Tinkering at the borders:
Lucky Miles's 'difference, distance, and dud maps'

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The topic of asylum seekers has been extremely visible on the national agenda, with many arguing that the 2004 election was won on the basis of the 'children overboard' saga and the Tampa crisis, with the Australian Prime Minister proclaiming, with 'great bravado and little irony' (Hage 2006), that: 'We decide who comes to this country and the basis upon which they come'. Despite the prominence of asylum seekers in the media, Australian feature filmmaking has been noticeably silent on this issue—until the recent release of James Michael Rowland's debut, *Lucky Miles* (2007).

Lucky Miles revolves around three exiles' quest to seek civilisation, resist capture and just survive in the desert, after being abandoned by an Indonesian fishing vessel in remote Western Australia. Pursued by an Army Reservist unit that seems more intent on fishing and football than on maintaining border integrity, the three exiles become more and more lost as they wander deeper into the desert.

Lucky Miles could be considered part of an expanding international genre of festival films which Yosefa Loshitzky labels 'journeys of hope': films portraying migration from the homeland to the host country and the associated struggle and suffering endured along the way (Loshitzky 2006, p. 745). The first point I want to address in the body of this paper is in relation to *Lucky Miles*' contribution to this international genre. Secondly, I will attempt to situate the film within the discourses of Australian multicultural and diasporic filmmaking. However, I argue that *Lucky Miles* is also firmly rooted within established Australian cultural traditions. The publicity material for the film describes it as a comedy about ‘difference, distance and dud maps’ (LuckyMiles.com) and it is the manifestation of these three tropes that comprises the third section of this essay. *Lucky Miles* is one of the first Australian feature films to let diasporic ‘others’ into the ‘heartland’ (Collins & Davis 2004, p. 100) of Australian cinema. In the absence of a close reading of the DVD (at the time of writing, *Lucky Miles* has not yet been released on DVD), this paper will try to situate the film within the discourses mentioned above.

Internationally, since Xavier Koller’s *Journey of Hope*—about a group of ill-fated Turkish Kurds seeking asylum in Switzerland—won the Best Foreign Film category at Cannes in 1990, an ever-growing number of high profile festival films have focussed on the issue of forcibly or voluntarily displaced persons and their quest for asylum. This list includes films such as *Borders* (Djadjam 2001), *In this World* (Winterbottom 2002) and *Baran* (Majidi 2001). Loshitzky argues that this genre subverts the dominant public discourse which dehumanises and criminalises migrants. Very few films, if any, have attempted this subject matter within the genre of comedy, as *Lucky Miles* does.

Loshitzky also notes another characteristic associated with these ‘journeys of hope’. She signals the dialectical relationship between the gaze of the tourist/spectator on the one hand, and that of the refugee on the other. The two films,

> *In This World* and *Journey of Hope* deprive the spectator of the scopophilic ‘touristic’ pleasure, subordinating his or her gaze to the refugee’s gaze in the pursuit of survival. Loshitzky (2006, p. 752)

Likewise in *Lucky Miles*, there are few sweeping long shots portraying the drama and sublime beauty of the iconic Australian landscape. In fact, the director even says in an interview that he tried to foreground the ‘banality of their [the exiles’] existence’

(McFarlane 2007, p. 24). In *Lucky Miles*, the camera succumbs to the gaze of the displaced asylum seekers as they traverse the inhospitable and scrubby desert terrain before them in pursuit of a road to Broome or Perth. The alienation that the asylum seekers feel is further emphasised by the physical environment they find themselves in. At one point they chance upon a little shanty in the middle of the desert, only to find it deserted of inhabitants, with a few tins of food and an abandoned car wreck.

Difference

> We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' (Prime Minister John Howard 2001, cited in Manne 2004, p. 41).

The multicultural conceptualisation of Australian nationhood is a relatively recent phenomenon. It became a familiar concept in the 1980s as a set of policies and a cultural ideal that critiqued prevailing monocultural views of national identity, opening up possibilities for Australian cinema and culture more broadly. However, at the dawn of the 21st century, despite record numbers of émigrés from non-English-speaking backgrounds, John Howard's Government made direct attacks on the ideals of multiculturalism and returned Australia to an era of assimilation. While hackneyed and insular visions for the nation state prevailed at government levels, portrayals of diasporic subjectivity and cultural diversity became more or less an everyday and unremarkable aspect of the Australian filmic landscape. On cursory inspection, more than half the seventeen Australian feature films and documentaries represented at the 2007 Sydney Film Festival displayed non-Anglo-Celtic central characters, and *Lucky Miles* won the Audience award for most popular film.

