinema that has become post-national *and* regional. The question I seek to address, through an analysis of *Unfinished Sky*, is how relevant is it to continue to define Australian cinema in terms of the national, as has long been dominant in Australian film scholarship, when aiming to take into account different races, ethnicities, and identities appearing on screen today? This is a question especially worth reconsidering since the demise of multiculturalism from the mid to late 1990s as an official cultural policy situated squarely within the framework of the national.

The post-national, or beyond Australian national cinema

There's a definite mutation going on in Australian cinema

Dave Hoskins (2007)

The concept of national cinema has been problematized and called into question in recent film scholarship at the same time as there have been renewed efforts to resurrect it (Vitali and Willemsen 2008). Australia, a product of its geographic isolation and history of government-sanctioned support for the film industry, has been particularly dependent on a concept of national cinema as having a key role to play in the strengthening of national identity. Despite national cinema frameworks dominating Australian film scholarship in previous decades, new models for considering the cinema are also appearing in response to what Deb Verhoeven (1999, 4) calls 'a crisis of representation at the heart of the national'.

Australian cinema of the new millennium has been referred to variously as a 'late national cinema' and a 'post-national cinema' (Craven 2001, 3; Verhoeven 1999, 4). Both of these terms draw attention to, and question the centrality of the discourse of, cultural nationalism that has underpinned the cinema of preceding decades. The 1970s to 1980s has generally been considered the period of Australia's filmic renaissance, with the film scholarship of that period examining how public subsidy measures fostered a cinematic revival supported by a trenchant cultural nationalism. The 1990s witnessed the beginnings of internationalization and the development of local/global connections in the cinema,

especially in the urban comedies of that period (O'Regan and Venkatasawmy 1999; Reid 1999). Writing in the late 1980s, Ross Gibson noted, '[Australia] is now perhaps more interested in the world rather than in boundaries that could theoretically separate the nation from the remainder of the international community' (1994, 58–9). Arguably, in the cinema of the new millennium, the focus on the national has been even further in retreat; or more accurately, the cultural nationalism of the preceding periods has not so much been replaced as now accompanied by an 'open-ness to the possibilities of the global' (Craven 2001, 2).

Another way of casting this 'openness' is as a form of post-nationalism. As Deb Verhoeven (1999, 4) writes:

In what might best be described as a type of 'post-nationalism', the cinema (and its critics) are perfectly aware of its 'being national' and work to continually stress the definition of this awareness. What might pass as usefully or simply 'national' for the purposes of cultural argument and policy is instead ... 'over' or in some way 'beyond' the national ... [But] the post-national Australian cinema is at once a cinema already completed and a cinema yet to be(come) accomplished.

What does Verhoeven mean by this – of a cinema already completed and a cinema yet to become accomplished? It is clear that post-national cinema does not sound the death knell of the national in cinema (or the concept of national cinema). For the reasons stated above, the concept of national cinema continues to persist in relation to Australian identity and in Australian film scholarship, even as it is increasingly accompanied by a greater willingness to engage with international influences and concerns. What it does mean for film scholars and critics is that it is no longer possible simply to 'look for' the national hidden in Australian films because the concept of the national itself is being reconfigured. Not only is it important to consider how the national continues to make its appearance in the cinema, it is also necessary to consider its 'dis-appearance' from the cinema (Verhoeven 1994, 4). The national has not simply dissolved into a global expanse. It has made its appearance (and its disappearance) in other contexts, one of which may be described as a post-national environment. In this post-national environment, both regional and global imperatives impact on what constitutes the nation, national culture, and national identity. The nation-state idea has mutated, and so too have the national myths that support it. Ross Gibson (1994, 58–9) explains, 'as the economic and cultural constitution of the society is currently "internationalising" so radically, the requirements of the national myths are also altering'.

Australian film scholars have attempted to account for these new 'requirements' of national myths by reinterpreting the myths according to changed social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. For instance, in their book *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, Felicity Collins and Therese Davis (2004) evoke the notion of 'backtracking' across traditional notions of national identity and longstanding national myths to find new paths that would allow us to reconsider the role of national cinema in a global politics of history, memory, and identity. They explore the effect that the landmark High Court decision of *Mabo* created in 1992, prompting a paradigm shift (cultural as well as political) in Australian historical consciousness (Collins and Davis 2004, 3). A key term that the authors develop is that of 'aftershocks' created by the paradigm shift, affecting how Australia now regarded its identity, the land, and how to belong to the country. For example, the myth of the landscape as a marker of national identity has shifted across time – from the shock recognition of *terra nullius* to Pauline Hanson's One Nation rhetoric during the mid 1990s over the co-option of land and space by Asians. In the present day, the situation of refugees entering the country by boat appears to be one of the

most pressing concerns on the political agenda, and the discourse of guilt and shame that Collins and Davis (2004, 17) develop in their book applies not only to indigenous Australians, but also, arguably, to new migrants and refugees as well.

