

LOOKING FOR ALIBRANDI **A PLACE IN SPACE**

by Jane Shields

Prior to the 1970's Australia was defined as a monocultural society – a society with only one culture – based on an essentialised Britishness. To be Australian was to be in possession of a national and not an ethnic identity. During this monocultural period, Australia's quest for a national identity had been entirely in terms of Britishness, a quest that excluded the identities and interests of the vast numbers of immigrants to Australia throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, prior to the 1970s, Australian film portrayed Australia in terms of a dominant ethnicity based on Anglo-Celtics. Other ethnicities, especially those of European origin, were subordinated to this dominant culture, and defined in opposition to it, thus films made during the film renaissance of the 1970s "failed to project an image of Australia as a multiracial and multicultural nation despite the fact that multiculturalism had become the official policy of successive governments" (Stratton 1998, 134). It wasn't until the 1980s that nation building fell out of favour in the government funding of film and television and was replaced by a focus on multiculturalism. The establishment of SBS television in the 1980s, specialising in multicultural programs, was an indication of government policy at the time. Shore clarifies that "the late twentieth-century world can be characterised as one profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, gender and sexuality" (Ozseek 2000). Ethnicities were no longer conformed to a unified idea of Australianness, but respected for their differences in order to allow them to play themselves out as a part of the pluralistic and hybrid character of the Australian nation.

Multiculturalism within Australian films offers its audiences an opportunity of recognising, as Australian, representations of social experience which are defined by their hybridity. Films such as Michael Jenkins' *The Heartbreak Kid* (1993), Aleksis Vellis' *The Wog Boy* (1999) and Kate Woods' *Looking for Alibrandi* (2000) depict a nation of "elaborate patterns of difference" as well as a construction of unity. In particular, *Looking for Alibrandi's* Josephine Alibrandi (Pia Miranda) typifies the hybridised Australian negotiating a cultural space for herself within her Italian community that is also negotiating its form and significance across grids of racial and cultural diversity.

Multicultural cinema deals with the overt theme of race and ethnicity, which is identified by discourses such as migration¹, diaspora², deracination³, the rediscovery of ethnic identity⁴, cultural conflict⁵, cultural misrecognition⁶, othering⁷, hybridisation⁸, generational conflict⁹ and old world versus new world¹⁰.

¹ *Migration* – the struggle to establish a life in a new country. ² *Diaspora* – the spread of an ethnic identity to many different parts of the world, due to migration of people out of an originating country. ³ *Deracination* – the uprooting of people from their homeland. ⁴ *The rediscovery of ethnic identity* – where a film explores the way a character can rediscover his or her original identity after assimilation into a new one. ⁵ *Cultural conflict* – the conflict between two different cultures with different values and beliefs. ⁶ *Cultural misrecognition* – the identification of aspects of another culture in terms of prevailing ideas circulating in one's own culture. ⁷ *Othering* – the confirmation of one's own cultural identity by highlighting an aspect of another culture as different. ⁸ *Hybridisation* – the construction of a cultural identity out of

various aspects of different cultures.⁹ *Generational conflict* – the conflict between those born in a new culture, or those able to adapt to a new culture, with those who cannot adapt, or who, for various reason, choose not to adapt.¹⁰ *Old World versus New World* – Old World equates with an older version of Europe defined by tradition, religious belief and conformity, superstition, old ways, conservative, respectful, oriented to the past. In Old World, individuals are not free agents, but tied to family and tradition. New World equates with democratic ideals of the free individual, independent of family and tradition, sexually and politically liberated, progressive, changeable, upwardly mobile, future directed.

Hynes states that in Australian films concerned with migration, home and identity “youthful characters, while integral to the story, have tended to hover around the margins” (Hynes 2001, 280). In contrast, more recently, multicultural cinema has opted against using a mature adult as their dominant voice, choosing more youthful characters to communicate the complexities of previous similar multicultural films, but appealing to a younger culture. For instance, Woods’ coming of age film, *Looking for Alibrandi*, centres on a 17-year-old female hybrid Australian who, overly conscious of her Italian heritage and her working class roots, craves popularity and acceptance amid her wealthy and elite peer group. Throughout these multiracial films the younger hybrid characters – the New World – challenge the ways and traditions of their older relatives – the Old World – in order to pursue an independent lifestyle, away from the pressures of the family and the cultural and ethnic ties that inevitably come with them.

