

## Disrupting Strength, Power and Perfect Bodies: Disability as Narrative Prosthesis in 1990s Australian National Cinema.

By Katie Ellis

The essential Australian is male, working-class, sardonic, laconic, loyal to his mates, unimpressed by rank, an improviser, non-conformist, and so on. These virtues are defined and redefined under the harsh conditions of the bush, workplace, war or sport, in which women, and the feminine qualities, are considered to be beside the point

--Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka describing the “male ensemble” (1988, p. 62)

Australian Cinema is often accused of favoring masculinity as a national identity in popular films at the expense of women’s stories. However, this masculine national identity was rewritten throughout the 1990s as films favoured more diversity in their characterisations. When masculine identities were foregrounded they explored the process of becoming a man and problematised the hegemonic masculinity of previous decades, such as the male ensemble hero described above by Dermody and Jacka. Often, disability was utilised within these narratives to confront the cultural and political dimensions of masculinity as a national identity. For example, the image of disability in *Shine*, *Angel Baby*, *Hammers over the Anvil*, *Metal Skin*, *Proof*, *Bootmen*, and *The Sum of Us* prevents male characters from achieving the cultural definition of masculinity established throughout 1970s and 1980s Australian national cinema.

Disability is central to the narratives of these films performing the function of what Mitchell and Snyder (2001, p. 49) describe as a narrative prosthesis. Although women with disability were more frequently seen during this period (Ferrier 2001, p. 65, Ellis 2008, p. 39), a cycle of films self consciously explored the process of becoming a man in Australian society through male characters with a disability. Throughout this paper I draw on Butterss’ (2001, p. 79) observation that rather than (re)present Australian masculinity in the straightforward and exclusionary manner of previous decades, films of the 1990s consciously explore

and reject masculinities previously established in Australian national cinema using the image of disability. Throughout this paper I will consider three films in detail – *The Sum of Us*, *Hammers over the Anvil*, and *Proof*, referring to others where necessary, to explore the tension between changing ideas of masculinity in Australian cinema and society and the marginalisation of disability.

### **Becoming a man – new heroes of Australian Cinema**

The masculine Australian national identity is well established and most evident in films produced in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, *Sunday Too Far Away*, *Breaker Morant*, *Gallipoli*, the *Mad Max* films and the *Crocodile Dundee* films. Often these films contain strong political content emphasising an opposition to the British establishment, at other times they simply attempt to present a recognisable image of Australia. Debi Enker (1994, p.218) describes the male ensemble cycle of Australian cinema:

*The heroes of Australian cinema are cast from a mould [...] physically strong, rugged, with chiselled features that suggest experience of the world and a manner that warns 'Don't mess with me'*

These portraits of Australian males correspond to local and international expectations and reinforce myths (Rayner 2000, p. 95). Due to this reiteration of stereotypes and the exclusion of any alternative, the Australian male portrayed in the male ensemble cycle became the national identity in the lead up to the 1990s. While these cultural representations are recognised as disempowering women by excluding them from Australian national identity (Dermody & Jacka 1988, p. 62, O'Regan 1996, p. 302, Ellis 2008, p. 42) very few men are actually representative of the typical characterisation of the masculine Australian identity (McCauley 1998, p. 209).

A number of Australian films during the 1990s explored an alternative masculinity for Australian men. This narrative trope arose from an era where cultural understandings of masculinity and the male identity were increasingly questioned and redefined (Petersen 1998, p. 19). During the 1990s Australian national cinema took the opportunity to recast the masculine script through

recognition that “old unitary notions of masculinity [were] no longer sustainable in a multicultural society” (Butterss 2001, p. 92).

Following calls for greater diversity, Australia’s cinematic output began incorporating films that included images of and stories about women, Aboriginal and islander people, multicultural groups and gay men and lesbians during the 1990s. These minority movements critiqued previous masculinist representations to present an image of Australia where different socio-cultural identities complimented each other. The films under discussion in this paper can likewise be placed within this turning point particularly as they reject the male ensemble identity. However, while hegemonic masculinity is being rejected, the male characters still strive to achieve notions of heterosexual masculinity. Narratives centre on the man’s role in the nuclear family, his position as breadwinner, his athleticism and finally ability to protect women. Disability operates within these narratives to problematise male character’s ability to achieve masculinity.

As the 1990s can be seen to be a uniquely international period of Australian filmmaking (Duncan et al 2005, p. 153) this tendency can be placed within the context of an international shift in the cinematic construction of masculinity. While the masculine body of the 1980s focused on external qualities of strength and physical power, 1990s cinema turned to emphasise internal qualities that dealt with ethical dilemmas and emotional trauma (Jeffords 2001, p. 344). Phillip Butterss poses a similar argument with respect to the characterisation of masculinity in Australian cinema as it moved into the 1990s. These films explored the process of *becoming* a man rather than projecting an image of *experience* with the world. Drawing on films such as *The Big Steal*, *Death in Brunswick*, *Strictly Ballroom* and *The Heartbreak Kid* Butterss (2001, p. 233) argues that the 1990s saw more variety in the way Australia represented masculinity cinematically. Several Australian films, released during the 1990s interrogated Australian masculinity in the manner identified by Butterss (2001) in male characters with disability. Often disability has worked with other aspects of visual style to symbolise an aspect of character, theme or action.