Another way of casting 'tracks' across Australia and beyond is to consider the question of borders; not just internal or domestic, but also 'the extremities of the national geo-body over its oceans and neighbouring regions, as well as upon enemies imaginatively located at the limits of the nation' (Perera 2007, 4–5). In this context, it is especially important to acknowledge the kinds of thinking that have underpinned the country's official government policy, given that so much of Australian cultural life is policy driven. In particular, Australia has come to global prominence (or infamy?) because of the way it has championed new forms of restrictive policies involving territorial redefinition, mandatory detention, and resettlement schemes towards asylum seekers over the past ten or so years (Gibney 2004, 191). It is also in this context that the notion of the regional assumes significance as it is asylum seekers from certain regional areas, particularly Asia and the Middle East, that have predominantly sought refuge in Australia and that have been grouped (and often vilified) according to their regional, as opposed to national, identity.⁵

In the cinema, there has been a group of recent Australian films that speak to the crisis of the national (of its disappearance and reappearance in regional contexts) through a portrayal of the plight of refugees. These films, which can be considered post-national and regional, include *Unfinished Sky*, *Lucky Miles* (dir. Michael James Rowland 2008), and Clara Law's documentary *Letters to Ali* (2004). Regional cinema is not simply a mid-point between the global and the national or reducible to either. It is, more accurately, a form of post-national cinema; one that considers the renewed place of the national but also its disappearance and displacement into new geographical formations – here, the region. Specifically, regional Australian cinema conceptualizes Australian cinema not only or necessarily through connections to other English-speaking cinema (most notably British and American cinema), but through its connections to Asia, or the Middle East, or to other regional entities that impinge on Australia's conception of the limits of its own national boundaries. This definition of regional cinema differs from purely geographical or linguistic markers, as found in regional Indian cinemas for example. Regional Australian cinema still attends to the local and the national, albeit as they have become more open to international forces and relationships. The definition of regional Australian cinema also contains a different meaning, one that centres on remote or rural Australia and Australian identities, both in the form of clichés as parodied in *Tropic Thunder*, and also in ways that simultaneously dismantle these stereotypes. 'Regional' Australia, in this sense, is represented as a new frontier that is becoming increasingly globalized or internationalized in the cinema of the new millennium, moving away from the dominant portrayal of the internationalization of urban centres in the hit Australian films of the 1990s. Through both of these connotations of the regional – one within Australia's national borders and the other attending to regions outside it – notions of boundaries, routes, and connections are re-emphasized in multiple and sometimes confounding ways.

Unfinished Sky is a pertinent film through which to explore these connections given that it shares many elements with other regional Australian films made around the same time. The scenario of a lonely farmer whose life is changed (for the better) through his relationship with a stranger from a different culture is echoed in the low-budget production *Broken Sun* (dir. Brad Haynes 2008). The film also shares elements of human trafficking with *The Jammed* (dir. Dee McLachlan) and illegal refugees with *Lucky Miles* (dir. Michael James Rowland), both released in 2007.⁶ In the following analysis, special attention will be paid to *Unfinished Sky* because the film has been consistently overlooked

in the criticism of this period despite its representation of a paradigm shift towards a post-national or regional Australian cinema. In *Unfinished Sky*, the question of sovereignty is raised not only over the national border (that is, space), but also in relation to the (international) bodies that cross over it.

***Unfinished Sky* and other stratospheres**

Unfinished Sky won six awards from ten nominations at the 50th Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards in 2008, including Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Lead Actress, Best Lead Actor, Best Cinematography, Best Sound, and Best Original Music Score. It also received four Inside Film (IF) Awards the same year.⁷ Since its premiere at the Brisbane International Film Festival in 2007, *Unfinished Sky* has screened at numerous international festivals and taken approximately \$1 million at the Australian box office. Yet despite this success, the film has received relatively little critical attention in Australian film scholarship. This can be compared to the response that met Michael James Rowland's *Lucky Miles*, a film released the same year (see, for example, Grace 2008; Simpson 2007; Perera 2009; Stratton 2009). Both films play on fears in the community over asylum seekers and boat people arriving on Australian shores during the late 1990s and early 2000s; that is, fears over the security of national borders being compromised by foreign 'others'.

