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Chapter 12

Isolation and Companionship: Disability in Australian (Post) Colonial Cinema

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Cinema is a powerful cultural tool in shaping society's opinion of disability (Norden, 1994). In Australian postcolonial cinema a discursive link exists between gender, disability and national identity. During the 1990s, a postcolonial critique of Australian cinema (see O'Regan, 1996) resulted in a diverse rethinking of identity, particularly in relation to race, sexuality, and gender. However, disability was often used as a visual metaphor to rehabilitate these previously marginalized identities, making a further critique of patriarchy. This paper traces this tendency and its connection to both disability and Australian national identity through several Australian films — from *The Well* (1997) to the internationally successful film *The Piano* (1993). While transgressive possibilities exist in each film, they are not fully explored and disability remains located in the body while wider critiques of gender and society are successfully achieved.

Disability is conspicuously absent from a theorization of the colonized body which exists in opposition to “the British body—civilized, civilizing, normal” (LaCom, 2002, p. 138). Under a postcolonial consideration of disability, she argues “we can only conceive of normalcy by conceiving its opposite: deviance” (LaCom, 2002, p. 138). According to Goffman (1997) an ideology is created in regard to stigma to explain inferiority and rationalize fears about the stigmatized group. Stigma works in colonial relations through a process of “othering” (Ryan, 1994, p. 117). Postcolonialism exists in the “space where colonial subjects become agents of resistance and of change” (Selmon, 1994, p. 24). Mishra and Hodge (1993) describe a postcolonial text as one which dismantles power relations reformulating “social structures as diverse as race, class, women's rights and so on” (p. 40). Disability exists in this unspecified space covered by “so on”. Despite reflecting a postcolonial rethinking of identity throughout the 1990s, disability was positioned as ‘Other’ in Australian national cinema. These social problematizations that excluded disability were frequently premised on constructions of nationhood. I wish to highlight the relationship impairment has in debunking and reconstructing the national identity.

Australian Cinema is often accused of favoring masculinity as a national identity in popular films at the expense of women's stories (O'Regan, 1996, p. 295). A disability perspective however reveals that disabled female characters are more prevalent than their male counterparts in Australian films (Ferrier, 2001). This fascination is not only contrary to tendencies in Australian cinema but also to worldwide trends in the representation of disability in film; which is usually done as an exploration of masculinity (Morris, 1997). Proceeding from Fanon's (1963) argument that “Othering occurs on the basis of physical and verbal difference,” LaCom (2002) provides a framework for including disability in the work of postcolonial scholars as disability has come to exist in a new category of monsters. Impairment was represented in Australian cinema during the 1990s through an individualized discourse of disability. According to Mishra and Hodge (1993), theories predicated upon oppression would find points of contact with postcolonialism. Although unrecognized by Mishra and Hodge, the social model of disability as it is predicated on

notions of marginalization is relevant to a postcolonial rethinking of identity, in the same way as race, gender and sexuality.

For LaCom (2002), women are integral to a process of nation building, and loss of control over women signals a threat to manhood and hence Europeaness. In this way the patriarchy controls women's labor, fertility and sexuality (LaCom, 2002). Reading the disabled body as "the difference against which a homogenous national body is defined" (p. 139), LaCom (2002) argues for a "convergence between disabled and women as identity categories" (p. 139). Wendell (1996) agrees arguing, "cultural associations of disability ... overlap with cultural expectations of femininity so that ... a disabled woman is redundantly fulfilling cultural expectations of her" (p. 62). Wendell is referring to the culturally prescribed heterosexual roles of men (active) and women (passive).

Internationally, disability film studies are concentrating on the way cinema "disables" people with impairments through stereotypes and constructions of abnormality. Impairment is individualized and disability is considered to be a problem within a damaged body. In Australia, alternatively, the concept of disability as being a perspective from which to critically examine diversity is only just emerging. As a consequence, theorists have not really begun viewing disability as more than a tendency—a cycle of films. Analysis tends to focus on the symbolic properties of impairment, failing to recognize the way such representations isolate disabled people by individualizing impairment or presenting it as a personal tragedy to be overcome. Throughout this article I will focus on the way disability is used symbolically to disable people with impairments in Australian national cinema during the 1990s. While Australian national cinema, during the 1990s, adopted the language of postcolonialism to problematize the position of a number of minority groups in Australian society, a tendency toward the personal tragedy mode of representation continues to marginalize a disability identity.

The main film selected for analysis, *The Well*, involves a personal tragedy mode of narrative, whereby a female protagonist's impairment holds significance to the overall plot, contributing to an individualistic portrayal of disability. Mulvey's (1975) theories of the gaze will inform the discussion of *The Well* and a more specific generic analysis of impairment as cinematic shorthand or icon. O'Regan's (1996) four ways of problematizing Australian nationhood during the 1990s highlights the mythology and ideology behind using impairment to critique Australian national identity.