A comprehensive list of diasporic films spans hundreds of feature, television, documentary and short film titles that have secured their positions within the Australian cinema corpus. The commercial success of films such as *Strictly Ballroom* (Luhrman 1992), or more recently

The Wog Boy (Vellis 2000), has popularised ethnic diversity in Australia, while the critical appeal of films such as Clara Law's *Floating Life* (1995) or Ana Kokkinos's *Head On* (1997), is evidenced by an ever-expanding body of intellectual work devoted to them (Yue 2002; Mitchell 2003; Siemonwicz 1999; Bennett 2007). However, as Bennett claims, the mere fact that diasporic Others feature more frequently in Australian cinema by no means equates to unproblematic depictions of multicultural identities (Bennett 2007, p. 64).

Using *Lucky Miles* as my case study in point, I argue that diasporic hybridity has manifested in specific ways in relation to Australian national cinema identity, and that previous theories of transnational and diasporic cinemas, while relevant, cannot be simply transplanted and grafted onto the Australian context. Hamid Naficy's and Laura Marks' theories of 'accented cinema' and 'intercultural cinema' respectively seem to complement one another by broadly arguing that diasporically hybrid films and filmmakers conform to/seek out a particular set of formal and stylistic tendencies that enable them to be spoken about together (such as their artisinal and experimental production mode; their emphasis on journeying; their multilinguality; haptic visuality; their use of 'accented' speech; and their epistolatory form). However, neither Marks' nor Naficy's theories seem especially apt when considering the bulk of films whose themes and content could be broadly labelled 'diasporic' or multicultural within the Australian context. In addition, as James Bennett argues, most representations of multicultural Australianness (in feature filmmaking at least) have been tackled by (male) white Australian directors (Bennett 2007, p. 62).

In her article on diasporic subjectivity in contemporary Australian documentary, Belinda Smaill (2006) makes the argument that it is through the mainstream television documentary that we have seen the most prolific number of diasporic representations. However, unlike the films which Hamid Naficy and Laura Marks examine, which for the most part are located within the rubric of experimental and artisanal mode of fiction filmmaking, Smaill points out that these local films adhere to the established conventions and codes of the TV documentary. In most cases the institutional context which governs the production of these independent documentaries (they are funded through collaborative arrangements with government film funding bodies such as the Australian Film Commission, the Film Finance Corporation and sometimes the various state film bodies), combined with the projected expectations of the public service television audience, means that they 'narrativise diasporic experience' (Smaill 2006, p. 272). I would add that in the vast majority of Australian feature filmmaking projects diasporic experience also manifests through the storytelling process, rather than in any experimentation with form and style. The institutional arrangements which govern the making of documentaries, as Smaill relates, also govern the production of most feature films in Australia. So, perhaps unlike other aspects of hybridity, diasporic hybridity has become regulated and institutionalised through the government funding of an industry that demands its films be made within a traditional mode of storytelling. *Lucky Miles* reflects this through its traditional narrative and road movie 'quest' structure.

But there is another aspect to the institutionalisation of diasporic hybridity that goes beyond just the narrativising of diasporic experience. In 1998, Ghassan Hage critiqued Australia's state-sanctioned multiculturalism because, he argued, it promoted ethnic difference as something enriching for the Anglo-Celtic core. It has become an:

> established power structure which always positions the migrant or Asian in the position of the Other, the tolerated rather than the tolerator … where White Australia as occupiers of the national space control, tolerate, enjoy and manage difference, diversity and ethnicity. (Hage 1998, pp. 3, 9)

Lucky Miles is a film in which a space for the Other is *created* and defined by the dominant group, and I am not necessarily referring to the ethnic origin of the scriptwriters or the production context (including government funding) of the film. In *Lucky Miles* we learn little about the cultures of origin of these characters. Any sense of diasporic difference which might have emerged from the narrative or from the characters' interactions in the film is to a large extent erased because of the director's desire to focus on the universality of the story. In an interview he stressed this very fact when he said, 'We know the backstories of these guys; we know where they come from and where they go after they come into our society' (McFarlane 2007; 26). Do we, really? How much does even the well-educated, non-Iraqi Australian know about the cultures of Iraqi people? By de-contextualising individual histories we lose any palpable sense of unique cultural identities and diversity.