According to the film's production notes, *Lucky Miles* began as a response to Thomas Friedman's book on globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999). The film is described as 'more than an Australian story – it's about a shrinking world where cultures collide'. The remote coastline of Western Australia is employed as the setting for this tale of globalization, using the figure of the refugee to explore ideas of 'contact' – both hostile and hospitable. As possibly Australia's most isolated state, Western Australia is inevitably drawn into debates concerning border control, as much as it must also contend with debates over regionalization given its proximity to (Southeast) Asia. The tagline of *Lucky Miles* is 'too much paradise', suggesting that the north of the state is 'too attractive' to unwelcome visitors at the same time as the harshness and beauty of the state also become a trap for asylum seekers hoping to find refuge there. Using comedy to create empathy with its characters, the film is premised on the journey of one refugee, Arun, who arrives by boat with several others from Asia and the Middle East, to make it to the city (Perth) in order to find his father. The film's end point is in the city, but there are no clear-cut answers there as to whether Arun will be accepted by his white Australian father. The film is deliberately ambiguous on this point, but the key to the film's impact is that it has also considered the possibility of openness to 'foreign bodies' in remote areas of Australia; that is, outside urban centres.

Told in a more dramatic tone, Brad Haynes' *Broken Sun*, produced a year after *Lucky Miles* and *Unfinished Sky*, also focuses on the effect of cultural difference on (white) Australians living in remote or regional areas, as opposed to urban centres.⁸ The film is based on the 1944 Cowra Breakout by Japanese prisoners of war (PoW) during the Second World War which resulted in the deaths of four Australians and 231 Japanese. Jack (Jai Koutrae), a reclusive New South Wales farmer and First World War veteran, remains haunted by his experiences of that war while the Second World War is taking place. Beyond Jack's farm is the Cowra prison camp. When a Japanese PoW Masaru (Shingo Usami) escapes and is found on Jack's rural property, he is marched back to the prison camp by Jack, with the ensuing journey altering both men's preconceptions of the other. As with *Lucky Miles* and *Unfinished Sky*, but different from Clara Law's *Letters to Ali*, the

film explores how conflict and confrontation can be dealt with not through reportage or documentary, but rather through fiction.

The gender politics of this film, as with many of the others mentioned, is also significant for its foregrounding of male protagonists both in the roles of refugee and outsider, and also in the role of boundary-policing white Australian (see also Stratton 2009, 630). In *Unfinished Sky*, as in *The Jammed*, however, anxieties about border control, security, and asylum seekers are embodied in the figure of a woman. Suvendrini Perera (2008, 69) frames this gendered form of representation within the phrase 'the gender of border panic'. This 'panic' arises because of a fear that the security of the state or the national way of life is under siege. In *Unfinished Sky*, the fears are only implicit and ultimately result in a positive transgression of boundaries by the male protagonist, John Woldring (William McInnes). Ideas of 'home' and security are played out in a sphere of domestication, resulting in a different meaning of 'home' for the female protagonist, Tahmeena (Monic Hendrickx), as for Woldring. The film globalizes both regional Australian identities and Middle Eastern asylum seeker identities and is significant for how it registers different perspectives on gender and globalization outside ('over and beyond') the national context; that is, in a post-national environment.

From Polish bride to Afghani refugee: Making and remaking home

Unfinished Sky opens with Queensland farmer, John Woldring, silently performing his daily routines with only his dog Elvis as a companion. Woldring is seemingly self-sufficient and only comes to realize that he is lonely when Afghani refugee Tahmeena, stumbles onto his property covered in blood and dirt. When Tahmeena first appears, the film is shot like a horror movie, with shaky hand-held camera movements, low bass sounds, and a squawking bird that causes Tahmeena to tremble. A shot of John's boots triggers a violent flashback. Throughout the film, these flashbacks reveal to the audience that Tahmeena has been violently sexually assaulted; her traumas are both past and present.