Disability is individualized as a medical pathology or personality defect that people who have impairments should seek to cure or hide. Representations locate the problem in a damaged body rather than a discriminatory environment. *The Well* and *The Piano* are located in traditional colonial spaces with gothic inflections. They highlight the intersection between culture, gender, nationality, and disability. A problematization of disability transforms postcolonial theory particularly as the image of disability has been used as a strategy of liberation for other marginalized groups, particularly women (Hall, 2002). These films rely on the social intertext of disability in order to make a critique of Australian society that has nothing to do with disability. Impairment operates symbolically in order to normalise a previously established other, and its depiction holds significance to the progression toward a multicultural national cinema.

In order to make this critique of national identity, impairment operates as an icon both in terms of *mise en scene* and mythology. *The Piano* and *The Well* each depict an impaired female character who is taken advantage of and who redundantly fulfills cultural expectations of women. By individualizing impairment as iconographic character

traits, 1990s Australian filmmakers individualized disability and absolved society of responsibility. Both films offer a space for women in the traditional Australian identity at the expense of disability. Creed (1987) argues that film naturalizes ideology through icons (p. 300).

Australian settler culture fears and is intolerant of difference (O'Regan, 1996). Post-colonial narratives regularly feature disabled female characters while embracing a gothic mood (Ferrier, 2001). The gothic is haunted by a terror of otherness (Jayamanne, 2001, p. 31). Such films are mesmerized with the politics of health and they display an irrational fear of dependence (Hayward, 2000, p. 189). These depictions reassure nondisabled audiences of their normality (Darke, 1998). Australian gothic pays attention to the reactions of disempowered individuals to these common gothic themes (Rayner, 2000, p. 25).

The Well explores the relationship between Hester, a club-footed spinster who lives alone with her ailing father on a farm, and Katherine, an effervescent teenager with a questionable past. After Hester's father dies, they sell the farm and move to an isolated old cottage. When Katherine accidentally kills a man while she is driving home, Hester disposes of the body in their well. Strange things begin to happen and their friendship deteriorates. *The Piano* and *The Well* draw on traditions of the Australian gothic, particularly the notion of internalized psychological territory, isolated landscapes, sexual repression, the morbid, grotesque, macabre, and fantastic and the iconographic use of disability to visually represent these characteristics within the diegesis.

Visual metaphors associated with physical difference evoking negative stereotypes of disability are based on familiar falsehoods and are an inefficient way of storytelling (Sutherland, 1997). As such, Sutherland (1997) is a strong critic of Syd Fields' (1994) views on the topic of screenwriting. Fields encourages using disability as an icon to reveal aspects of characterization:

[a] screenplay, remember, is a story told with pictures ... Pictures, or images, reveal aspects of character ... Physical handicap—as an aspect of characterization—is a convention that extends far back into the past. Form your characters ... then reveal them by their actions, and possibly physical traits. (p. 31)

Impairment is often used as an icon in Australian cinema to compress information about character and plot. This tendency can be seen in *The Piano*, where Ada who has 'no say' in her life, is mute. In this way the director of the film Jane Campion, following along established feminist lines is making a social statement about the patriarchy silencing women, and impairment is implicated stylistically. Campion however sees her use of disability as a narrative tool and is adamant that her film is not about disability (Ferrier, 2001). By privileging the able-bodied view of Ada's life, Campion allows her impairment to be defined by the disabling community, eliding issues of disability and its linkage with colonialism, racism and sexism. While Ada is afforded opportunity in the film to express her sexuality, the intersection between sexuality and disability is not entirely dissected. Only a disability perspective would reveal this silencing.

Critics who reviewed *The Well* almost always referred to Hester's physical impairment (Stratton, 1997; Scott, 2000; LaSalle, 1999; W. Morris, 1999; Nunn, 2002; Davis, 1998; Keough, 1998; Brussat and Brussat, 1997; Jardine, 1998). Some hypothesized that her walking impairment symbolized her inner repression (Scott, 2000; LaSalle, 1999; and Davis, 1998), often agreeing that it contributed to the gothic "mood" of the film (Urban, 1997). Thus the film was seen critically as being in line with Fields'

(1994) method of film production, which is to use impairment as a character or plot device. Within this film Hester works as what Sutherland (1997) would describe “an inadequate or incomplete able-bodied person” (p. 18)—an outsider. In this way impairment is individualized. The nonspecific emphasis on Hester’s affected foot suggests that her impairment has a mythology. Sutherland (1997) contends that the mythology of a limping impairment indicates a deficient character. Further, disabled women indicate a loss of attractiveness—they are “sexual losers” (Sutherland, 1997, p. 18). Hester is interpreted as repressed, not quite whole; she is a sexual loser.