Distance

> If you stop, you're stuffed. (Sandy in *Japanese Story* (Brooks 2003))

Australia's 'tyranny of distance' made it a difficult territory to colonise and colonisation came relatively late. As a result, it is now a difficult territory to access for those seeking asylum—unlike other desirable countries such as the US and Europe, which share land borders with many countries. While the term was originally employed by Geoffrey Blainey to describe Australia's relationship with Europe, particularly the UK, it is now more often used to describe the situation *within* Australia: Australians' distance from one another, dotted around the huge continent. This isolation or 'tyranny of distance' takes on added significance in the context of émigrés and asylum seekers. Isolation from the rest of the world has compelled most diasporic communities in Australia, as a matter of survival, to more quickly integrate into the broader community; than in other countries like the US or in Europe. This, combined with a government-sanctioned policy of multiculturalism, and a government funded film industry, has spawned diasporic films which say more about the new country, Australia (and its existing hegemonic tropes) than the old. And *Lucky Miles* seems typical in this regard. The remainder of this paper discusses these aspects.

As well as contributing to the distinctive Australian genre of the ‘no road’ film which I discuss below, *Lucky Miles* also exhibits a fascination with the car and mobility, which I have described elsewhere as ‘antipodean automobility’ (Simpson 2006). Australia’s long distances between major urban centres, combined with the isolation of country roads, means that we depend on our cars not only for mobility but also for survival. Outside the major urban centres there are often no alternatives to car-based travel, and if a vehicle breaks down or crashes in a remote area there is an outside possibility that no one will offer aid. As Sandy in *Japanese Story* puts it: ‘[i]f you stop, you're stuffed!’—and as Kitson emphasises in his discussion of car crashes in Australian film, ‘a crash in the bush, in the outback, reduces us all to nothing … and plugs into our deepest fears and desires’ (Kitson 2003, p. 68). This car-survival (or not) has provoked numerous filmmakers to maroon and abandon their characters through car crashes, boggings or breakdowns in the outback or in ‘hick’ country towns, to explore this auto-*im*mobility (Simpson 2006). For example, *Shame* (Jodrell 1988) depicts Asta's Japanese motorcycle breaking down, after which she gets stuck in the red-neck town of Ginborak; in *High Tide* (Armstrong 1987), Lili gets stuck in the coastal town of Eden after her Valiant breaks down and she loses her job; in *Japanese Story* (Brooks 2003) the central characters are stranded in the bush after their Landcruiser gets bogged; in *Walkabout* (Roeg 1971) two children are left to fend for themselves in the bush after their suicidal father sets his VW Beetle alight; and in *Wolf Creek* (McLean 2005), a gruesome fate awaits three backpackers when they are left at the mercy of a local madman after their dodgy Falcon breaks down in the outback (Simpson 2006). While not strictly a car crash, the opening shot of *Lucky Miles* sees the characters stranded on the national border by an Indonesian fishing boat, entering that liminal, interstitial space between land and sea, and between Australia and *not* Australia. But *Lucky Miles*’ ‘antipodean automobility’ does not stop there. The army reservists also have to get their car going to survive. And finally, to show how thoroughly adapted the lost exiles have become, the humorous scene close to the end of the film displays the Iraqi ‘qualified engineer’ getting an abandoned car wreck going, echoing the *mutikars* from the ingenious *Bush Mechanics* series. The film seems to be implying that surely these exiles' ability to survive in Australian cinema's heartland, the desert, a place where 'real' Australians live, means that they have legitimately earned the title 'Australian' if they so desire it.

Dud maps

> It's a road movie without a road; it's uniquely Australian.
> (Director James Michael Rowland in conversation with Brian McFarlane. (McFarlane 2007, p. 26))

For most of *Lucky Miles* the exiles are lost, traversing by foot the harsh desert terrain. While they possess a map, even Western cartographers' lines do not mean a thing if you cannot 'read' the land or find a road. Interestingly, this is not the first film to be described as 'a road movie without roads'. *Lucky Miles* could, in fact, be considered an extension of the sub-genre which Fiona Probyn has called the 'no road' film, and which, to date, includes *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, *One Night the Moon* and *Wind,* amongst others. The 'no road' film has a few defining characteristics, such as being without bitumen (read: colonised) roads, and includes 'different epistemological traces' to the traditional road movies: traces that you 'might not be able to know from the inside' (Probyn 2005), unless you are an Indigenous tracker. The Australian 'no road' film denies the nihilism of the traditional US road movie, or the 'freedom on the road to nowhere' as Timothy Corrigan typifies the genre, because in