Unfinished Sky is a remake of a 1999 Dutch film, *The Polish Bride/ De Poolse Bruid*, directed by Karim Traïdia, but unlike the Polish version, in the Australian version the Afghani refugee cannot easily return 'home'. Dutch producer Anton Smit (2008) explains the remake in this way:

With this film, I had from the beginning the idea of making it into a real Australian film, a beautiful love story which would also be a political statement. In Holland, the film was about how, when the Iron Curtain went down, a mass of women from behind the Iron Curtain came to the West. Some of them were forced into prostitution. In our film the woman is from Afghanistan and she falls in love with a Queensland farmer.

With this film there is a regional geographical shift from Europe to the Middle East and Australia. Monic Hendrickx, who plays the Afghani refugee, Tahmeena, in *Unfinished Sky*, also plays Anna, a Polish refugee in the Netherlands, in *The Polish Bride*. The response to Hendrickx's dual representation did not attract the controversy of Robert Downey Jr's blackface performance in *Tropic Thunder*, but it is still a loaded representation. When John asks Tahmeena to point to where she has come from on a map, Tahmeena's finger travels west across Iran and lands on Afghanistan. His response, 'Oh Jesus, you're an illegal aren't you? Are you Muslim? Islam? Taliban?' is met by her reply, 'Communist'. John retorts, 'Oh Jesus, that makes it a whole lot better now, doesn't it?' Casting Tahmeena as a Communist rather than a Taliban or Muslim avoids the political connotations associated with those terms and possibly (in a majority of the Australian

population's eye) makes her a more sympathetic character. In this case, Tahmeena's husband and father were killed by the Taliban and she organized for her daughter to escape to Australia with neighbours. Audience sympathy for the character is heightened when Tahmeena is contrasted with the film's two-dimensional villains, hotel owner, Bob Potter (Bille Brown), his son Mike (Christopher Summers), and a police sergeant Carl Allen (David Field), who are connected to Tahmeena's trafficking and assault.

Of jigsaws and fences: Globalizing regional identities

In publicity material for the Toronto International Film Festival, the film is situated in the context of globalization:

Part social commentary, part thriller, part love story, *Unfinished Sky* is above all about the distance between things. At the story's outset, everything is far apart: John's farm from town, the backgrounds of the two main characters, the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle half-assembled on the table. With exceptional cinematography, great narrative sense and strong performances elicited from his cast, director Peter Duncan has crafted a complex and engrossing drama that brings the world closer together.

The early part of the film highlights the portrayal of Australia as a wide open expanse; John lives in a small rural town and the empty, endless stretches of road he traverses in his ute emphasize this isolation. During an exchange on the road, the town's hotel owner claims that one of their cleaners (Tahmeena) has run away – 'Pretty lass, dark, foreign' – and John replies, 'I haven't seen anyone for a couple of weeks Bob'. Also typical of a small community, residents pay attention to each other's business; children's books John buys to teach Tahmeena English do not escape the eye of fellow shoppers, and the extra toothbrush in his bathroom does not go without comment from his guests.

The contrast between this closeness and the (geographic and emotional) 'distance between things' is used in an exploration of globalization and regionalization, of bringing people closer together and watching the conflicts play out. The 'unfinished sky' of the film's title refers to the expanse of sky and cloud in a seemingly forever incomplete jigsaw puzzle which John keeps on his dining table. Every night John adds pieces to this puzzle while simultaneously removing others. Seeing the puzzle soon after she arrives, Tahmeena adds a piece to it only to be chastised by John for having tampered with it. 'What do you think you're doing? It's not your home, do you understand? You don't belong here and you've got no right.' The puzzle motif is obvious; both John and Tahmeena piece together aspects of each other, just as the audience participates in this unfolding of information about the two characters (garnered from flashbacks and also from what the characters tell us). The puzzle is a way for John and Tahmeena to communicate non-verbally, passing pieces of the puzzle to each other, their hands almost touching. As the two learn to communicate with each other, John is also able to reconnect to the land; his house, which at the start of the film looks run-down and messy, now appears larger and brighter. One night, having grown closer together, the two begin to complete the jigsaw together. Just when it is almost complete, they start to take it apart – first a piece at a time and then more frantically, in larger clusters. Their 'fit' together is (as yet) impossible.