In an interview with *Cinema Papers* (Hunter, 1997), director Samantha Lang highlighted the importance of Hester’s inner world. Although she did not explicitly address the issue of Hester’s impairment, she suggested that the film explored “a darker side of the female psyche” (Hunter, 1997, p. 26). Further, “the landscape is supposed to reflect, to provide a metaphor for Hester’s inner world” (Hunter, 1997, p. 26). Lang began the interview by suggesting the filmic perspective of *The Well* was “heightened reality:”

[w]here you allow the film to take on a symbolic value. A cupboard for example, can mean more than a cupboard. The things within the frame are significant; they are not arbitrarily there. (Hunter, 1997, p. 27)

The different emotional focus of each character plays out in the visual representation of Hester’s foot. *The Well* is suited to a critical examination in terms of landscape and how Lang utilizes the Australian landscape to convey inner isolation. As the landscape has come to take on symbolic meaning in Australian national cinema (Gibson, 1998; Murray, 1994; and Rayner, 2000) so too has impairment.

The landscape drives Hester and Katherine apart and provides a visual reference for Hester’s inner world. Hester has a strong desire to leave the farm to spend a year in Europe and America, while it has always been Katherine’s dream to live on a farm. Hester wants to recreate the “best time” of her life—the European holiday she had with her governess Hilde when she was 12 years old. The atmospheric shots of the landscape add to the gothic feeling of isolation in this film, and further reinforce Hester’s inner repression. After she hears that Katherine’s friend Joanna is coming to stay, Hester cries behind a rock. She is emotionally isolated, an “emotional cripple.” After she kills the man on the road, Katherine adopts the fetal position, as Hester puts the body down the well. Katherine falls in love with the dead man, and Hester only cares about the missing money.

The Well displays a colonial anxiety about the landscape. The Australian landscape was alien to the European settler aesthetic (Ferrier, 2001). This has remained a fixed part of the Australian cultural national identity. The bush was thought to foster madness and eccentricity (Ferrier, 2001). From the innocence of the boy and girl in *Walkabout* (1971) to the struggle between Aboriginal and white customs in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), the landscape has been used as a reflection of mood and inner feelings in Australian national cinema. In his review, Urban (1997) concentrates on how Lang created the mood of the film and describes the landscape as a symbol. Such landscape would be even more formidable to an impaired person such as Hester. O’Regan (1996) connects narratives that portray Australian national identity as European-derived with European art films. These films tend to drive characters apart and rarely have conventional happy endings (O’Regan, 1996, p. 63). In *The Well*, paranoia drives Hester and Katherine apart.

In *The Piano*, Ada who has not spoken since she was six years old is sent to New Zealand by her father to marry a settler she has never met. She brings her daughter Flora and her piano. Ada began playing the piano around the same time she became mute, thus suggesting that she preferred to speak through her piano and voluntarily gave up talking. Once in New Zealand, her new husband, Alistair Stewart, a man who prefers his women “silent” refuses to transport her piano to his settlement. This also introduces the traditional heterosexual perspectives and their implications for disability that is to be continued throughout the film. Stewart speaks, he is the active male and Ada, the passive female, has no voice. By leaving the piano on the beach, Stewart further takes away Ada’s already silent voice. Stewart will take her body to his settlement but not her voice because her sexuality is an acceptable factor while her disability makes her different. Her femininity is acknowledged; she takes on the traditional female role of motherhood, but when her disability begins influencing her sexuality through the piano this role is unavailable. Flora turns against her, becoming an informant for Stewart. Ada’s disability works to make her a freak, someone fundamentally “different.” An Other. O’Regan (1996) suggests that Australia’s nationhood could be problematized in four ways by the 1990s. Diversity is the main focus of his argument, which proposes that Australian nationhood can no longer be considered in the singular, exclusionary way. Earlier representations, favored by literary favorites such as Henry Lawson, were exclusionary and have provided the foundation of many of the representations of Australian national identity (Turner, 1994). However, by the 1990s Australia began to consider national identity in more varied terms that included a “diversity of ethnicities, cultural traditions, and political interests” (Turner, 1994, p. 5). As a consequence, the “reality” of national identity was revealed as a manifestation of oppression and discrimination (Turner, 1994).