> postcolonial Australia … the road does not lead to 'nowhere' with its connotations of *terra nullius* … rather it leads into, onto and through, someone else's already culturally inscribed land… the no road films illustrate above all the 'somewhere-ness' of place in contrast to the nowhereness of unbounded, unmapped 'space'. (Probyn 2005)

So, in all these ‘no road’ films the tracker is central, performing the vital function of guiding the non-Indigenous Australians on the road, or the ‘no road’ as the case may be, where there are no maps, or just ‘dud maps’. Interestingly, the only redeeming, fully functioning character in *Lucky Miles* is the Indigenous army reservist who is sensible and technologically savvy and is the one who gets his team out of many sticky situations. In a minor way he performs the role of the guide in the film, however in comparison to the ‘no road’ films above, his role has been substantially diminished.

That said, the film also exhibits some of the characteristics of the hegemonic European sensibility towards Australian space. Even the title of the film, *Lucky Miles,* reflects that familiar, laconic, nihilistic relationship to country which denies the bush or the outback a cultural value and reinscribes that idea of it being ‘an empty expanse, a tabula rasa’ (Dargis, cited in Cohan & Hark, p. 1) or in Australian terms a *terra nullius*. The director reflects this when he says:

> When you come to Australia, you walk inland, thinking, ‘Surely there’ll be something there.’ But there’s nothing but the desert. (McFarlane 2007, p. 26)

For me, the humorous and laconic tone of *Lucky Miles*, which emanates from that very European sensibility towards the landscape, reinvoked that famous scene from *Gallipoli* (Weir 1981) when Archy and Frank walk over a great, expansive salt-pan in Western Australia, on their way to enlist for World War One. They meet a camel driver whose isolation is such that he does not even know that a war is going on. When Archy and Frank confront him with the idea that Australia might be invaded by the Germans, the camera follows his gaze to reveal a vast ‘empty’ track of land, and he responds, ‘They can bloody have it’. Likewise, to the would-be asylum seeker to Australia, *Lucky Miles* seems to be posing the question—do you *really* want to come *here,* to the ‘lucky’ country?

In the context of the ‘no road’ film, *Lucky Miles* contemplates the question: where do non-Indigenous, non-Australians figure? Are they just an extension of the settler relationship with the land, as this film posits? Or, do they fail to inherit the legacy of dispossession and the same conquistadorial perspective on land (scape) that Ross Gibson has alluded to (Gibson 1993)? The fact that these characters react in a way that countless non-Indigenous Australians have done, indicates the prevailing dominance of this perspective. Even the director’s comments about the film seem to reinforce this:

> It’s the story of Burke and Wills updated to reflect immigration patterns of recent years. We’ve shamelessly reworked a national myth to sell to the world. (McFarlane 2007, p. 26)

However the presence of the Indigenous character also hints that there might be another way; another perspective—if only we would stop for a moment to listen.

Conclusion

In 2005 Richard Dyer spoke of a tendency in Film Studies for theorists to ask questions of a film based on an academic agenda, rather than being focused on the concerns of the films themselves (Bennett 2007, p. 63). *Lucky Miles* playfully and self-consciously reinscribes those tropes that countless academics have described as hegemonic tropes of national identity. Through its terms of ‘difference, distance and dud maps’, this film seems to be more than just giving a wink and a nod to the Australian film archive. It almost feels as if it has been made as a teaching resource for an audience of Australian cinema academics.

In the Australian context, portrayals of the émigré experience have rarely ventured beyond the urban and suburban confines of the major cities. Recently, films like *Love’s Brother* (Sardi 2004) and *Romulus My Father* (Roxburgh 2007) have shown the country town as tentatively open to the émigré experience. But portrayals of the non-Anglo-Celtic and non-Indigenous exiles in the outback or the bush are extremely rare.

While *Lucky Miles* attempts a liberal-humanist questioning of the inhumane, anti-refugee, anti-multicultural, pro-assimilationist, ‘relaxed and comfortable’ stance of John Howard’s Australia, it does not do much more than just tinker at the borders. While this is one of the first Australian films to let diasporic Others into the ‘heartland’ (Collins & Davis 2004) of Australian cinema, it does not really attempt to negotiate the bigger questions of diasporic hybridity with which Australian culture is grappling. The action of the film takes place on the geographic and sovereign borders of Australia and its enquiry does not really go beyond there.

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