## **Disability as Narrative Prosthesis**

Several theorists (O'Regan 1996, Verhoeven 1999, Rayner 2000, Ferrier 2001, Gillard & Achimovich 2003, Goggin and Newell 2003, Duncan et al 2005, Ellis 2008) have noticed the prevalence of disability in Australian national cinema during the 1990s and its symbolic value. Diversity was communicated through quirky and eccentric individuals (O'Regan 1995, p. 9); often they had a disability. In a conscious cinematic link made for greater symbolic power Michael Rhymer made his quirky characters in *Angel Baby* schizophrenic (Urban 1995, online).

Duncan et al (2003, p. 154) argue that disability is central to Australian national cinema in organizing power and gender. The pervasiveness of disability in Australian national cinema throughout the 1990s suggests it is a fundamental aspect of contemporary Australian culture (Duncan et al 2005, p. 155). Disability has a narrative significance in Australian cinema by operating as a "figure for broader cultural concerns" (Duncan et al 2005, p. 154).

Throughout this article I will utilize the narrative prosthesis framework established by Mitchell and Snyder (2001, p. 49) and Duncan et al (2005, p. 157) to explore the way disability has been used throughout 1990s Australian national cinema "as a crutch upon which [film] narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytic insight." In the context of Australian masculinity, disability disrupts the usual cultural script of strength, power and perfect bodies.

Paul Darke (1999, online) argues that disability is useful to an analysis of hegemonic masculinity particularly as the presence of disability in film narratives is easily recognized as a loss of masculinity. He recommends a consideration of the social discourse "of what constitutes masculinity and therefore a man." Masculinity is a construction that is bound up in the construction of disability. Likewise, Jenny Morris (1997, p. 22) suggests that many films representing disability do so as an exploration of masculinity, "film-makers have used disability as a metaphor for dependency and vulnerability and as a vehicle for exploring such experiences for men." She goes on: "the social definition of

masculinity is inextricably bound up with a celebration of strength, of perfect bodies. At the same time, to be masculine is to be not vulnerable.”

*The Sum of Us* is primarily about a young gay man and his changing relationship with his father who becomes disabled following a stroke. This key film of the decade highlights a number of character traits of the 1990s Australian male identity as it critiqued the male ensemble. An intertextual reference to the male ensemble cycle is made in this film in order to renegotiate Australian masculine national identity in a 1990s context. Russell Crowe (indicative of a new Australian masculinity) joins with Jack Thompson; a quintessential outback man. As Harry, Thompson reworks his nude clothes scrubbing scene of the shearing shed in *Sunday Too Far Away* to the kitchen complete with an apron and sink full of dishes. The male ensemble features working class masculinity as the marker of Australianness. Gill Valentine (1999, p. 169) links masculinity, class and disability when he argues, for working-class men, their ability to endure physical hardship is crucial to their identity and livelihood. Thus hegemonic masculinity is predicated on the absence of disability. Likewise, Australianness is predicated on hegemonic masculinity. *The Sum of Us* uses disability to question and rework this identity.

In some respects *The Sum of Us* projects a very heterosexual masculine way of life, as Jeff (the gay son) has appropriated much of Harry's (the positive role model blokey father) masculinity. McCauley (1998, p. 210) argues that heterosexual Harry is the legitimizing force in Jeff's sexuality:

*Jeff just happens to find himself homosexual, despite [his] normal upbringing and positive male role model, and despite meeting certain criteria of Australian masculinity – he's a working class plumber from Balmain, plays rugby and has atrocious table manners.*

Jeff and Harry live together in a very “domestic” existence which puts off potential lovers on both sides. After each suffers romantic disappointment Harry has a stroke and together they find strength in the face of adversity and things begin to look more positive for Jeff. Harry's disability is the interruptive force that confronts both his and Jeff's masculinity and challenges the cultural ideas around father and son relationships. Harry's stroke consolidates the love between father

and son, and that love takes many forms. Jeff does not want his whole world to begin and end with being gay, and “even likes women”. Harry’s total dependence on Jeff for his basic survival — including “going to the lav” — offers a new masculinity where internalized masculine dimensions are valuable. Harry’s disability is the legitimizing force in establishing a new form of mateship between heterosexual father and homosexual son.

At different points throughout *The Sum of Us* Harry calls the construction of the film to the audience’s attention through direct address. For example, at one point he claims “The trouble with having a stroke is the people that treat you like a fuckwit afterwards”. Following this assertion the scene cuts to a close-up on Harry’s face as Jeff wheels him through the supermarket where stylistically he *is* a fuckwit - half-awake perhaps even dribbling saliva. Although lacking physical capabilities Harry drives the narrative as he sees Greg, Jeff’s potential lover, and begins to beep incessantly on the bell Jeff had rigged up to the chair so that Harry could still communicate despite the loss of his language function.