Using a postcolonial framework, O’Regan (1996) contends Australian cinema is messy and opens up many topics for discussion. Throughout the book, O’Regan attends to both the unity and the diversity of Australian cinema. He begins his problematization of Australian national cinema by highlighting a number of social critiques and dividing them into durable cultural cleavages. His categories can be summarized in terms of gender, region, demography and class. Likewise, in identity politics more generally, identities as established through discourses of locale, gender, ethnicity, and kinship are particularly important and resistant to change (Jenkins, 1996, p. 21). Filmmakers use these identities to debunk and reconstruct Australian national identity through film and suggest who we are and who we may become as Australians (O’Regan, 1996, pp. 304–5). Ethnicity is an identity established early in life, and any change to this identity is resisted (Jenkins, 1996). In previous decades, the subordination of multicultural groups was encouraged through national cinema as being in Australia’s best interests (Moran, 1996, p. 10). However, during the 1990s, Australia’s nationhood began to be problematized and as a result became more inclusive of diversity. Australian national cinema during the 1990s was inclusive of multiculturalism, but resisted disability. Jenkins (1996) argues that impairment threatens human-ness—the basis of all identity formations. An examination of films, which follow the postcolonial tendency to use disability to symbolically problematize patriarchal relations, reveals the ableist tendencies of 1990s Australian national cinema. This is a wider trend in feminist and postcolonial discourses which conceives woman as being disabled by patriarchal oppression (Hall, 2002). Indeed Mishra and Hodge (1993) describe women in postcolonial discourse as being “twice-disabled” (p. 39). O’Regan’s (1996) cleavages do not go far enough in providing an adequate framework for this critique. He extends his analysis to include four ways of

problematizing Australian nationhood, as a European-derived society, a diasporic society, a new world society and finally as a multicultural society (O'Regan, 1996).

Multiculturalism was valued in Australian cinema during the 1990s. However, traditionally disability has been recognized as a medical condition, without much cultural significance or responsibility. This is aptly demonstrated in *The Sum of Us* (1994) when Harry is not rehabilitated following his stroke and is sent home to live with Jeff, as he is no longer "sick." Despite this, and the fact that Harry (according to Jeff) always wants to go out to the park, he is most frequently depicted lying in bed—a medical setting.

Finkelstein (1987) defines a multicultural society as one made up of different groups, each with their own contribution to make to society and that disabled people are a separate group. However, historically a disabled group has been considered unable to make a significant contribution, at times being called "useless eaters" (by the Nazis in Germany and more recently, in Australia, Peter Singer (1985) has made a similar argument suggesting a drain of resources).

To return to O'Regan's (1996) problematizations, as a settler society, Australia is largely "European-derived." As are Australia's political, legal, social and cultural institutions. Films which problematize the cultural differences within the nation do these with Australia's European family, which becomes amalgamated into the later white Australian identity (O'Regan, 1996, pp. 306-307). *Metal Skin* uses a variety of impairments to highlight cultural differences within the European family, which can be further located back to gender cleavages in terms of problematizing Australians amongst themselves. In this film, despite each character's possession of an impairment or psychological trauma (personal tragedy), recognizable impairment remains female specific throughout the course of the film. Characters in *The Well* are closely aligned to the European-derived national identity with a total exclusion of any other racial group. The settler society aesthetic is adhered to as the film is set on an isolated windy farm where white Australians attempt an outback vocation regardless of their experience or suitability. The characters also display a strong loyalty to their colonial ties, to Europe and America.

Hester has lived alone with her father on an isolated windy farm for her whole life. Her governess took her on a European holiday when she was 12 years old. Now Hilde is gone and the only people Hester has contact with are her ailing father, his financial advisor Harry Bird who visits overnight once a week, and Molly their cantankerous housekeeper. So she decides to hire Katherine. Hester refuses to share Katherine's attentions with anyone, claiming Katherine is "just for her." After Katherine attempts to quit, Hester re-hires Molly to do the more physically demanding work and she embarks on a personal friendship with Katherine. Harry disapproves of the friendship and attempts to discuss financial matters with Hester away from Katherine. When Hester's father dies, Harry suggests she sell the farm. Hester is horrified. Under Katherine's influence, Hester has been spending a lot of money and this worries Harry. While Hester is sick with a migraine, Katherine negotiates a sale of the farm whereby Hester retains ownership of a cottage on the property's border.

This cottage is isolated and has an empty well in the front yard. Hester and Katherine move in and plan a year-long overseas holiday to Europe and America. As Katherine and Hester become more codependent, mistrust develops. They attend a party together and Jen Borden, the new owner of Hester's farm, accuses Hester of stifling Katherine. Perhaps as a way to prove she is not stifling Katherine, Hester allows her to drive home despite it being dark and only Katherine's second time driving. While driving

home, Katherine accidentally kills a man. Following Hester's suggestion to put his body in the well, they are united in their secret, but upon discovering the money from the sale of the farm is missing, they begin doubting each other's intentions. While Hester retreats emotionally, becoming obsessed with the missing money, Katherine professes to be in love with the man they disposed of in their well.