Looking for Alibrandi is predominantly about a young first generation Australian, Josephine Alibrandi (Josie), coming to terms with her Italian heritage and identity, “...culture is nailed into you so deep you can’t escape it” (Woods 2000) Before she can successfully achieve an independent lifestyle she has to confront the stifling traditional beliefs of her Italian grandmother. *Alibrandi*’s chief motifs unite to create the overt premise communicating the importance of identity and a sense of place within a modernised Australia. This is evidently more complicated for someone not only struggling within themselves but also within their specific ethnic community. In *Looking for Alibrandi* Josie’s concept of national identity centres on being Australian, which she sees as being rich, popular and socially accepted. Surrounded by Anglo-Celtic peers, while studying through scholarship at the prestigious St Martha’s Catholic school for girls, Josie sees the attributes of these girls as being central to “being Australian”. While Australia is a multicultural society made up of many different races, within this film, in particular, the cultural differences are presented as more of a class based divide. Josie, the Italian - Australian, is juxtaposed with the character of Carly Bishop (Leeanna Walsman), an Anglo upper class Australian. It is Josie’s class insecurity that stops her from admitting her true feelings for the upper class John Barton, school captain at a wealthy boys Catholic high school and son of esteemed, wealthy Anglo-Celtic parents. Josie desires the life of John Barton and would love to live a life in which people look up at her with envy. However, Josie is unaware of the great expectations placed upon John by his family and suicide seems the only way out for him. His death is an important part of Josie’s discovery process as she comes to realise that while she is supposedly deprived, she is also free to pursue any sort of life she wants. Additionally, meeting her father and forming a relationship with him provides Josie with the long awaited stable father figure who helps her make sense of her own identity and unique set of circumstances. Throughout her life Josie has been

considered an “outcast” in the eyes of her Italian community, and a “bastard ” in the eyes of the Anglo-Celtic community. The long awaited presence of her father ultimately constructs a “new image” for Josie as she becomes proud and protective of his existence. Carla Fasano explains, “successive generations of Italian-Australian women appear to be inventing a new identity for themselves” (Saville 1995, 139), and for Josie these factors become vital in order for her to accept her personal and national identity.

Hynes notes that there are obvious “crucial differences between each generation of migrants: those that are born in one country and arrive as adults in another, those who arrive as children, those who are first generation born in the host country, and so on” (Hynes 2001, 280), and in *Alibrandi* it is this generational conflict that entices Josie, like others of her generation, to challenge the old order and the old traditions. Josie’s Nonna Katia (Elena Cotta), has been in Australia for over thirty years but still “lives in Italy”. She does everything the Italian way and for the majority of the time, speaks in her native language, hence the use of subtitles. Josie on the other hand, feels “indignant and constrained by her lack of freedom” (Hynes, 2001, 281) and constantly rebels against traditions and obligations. In due course, many of Josie’s questions are answered and the truth of her heritage is revealed, thus enabling her to rediscover her ethnic identity. Accordingly, once Josie assimilated into a “new identity” she was able to revive her original identity and respect her Italian origins along with the fact that her Nonna is too old to adopt new habits, and it’s people like her Nonna that maintain the link to a country’s heritage. It is also a noteworthy point to make that in *Looking for Alibrandi*, as Hynes detects, “...it also appears that the burden of carrying and maintaining the culture and traditions from Sicily to Australia is borne largely by the women, particularly the older women” (Hynes, 2001, 281). *Looking for Alibrandi* is one of the few films that doesn’t downplay or gloss over the importance and involvement of the role of women within an ethnic family and community. In a characteristically staunchly patriarchal community, ironically, *Alibrandi* views the Italian community through the experiences of the women’s culture, “a local matriarchy” (Hynes 2001, 280).

Ghassan Hage reinforces the well-established fact that “certain foods and cuisines are central to migrant identity and their sense of home” (Hynes 2001, 281). *Looking for Alibrandi* amplifies this fact with its few, yet significant, scenes focusing on the preparation and consumption of traditional Italian food. Celebrations such as Tomato Day, which features twice in the film - “acting as bookends”, and Easter are the two main events that depict the possible ‘clichéd’ “Italianness” throughout the film but in fact should be viewed as the events in which tension is seen within the group, and contrastingly, the highlighted point in which Josie accepts her heritage, her community, and primarily, her identity, “...it doesn’t matter whether I’m Josephine Andretti who was never an Alibrandi, should have been a Sandford and who may never be a Coote” (Woods 2000).

The story of the three generations of Alibrandi women is powerful and poignant. They all have their own stories to tell and obstacles to overcome. Despite their differences, ultimately they learn from each other and their emotional journeys bind them more tightly together at the end of the film. *Looking for Alibrandi*’s feel-good ending is crucial in the youth genre.

Australia is a country diverse in culture. With a great proportion of our population consisting of migrants, our culture has been greatly influenced by many others from around the world. Likewise, the Australian film industry has proven to be just as diverse and rich with influence, while at the same time standing out in its own right. Thus, a film about the multicultural nature of Australian, such as *Looking for Alibrandi*, gives the concept of multiculturalism the respect and depth it deserve and thus captures the problems that many ethnic communities still face today, searching for their place in Australia. Josephine sums up her feelings towards her bi-racial situation in a modernised Australia, "I'm not sure whether everyone in this country will ever understand multiculturalism... but the important thing is that I know where my place in life is" (Woods 2000). *Looking for Alibrandi*, along with numerous similar multicultural films, doesn't try to be specifically "aussie" or "ocker", nor does it try to be racist. *Looking for Alibrandi* merely highlights the ignorance shown by many within the Australian society, and as Australia increases as a multicultural and multiracial society, more and more Australians – both hybrids and Anglo-Celtics – will surely identify with this film. O'Regan promotes this statement with his belief that, "Australian cinema serves as a vehicle of popular socialization and as a forum for telling uncomfortable truths about its society" (O'Regan 1996, 331).