Sonia Tascón (2007, 52) has written about the use of love in Australian cross-cultural romance/refugee films 'to represent the transgression and crossing of cultural borders'. Love is a way to merge the personal and the political or the ethical; it speaks of an embodied ethics, not just official (Australia's asylum seeker policy for instance), but also an everyday ethics. Tascón comments, 'If multiculturalism as a narrative of the national and the ethical has visibly been threatened by governmental policies and practices,

especially evident in their treatment of refugee boat people, then these films reassert the value of the multicultural in areas where it had most abysmally failed: the private and personal' (2007, 59). In Australian cinema, cross-cultural romance is alternately portrayed as problematic (e.g. *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (dir. Dennis O'Rourke 1991)), failed (e.g. *Heaven's Burning* (dir. Craig Lahiff 1997)), an impossibility (e.g. *Japanese Story* (dir. Sue Brooks 2003)), or as triumphant (e.g. *Strictly Ballroom* (dir. Baz Luhrmann 1992)) (Tascón 2007, 52). Here, it features as an unfinished promise, a relationship that *might* be formed at a later date. Interestingly, the original Dutch version, *The Polish Bride*, is far more optimistic than *Unfinished Sky*, and John's Dutch equivalent, Henk Woldering (Jaap Spijkers), is much less suspicious and impatient than John.

In *The Polish Bride*, Henk does not attempt to conceal Anna, as John deems necessary with Tahmeena, and Anna is also stronger and more in control. In the final scene of *The Polish Bride*, Henk shoots the hotel owner but it is Anna who axes his son in revenge, with violence and rage. Significantly, the ending of the film also sees her returning, with her daughter, to Henk's farm where presumably she will live happily with him. In *Unfinished Sky* there is a reunion between mother and daughter, and John and Tahmeena, but it takes place behind razor wire in a refugee detention centre. The ending of the film turns into a bizarre thriller, unlike the blunt violence of the original. After the arrest of the corrupt police officer, Carl Allen, there is a fade to black and the next shot is of Tahmeena in a red dress standing in a clean white waiting room. A pan to the side reveals that there are bars outside the window. John has managed to locate Tahmeena's daughter and she implores him, 'I come home soon?' John replies, 'Hopefully'. The camera then pans to the razor wire outside the room and then higher into the clouds and sky. 'Home', that is, Australia, is still premised on a hope, a promise. This post-national 'Australian' remake is tied to the very current national preoccupation with the plight of Middle Eastern refugees (and concurrently suspicion of the region since 9/11), as well as constrained by the actuality of the nation's asylum seeker policy. However, by showing regional Australia 'open' to the possibilities of the global in the form of a romantic relationship between a white Australian farmer and a Middle Eastern refugee, the film compels us to rethink how Australian cinema might come to create meaning outside a dominant framework of the national.

In *Unfinished Sky*, Australia is portrayed as post-national and regional at the same time as it is still very much localized. There are influences from the United States and Europe as well as Asia integrated into the film's local representations. For instance, there is a particularly strong reference made to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), placed in the context of rural Australian life. John dresses Tahmeena in his dead wife's clothes, arranging her hair in the same way and showing her how to drive a tractor and play Australian Rules football with Elvis the dog just as his wife used to. Elvis, the Australian cattle dog, is named after one of America's most famous musicians of all time and features in a film that parallels one made by one of America's most well-known directors, (British-born) Alfred Hitchcock. The director of *Unfinished Sky*, Peter Duncan, comments, 'Hopefully, what people will get into visually about this, it that is a European-style Australian film. The style isn't entirely domestic, because I think the message of the film is universal and we didn't want to get caught up in it being too stereotypically Australian' (production notes). The film's supposed 'universality' is more accurately a form of post-nationality, which is not adequately conveyed by the now neglected term multiculturalism. Rather, the film is regional and post-national, centred on the internationalizing of characters in remote Australia through the figure of the refugee. Borders and boundaries have partially been dismantled just as new ones (behind razor wire) are being erected, leaving one always on one side of the fence or the other.

Conclusion

Well-known in Australia as both a writer and an actor, William McInnes (2008) wrote a piece in Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper entitled 'Crossing to the Other Side' to coincide with the release of *Unfinished Sky*. In this article, McInnes recounts a time when he was invited to dinner at the house of a female friend. His friend's father made some snide comments about animals (in fact, baboons) in relation to a television programme they were watching. He described the baboons as all looking the same, intending to make a point about the ease with which it was possible to distinguish between people. This observation was used to create a distinction between newly-arrived Vietnamese immigrants and white Australians who 'naturally' belonged to the country. Implicitly, a connection was also made between Asian immigrants and the animals on the television programme. McInnes noted that although this dinner took place twenty five years ago, a lack of tolerance to difference was still very much alive in Australia.