Despite the apparent limited scope of Australian cinema as a European-derived national cinema, it is reflected in the remaining three problematizations and does open a space for European identities other than Britishness to be incorporated into Australian national cinema. For example, while *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Romper Stomper* (1992) are multicultural narratives, they do locate the drama within a European-derived identity. Discussion of Australian national cinema as a European-derived national cinema extends further back than when it is conceived in terms of diaspora, new world, or multiculturalism.

Australia as a European-derived society may also be considered as a British-Australian diaspora. However, this is often not recognized as the dominant ethnicity and is rarely considered as a diaspora. Although Britishness is the dominant ethnicity, a diaspora exists with loyalty to the homeland; in addition, a feeling of alienation exists in relation to the harsh Australian landscape. This was reflected in the Hall and Chauvel films of the 1930s, which attempted to conflate the British-diaspora with mainstream Australia (marginalizing other settler groups such as the Irish, German and Italian descendents and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups).

The introduction of official multicultural policies saw the British-Australian diaspora lose its dominance by the 1980s. As the official policies continued to focus on the separateness of cultural groups, not yet seeing an Australian identity as multicultural, other diasporas emerged favoring pluralism. O'Regan (1996) argues that by the 1980s Australian filmmakers ceased defining the Australian identity in opposition to Britain and began to look inwardly or to Asia or America for points of reference (p. 313). This can be seen in *No Worries* (1993) as Australia is defined inwardly (farm life), with reference to Asia (Chinatown and "boat people") and in opposition to Britain (farmers experiencing difficulties their fathers never did: high interest rates, drought, low wool prices and recession). Likewise, *Blood Oath* (1990) uses Asia and America as points of reference, as the action takes place in Asia (Indonesia) where both Asia and America are implicated in the losses Australia experienced by entering World War II.

As Britain lost its dominance in Australia, films began to favor other diasporas and considered different sides to the Australian identity in terms of loyalty. O'Regan sees the shift from Britain to America as the dominant power reflected in Australia's national cinema. Impairment has been used in this context as a punishment for the dominant power making mistakes. While films such as *Breaker Morant* (1980) and *Gallipoli* (1981) used a war setting to define an Australian culture and identity in opposition to a British one, *Blood Oath* shifted the focus to America as the dominant power sacrificing Australia for political gain. While the earlier films used death to critique Britain, *Blood Oath* uses impairment to make a similar criticism of American politics.

The settler culture, as it is (and is not) defined diasporically, is also problematized in *No Worries*, in which a young rural family is forced to move to the city to live with a relative (Uncle Kev) in Chinatown. The daughter Mathilda attends a school where there is no dominant ethnicity and children of many different cultural backgrounds learn together in a multicultural environment. Her teacher treats the class as though it were made up of many equal diasporas, including the European-derived students. An Irish

student is chastised for his graffiti (“boat people go home”) when the teacher points out that his Irish-Australian heritage can also be located back to transportation to the country via boat and that he is therefore a boat person himself. O’Regan (1996) comments on this tendency of the settler culture to see itself as non-diasporically defined.

Conflict emerges as the settler culture refuses to see itself as a diasporic identity, regarding the culture as ‘Australian’ and seeing any diasporic aspect as colonial in form. There are similarities between this refusal and the tendency of the disability rights movement to emphasize the “ableness” of the group. Ada and Hester, like other disabled Australians, are encouraged to “conform according to the values and standards that are already established within the community” (Parsons, 1999, p. 12). The disability rights movement embraces this aesthetic at large and employs a very different rhetoric in comparison to other movements:

[t]he women’s movement does not primarily emphasise the ‘maleness’ of women. The [A]boriginal movement does not primarily emphasise the ‘whiteness’ of [A]borigines. The gay and lesbian movement does not primarily emphasise the ‘heterosexualness’ of gay men and lesbians. But the disability movement does, it seems, very much emphasise the ‘ableness’ of people with disabilities. (Parsons, 1999, p. 13)

Hester and Ada are encouraged to pass by an ableist society and are punished when they do not succeed. Further, the disability rights movement appears to encourage this as the best course of action.

Disabled people are vulnerable to abuse; they are limited in the ways they can protect themselves from the scrutiny of others (Seymour, 1998, p. 140). In *The Piano*, the house staff gossip about Ada, speculating that there could be no fate worse than being dumb, except perhaps being deaf, or even deaf *and* dumb. Dependence on others heightens vulnerability to sexual, physical, psychological and domestic abuse (Seymour, 1998). Ada is subject to all of these forms of abuse: sexual abuse when Stewart tries to rape her, physical abuse when he cuts off her finger, psychological abuse when Baines calls her a whore, and domestic abuse when Stewart locks her in the house.