Morris looks to social stereotypes of masculinity when considering the representation of disabled men, which include strength, perfect bodies, not being vulnerable, a celebration of youth, and taking bodily functions for granted. She cites the examples of *My Left Foot* and *Born on the Fourth of July* to illustrate the contention that “dependency is hell for a man”. These films, she argues, rely on stereotypes of heterosexual masculinity (93–7). They are about masculinity, not disability.

*Hammers over the Anvil* draws on the characterisation of the male ensemble and uses disability to explore a loss of masculinity. Alan, a young boy who has polio, wants to be like East. East is a great horseman who lives alone with his horses, every woman in town wants him but he is happy with his horses (very ‘Australian’) until Grace comes to town. Both Alan and East fall for Grace who is a beautiful aristocratic woman. As East and Grace embark on an illicit affair, Alan promises to keep it a secret and sometimes acts as a go between and covers up for them.

As East becomes too possessive of Grace and too comfortable in his quasi-father-figure role in the trio of himself, Grace (childless), and Alan (motherless), he suffers a serious head injury and the paternal role is taken from him—as is his hegemonic masculinity. This accident works within the narrative to punish East for his aggression in trying to get Grace to leave her husband and run away with him. Grace is likewise punished for her infidelity with a lifetime of caring for East who is totally dependent and will never again be the intensely masculine character we first saw naked, riding his horse in the lake. Alan also gives up his hopes of ever riding a horse too.

In *Proof*, Martin is not portrayed as having lost his masculinity, as East is in *Hammers over the Anvil*. Martin, who was blind from birth, never possessed masculinity. In *Proof* Martin's inability to trust his mother explains social restrictions he experiences later in life including not being able to form a sexual relationship. When Martin was given a camera for his tenth birthday he thought it would help him see. He takes photos to prove that what people tell him are really there but he has never found anyone he trusts enough to describe the photos to him. His housekeeper Celia wishes he trusted her because she is in love with him. When Martin meets Andy he thinks he can trust him enough to get him to describe his photos but Celia manipulates Andy into lying to Martin.

Martin's attraction to Celia is hinted at but not entirely explored within the narrative, however, they do engage in a kind of power struggle; Celia moves furniture so that Martin is constantly bumping into things and Martin refuses her sex so that he can pity her. At one point Celia almost succeeds in seducing Martin but he pushes her away telling her that he doesn't need anyone. The flashbacks portraying Martin's relationship with his mother are juxtaposed with his present relationships with Andy and Celia locating the origins of his problems interacting with people to his mother. Martin believes that he embarrassed his mother and that she lied to him about what was in the photos he took. At the film's close Martin has fired Celia, and Andy describes the first photo Martin ever took exactly as his mother did. Throughout the film Martin's mistrust of the people

around him have been individualised and the focus has been on his relationship with his mother, who he falsely believed lied to him just because she could.

Director Jocelyn Moorhouse (Murray 1994, p. 130) says of the relationship between Martin and Celia:

*I wanted audiences to discover [her smouldering beauty]. Luckily a lot of people do think she's really beautiful and they almost indignantly say, "How dare you! What's she doing as a housekeeper?", as if housekeepers can't be beautiful. It's a good effect because I wanted them to think Martin is stupid for treating her like a monster, because she's not. He turned her into one by his cruelty.*

Moorhouse further explains that the only time Martin treats Celia as a human should be treated is when he comments on her breasts as he fires her (Murray 1994, p. 130). This idea that Martin could achieve masculinity by objectifying a women's physical beauty illustrates Darke's (1999, online) contention that masculinity is a construction bound up in the construction of disability. Martin is blind and can not appreciate Celia's physical beauty without touching her however the above quote suggests Moorhouse expects audiences to hold Martin to the same rules that apply to men who are not blind.

## **Conclusion**

Australian films of the 1990s challenged and reworked the masculinist national identity firmly established in previous decades. While this tendency can be attributed to calls within the nation for women centered stories and an overall greater diversity, inclusive of minority groups, it must also be located in international problematisations of masculinity. Australia's hegemonic masculine national identity was problematised by films that explored the process of becoming a man. The image of disability was often utilized as a narrative prosthesis within these narratives to confront the cultural and political dimensions of masculinity as a national identity.

An analysis of the impact of disability on a masculine identity, as it is presented in Australian films of the 1990s, reveals a number of common factors. As a narrative prosthesis, disability prevents male characters achieving hegemonic masculinity and opens a space for other marginalized groups. For example, *The Sum of Us*



explores representations of homosexuality coexisting with heterosexual masculinity. The incidence of disability immediately renders Harry dependent (thus emasculated) perhaps making it easier for homosexuality to exist in that household.

Although disability may legitimize male identities previously unavailable in Australian cinema, it is the impetus for debate rather than a fully developed identity itself. Disability is therefore further marginalized in *Proof*, *The Sum of Us*, *Hammers over the Anvil* and other similar films and by extension Australian national identity.

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