The 'promise' of McInnes' anecdote is revealed when he later encounters the family again – on the iconic landscape of an Australian beach – and discovers that one of the sons in the family has married a Vietnamese-Australian woman and they have had their own son, much loved by the grandfather (who made the original comments about baboons and Asians). McInnes uses this story to promote the value of *Unfinished Sky* to Australian audiences who may, to their own surprise, grow to accept and even embrace change and cultural difference.

Interestingly, not much has been made in the press or in film criticism about the 'impersonation' of an Afghani refugee by Dutch actress Monic Hendrickx in *Unfinished Sky*, after she had also portrayed a Polish refugee in *The Polish Bride*. Nevertheless, her representation arguably falls into the same category as Robert Downey Jnr's blackface performance in *Tropic Thunder* in terms of the power differentials involved in these cross-racial portrayals.⁹ Refugees arriving in Australia may not (yet) have crossed the divide (over to the other side of the fence, into the nation), but the film shows us that they are to be humanized and respected within a post-national environment. In *Unfinished Sky*, when John boils frankfurter sausages for dinner, Tahmeena rebukes him: 'Dog dinner; no dinner to us'. She feeds the sausages to Elvis the blue heeler, who heartily consumes them before she reiterates, 'See, dog dinner'. It is this 'international' Aussie sausage (with German and US references, yet standing in for Australia's derivative food culture), that ultimately draws the line between animal and human; 'Australian' (albeit a cattle dog), and immigrant. In regional Australian films such as *Unfinished Sky*, Australian identity is sometimes portrayed through clichés, sometimes it is rendered comically, at other times more seriously, but the boundaries of what constitutes 'authenticity' have never been more easily overcome, just as they are simultaneously, and continually, constrained.

Notes

1. Stiller says that he first had the idea for the film after his small role as a prisoner of war in Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* (1987), another stratospherically titled film.
2. Test screenings went well; there was more outcry from disability groups over Stiller's portrayal of an intellectually-challenged young man, 'Simple Jack'. More recently, in the Australian context (in October 2009), there was controversy over a blackface Michael Jackson skit on the popular television programme *Hey, Hey It's Saturday*. Guest judge Harry Connick Jnr's incensed reaction, as well as entertainer Kamahl's negative response, provoked both outrage and support.
3. *Kangaroo Jack* is a 2003 comedy directed by Jerry Bruckheimer starring Jerry O'Connell. An animated children's sequel, *Kangaroo Jack: G'Day USA!*, was released on video the following year.

4. The film is the first feature produced by New Holland Pictures, a film and television production company formed in 2005 by Australian producers Cathy and Mark Overett and Dutch producers Anton Smit and San Fu Maltha. (A third of the budget was financed from Holland).
5. The latest in a string of policy debacles concerning Australia's 'border protection' policy is current Prime Minister Julia Gillard's proposal for an East Timor regional processing centre, which has been rejected by the East Timor parliament. This proposal has been likened to former Prime Minister John Howard's 'Pacific Solution'; both highlight the role of the region.
6. In this list I have not included films about migrancy and immigration in general such as *Floating Life* (dir. Clara Law 1996) and *The Home Song Stories* (dir. Tony Ayres 2007).
7. Best Director for Peter Duncan, Best Actress for Monic Hendrickx, Best Editing for Suresh Ayyar, and Best Production Design for Laurie Faen.
8. Benjamin Zeccola, executive director of Palace Films which distributed *Unfinished Sky*, commented that the film was continuing to do strong business in regional areas: 'People are really enjoying the film; there's been strong word of mouth and a lot of demand from regional locations. It's proven to have really long legs. . . . The [box office] over the last couple of weeks has come from regional business and . . . [t]here are still a lot of regional bookings to come in'. <http://www.newhollandpictures.com.au/UnfinishedSkyinchestowards1m.asp>.
9. The fact that Hendrickx's portrayal of an Afghani refugee did not generate the same kind of controversy as Downey Jr's blackface portrayal in *Topic Thunder* probably has more to do with US racial politics than it does with Australian identity politics.

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