The vulnerability of those with impairments is heightened in times of abuse and is used as a cinematic technique to reinforce the dominance of the heterosexual antithesis of active/male and passive/female, and ultimately propagate ableism. Minority groups such as disabled women are positioned in terms of the “acceptability” of their bodies (Wendell, 1996). In this way disabled women are encouraged to “pass” as nondisabled in order to retain their desirability, like Sophie in *Lucky Break* (1994). Cultural standards of beauty and social acceptability urge disabled women to pass as nondisabled (Hillyer, 1993). Women who do not attempt to pass, such as Hester in *The Well*, do not reach standards of beauty and social acceptability and are therefore considered lacking: Hester is sexually repressed. Australian films further encourage this interpretation in that it is only the disabled women with this ability to “pass” who remain to be constructed as potential sexual partners, a representation not generally afforded to disabled women. For example in *Cosi* (1996), Julie is the only patient at the mental hospital whose condition is made known to the audience. She is a junkie, therefore the audience can reason that she’s not “really” disabled and can be viewed sexually by Lewis. Similarly, Ada is not instantly recognized as “disabled” as her being mute is more of a narrative technique to make a feminist statement regarding women’s lack of control in their lives. This impairment is individualized in order to critique another aspect of an exclusionary society.

When disability is represented in cinema it often works semiotically to project information about nondisabled characters. The audience identifies with these nondisabled characters (Norden, 1994). Film spectators comprehend cinema via identification with a character on screen (Metz, 1982). Mechanisms of audience identification reveal gendered subjectivity (Jayamanne, 2001, pp. 52-3). Similar arguments can be applied to the representation of disability on screen. Cinema reinforces the boundaries of normality, which excludes disability (Darke, 1998). Despite the popularity of cultural diversity as a dominant theme in Australian national cinema during the last decade, impairment reminds us that anyone can become disabled (Dawidoff, 2003). A warped social imagery extends to disabled people as it does to other repressed subgroups (Norden, 1994).

Parallelism operates in *The Well* as a way of communicating differing character traits. Hester is positioned in the film in relation to able-bodied Katherine and she is defined in terms of her sexual repression, which is manifested visually through her foot. This reinforces Darke's contention that impairment is used in cinema to symbolize abnormality, which in turn sustains a hegemonic image of normality. Katherine runs around with either no shoes or high-heeled boots, while Hester wears orthopedic shoes. Hester's abnormality reinforces Katherine's normality. Katherine, in her excitement about her friend Joanna coming to stay, talks about how Joanna can borrow her shoes. This adds to Hester's annoyance and jealousy. When Katherine says she's in love with her new boots, Hester pushes Katherine's legs from the dashboard of her new car. Hester walks with a lop-sided gait, while Katherine always runs or skips.

The intersection between the representation of impairment and the gothic mode is a tendency of narrative depiction of female characters. The difference between these two women is exemplified in a traditional gothic mode when Hester stares at herself in the lid of a pan she is cleaning. Her reflection looks monstrous and distorted; she seems fascinated and pleased by this image. This scene is juxtaposed with one of Katherine lying on her bed alone in her bedroom with her bare legs in the air; she stands to go and look at herself in the mirror, adjusting her hair to make herself look more attractive. Again legs are a point of significance, indicating sexual attractiveness in a manner similar to a scene in *Lucky Break*, in which Sophie tossed her crutches under the bed as the camera frames her leg in the traditional fetishistic way. These character's legs are thus icons of female sexuality or impairment and, therefore, asexuality (or as an icon of wasted sexuality). Impairment is again subjected to an investigating gaze, while the female body is held under the desiring male gaze through basic camera framing.

Following Hester and Katherine's move to the small cottage, there is a scene in which they dance. The camera frames Hester's clubfoot and she looks awkward. This framing is continued whenever there is an emphasis on Hester's repression. There are many close-ups of Hester's foot, but none of her face, while there are several extreme close-ups of Katherine's face displaying her unrestrained emotions. Mulvey (1992/1975) argues that the pleasure in looking produced through cinema can be related to the current cinematic conventions, which focus attention on the human form and its relationship with its surroundings. In a similar way to the conventional fetishisation of women in films, as seen in the earlier cinematographic dissection of Katherine, the spectator is manipulated into a dismissive response by the focus being placed on Hester's impairment.

The New World identity is an emerging identity and is predicated on immigrants' willingness to take on a new identity and the host culture's willingness to accommodate them. This aesthetic was reflected throughout Australia's official multicultural policies, which required adaptation on the side of both migrants and the host society. O'Regan

(1996) describes the New World cinema as a melting pot with utopian ideological underpinnings.

The utopian ideological underpinnings and New World nationhood can be seen in *Lucky Break*, as ethnically marked actors remain ethnically unmarked in the diegesis. The ethnicity of the protagonists is not foregrounded and would seem to be an insignificant aspect of their characterization. This lack of dominant ethnicity reflects the New World identity, as a cultural hybrid exists (O'Regan, 1996). However, a detective (Yuri) is ethnically marked and offers insight into the social exclusion Sophie experiences as a disabled woman. His sensitivity toward her is highlighted in the scene where Eddie waits for Sophie's cast to be removed. When Sophie emerges, revealing her "true self," Eddie leaves her while Yuri remains supportive. For O'Regan (1996), the use of ethnically unmarked characters and narratives serves to normalize multiple ethnicities in Australian cinema and society. While the unspecified ethnicities of the characters are significant to a theorization of *Lucky Break* from a new world perspective, the utopian ideological underpinnings—particularly of the normalizing function of impairment in cinema—reveals the ableist focus. Sophie's marginalization is not presented as a social problem but rather as being located in her head and her own vulnerability, and thus it is individualized. Although Sophie, as a disabled woman, is finally granted access to a sexual and romantic relationship, her passing is celebrated, not problematized, and Sophie indeed returns to writing romance novels, living through her fantasies as she waits for Eddie to return from his one-year jail term.

The visual representation of a woman who limps relies on the stereotype that a disabled woman is a "sexual loser." She is not a wife or mother, and if she is in a relationship she becomes overly dependent on it because she is unlikely to find another (Sutherland, 1997). This expectation is confirmed when Jen says to Hester, "You shouldn't keep her shut away like you do. Not everyone wants to be single." Hester is overly dependent on Katherine. Hester is excluded from the family that buys her farm, while they embrace Katherine. Katherine dresses up in Jen's clothes (which Hester calls "cheap"), flirts with the farmhands, and plays with the toddlers, while Hester struggles to walk up the stairs of her old home. Katherine appears to be equally dependent on Hester, but by ultimately taking off with the money, she is seen to hold the power.

While Hester comes across as a prude and a sexual loser due to the semiotic connection with her limp and costuming, Katherine appears oversexed and ready for anything. The same long blue skirt and off-white blouse covers Hester's body for the film's duration, while Katherine, who is forever dressed in purple, has permanently erect nipples. In a photograph of Hester with Hilde, taken when she was a young child, Hester is wearing a yellow hat and jumper; later Katherine wears this hat and Hester makes her a yellow dress. Often the camera lingers on Hester as she stares at Katherine as though she is scrutinizing her, perhaps seeing something in Katherine that she herself possessed in the company of Hilde.

For O'Regan (1996), ethnicity in a New World cinema, (for example *Nirvana Street Murder* (1990) becomes simply another subcultural identity similar to the body-builder subculture in *Body Melt* (1993). The mix of identities in *Death in Brunswick* (1991) is particularly relevant to a discussion of Australia as a New World cinema. However, impairment is used metaphorically in these films and is not offered as an identity, subculturally or otherwise.

In somewhat of a passing observation, O'Regan (1996) describes the New World cinema as hegemonic in its tendency to downplay ethnicity. His description does offer a

direction for the inclusion of disability as he argues that the New World cinema opens a space for other cultural cleavages outside birth, ethnicity and family. In New World films ethnicity is downplayed to the degree that it is not an issue. When impairment enters, however, the downplay is almost to nullify its existence—an act in which there is no cultural value. The identity is unselfconscious. When this identity is self-conscious, however, it is capable of inciting social change. By naming the struggle between disabled people and disabling society, focus will shift away from the body and on to society. As multicultural policies have progressed to highlight the importance of a self-conscious identity in establishing and maintaining social equality, so Australian national cinema offers the possibility of becoming inclusive of a social model of disability.

In *The Piano* Ada's inability to speak is a technique used to reveal an aspect of her character rather than a portrayal designed to name the struggle between disabled people and disabling society: Ada can not speak and she has no "say" in her life. Ferrier believes that Ada's disability is aestheticized and she becomes sympathetically vulnerable because of her disability. This vulnerability allows Ada to be controlled by the men in her life, illustrating the traditional "active male, passive female" notion of heterosexual sexuality and the implications it has for disability and sexuality, aptly affirming Wendell's (1996) observation that disabled women redundantly fulfill cultural expectations of the passive female.

In Australia, multiculturalism has been presented as a way to include difference and diversity in the national identity (O'Regan, 1996, p. 324). Multiculturalism projects cultural diversity as an organizing social and national principle (O'Regan, 1996). As an aesthetic in filmmaking, multiculturalism has functioned as a national project assisting Australia to become culturally open. Multicultural films offer self-conscious insights into the perspective of the disenfranchised. These films confront Australia's colonial history and identity is not fixed or historically given, rather it is in the process of becoming. This is reflected in the multicultural policies throughout the 1990s, which attributed importance to the diversity of the population in terms of its social, cultural, and economic value.

O'Regan's (1996) discussion of the multiplicity of identity amongst individual members concentrates on Tracey Moffatt. Moffatt refuses to adopt a fixed identity, preferring to adopt a number of social identities:

'I want to be known as Tracey Moffatt, interesting film-maker'; 'Tracey Moffatt, Aboriginal film-maker'; 'Yes I am Aboriginal, but I have the right to be avant-garde like any white artist.' (O'Regan, 1996, p. 327)

This refusal to adopt a fixed public identity may resolve the issues facing disabled artists who want recognition of their art to be exclusive of their impairment. These issues are partially due to the continuation of able-bodied perceptions of what normality means.

O'Regan (1996) concludes his discussion with the contention that his problematizations of nationhood have not allowed for a sufficiently in-depth analysis of other cultural cleavages. He argues that they do not structure all other social problematizations, rather that they can be considered in combination with gender, region, demography and class. While this comment may pre-empt my claim that disability should be considered when problematizing Australian national cinema in terms of society and nationhood, his cleavages do not approach this perspective to a sufficient degree.

In a review for *Cinema Papers*, Diane Cook (1997) suggested that *The Well*, although lacking in other areas (faithful adaptation from the original Elizabeth Jolley

novel), pushed already heightened tensions to a terrible climax. Within the mutual dependency of the two women, the forces at play and battle of wills are obvious, including:

[c]haos and order, age and youth, feminine and masculine, isolation and companionship, wealth and poverty, profligacy and meanness, sexuality and enforced celibacy, control and abandon, affection and self-concern, internal and external life wrestle for control (Cook, 1997, p. 36).

By listing these binaries, Cook highlights the importance of characterization to the overall plot of *The Well*, and implicitly recognizes the way internal thoughts are manifested externally for a visual medium. As previously mentioned, when interviewed by Tim Hunter, Samantha Lang highlights the inner world as being important. Hester represents age and enforced celibacy, and wrestles for control of her life, adopting a forced order to retain “control,” while Katherine, unencumbered by physical impairment, is flighty and her life is full of chaos and abandon. Katherine does not attempt to wrestle for control and ultimately she has the most power (and money). Therefore an unrecognized binary is the battle between ‘disability’ and ‘ability’.

O’Regan (1996) sees the representation of disability most frequently in what he describes as social problematization films and relates them to the social, political, and cultural contexts of Australian national cinema. Yet he does not address the way impairment has been used to present character traits, in films such as *The Well*, which may not be described in this category. While O’Regan (1996) finds multiculturalism to be an important feature by which Australians project nationhood, he does not consider the disabled as a group with similar cultural experiences to one another and therefore worthy of being considered a distinct cultural group, which is part of the multicultural society.

Analysis of *The Well* from a disability perspective offers a symbiosis of O’Regan’s (1996) inward and outward perspectives. Although he attempts to keep these separate, he acknowledges in his initial definition of national cinema that they are related. Verhoeven (2002) describes this interrelation as Industry 3 and argues that during the 1990s Australian national cinema favoured films that were both local and global. *The Well* adopts many of the semantic elements of the European art films, but Australianizes them by locating the narrative in an Australian landscape. At a very basic level, the landscape highlights the contention that disability is socially created. The connection between the land and the impairment as metaphors for emotion is of particular importance to an analysis of *The Well*. The art film also rejects Hollywood-style happy endings (O’Regan, 1996). Within a disability context, the ending of *The Well* reinforces a semiotic connection between impairment and vulnerability. The lack of control is perpetuated as Katherine gains ultimate power by stealing all the money, and Hester is left alone in the desert and forced to accept a ride with the Borderns—people she despises. She is particularly devalued as she is obliged to sit in the back seat with several bratty children. Hester has never in her life been exposed to children, having always interacted with adults, even when she was a child herself. Narratives such as this resist the possibility that disability could be included within a multicultural framework, and locate the ‘problem’ in the body.

Postcolonial feminism is a contentious field (Lambert, 2005) and the integration of disability to these fields of analysis even more so. An integration of feminist disability studies is important as it provides a framework “for critiquing strategies of liberation that work to ultimately eliminate one form of oppression while perpetuating another” (Hall,

2002, p. x). In relation to disability film studies under a postcolonial framework, *The Well* and *The Piano* demonstrate the iconographic use of disability as a visual shorthand that relies on ableist ideologies. Disability as a postcolonial tool/ identity carries with it many possibilities for critique, yet currently its political power is diminished by the tendency to adopt an individualistic mode, both in terms of representation and academic debate. While critiquing patriarchal power relations under a postcolonial framework, a critique of disability as disempowered by the same power structures is unexplored and marginally implicit at best.

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