



**Research Study**

**Speaking Another Language: Australian Multilingual Films**

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**ABSTRACT.** In Australia, the film industry—supported by government subsidies since the 1970s—has a central role in reflecting and informing ideas about national identity. As Australian multicultural filmmaking developed in the 1990s, so did the presence of Australian made multilingual cinema, highlighting Australia’s changing relationship with the Asia-Pacific region, and growing linguistic, as well as cultural, diversity. Using key concepts from adaptation studies and Australian film studies, this article uses textual analysis to draw attention to a series of Australian films that 1) represent Asian-Australian migrant subjects, and, 2) are multilingual and multicultural representations of Australian life. The films analysed are: *Floating Life* (1996), *La Spagnola* (2001), *The Finished People* (2003), *Footy Legends* (2006), and *Unfinished Sky* (2007). The analysis finds that these examples illustrate the adaptation or creative interpretation of multiculturalism as a national heritage discourse, and raises questions about the practicality of Australian multiculturalism as a national framework in the context of an ongoing commitment to a singular national language, English.

**RÉSUMÉ.** En Australie, l'industrie cinématographique, soutenue par des subventions gouvernementales depuis les années 1970, joue un rôle central dans la réflexion et la diffusion des idées sur l'identité nationale. Au fur et à mesure que le cinéma multiculturel australien se développait dans les années 1990, la présence du cinéma multilingue australien s'est développée, mettant en évidence la relation changeante de l'Australie avec la région Asie-Pacifique et la diversité linguistique et culturelle croissante. En s'appuyant sur des concepts clés d'études d'adaptation et d'études cinématographiques australiennes, cet article utilise l'analyse textuelle pour attirer l'attention sur une série de films australiens qui représentent des sujets de migrants australiens asiatiques, et qui sont des représentations multilingues et multiculturelles de la vie australienne. Les films analysés sont *Floating Life* (1996), *La Spagnola* (2001), *The Finished People* (2003), *Footy Legends* (2006) et *Unfinished Sky* (2007). L'article constate que ces exemples illustrent l'adaptation ou l'interprétation créative du multiculturalisme en tant que discours sur le patrimoine national, soulevant des questions sur le caractère pratique du multiculturalisme australien en tant que cadre national dans le contexte de l'engagement continu envers une langue nationale singulière, l'anglais.

**Keywords:** *film, national identity, multilingual, multiculturalism, Australia.*

**Mots-clés :** *film, identité nationale, multilingue, multiculturalisme, Australie.*



## **INTRODUCTION**

In Australia, the film industry—supported by government subsidies since the 1970s—has a central role in reflecting and informing ideas about national identity (Dermody & Jacka, 1987; Elder, 2007; O'Regan, 1996, 2002; Turner, 1994, 1999). As Australian multicultural filmmaking developed in the 1990s, so did the presence of Australian-made multilingual cinema, which highlighted Australia's changing relationship with the Asia-Pacific region, and its growing recognition of linguistic, as well as cultural, diversity. Australia, already a multicultural and multilingual nation long before it was named Australia in 1901 (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), experienced a massive period of migration after World War II. In response, a new multiculturalism policy was introduced, which espoused cultural tolerance and social inclusion (Grassby, 1972). Multicultural became a normative and ideological description of the population (Lopez, 2000). It stood in contrast to the concept of a White Australia, typically characterised by the White Australia policy—a suite of twentieth century immigration controls that restricted entry to Australia on the basis of race (Lake & Reynolds, 2008; Richards, 2008). This article uses key concepts from adaptation studies and Australian film studies to analyse five films that adapt the popular representation of multiculturalism as a policy and national ethos, using languages additional to English.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Applying Elliott's (2014) concept of doing adaptation, the textual analysis in this article highlights the adaptation or creative interpretation of multiculturalism as national heritage and multilingual discourse in Australian film. Elliott's work repositions the idea of adaptation as critic, which allows her to suggest new ways of theorising and writing about adaptations, and creates different angles from which to engage with adapted texts. Adaptation is impossible to define in a fixed way, because by definition, it is always changing (Hutcheon, 2006). Elliott uses the idea of doing adaptation to develop a pedagogical approach. She argues that undertaking the process of adapting texts from one form to another offers new insight into the process and context of their production. As she puts it, "Doing adaptation opens insights, interpretations, and concepts inaccessible to conventional modes of theorizing, criticism, and expository writing about adaptations. It also offers new ways to engage the aesthetics of adaptations" (Elliott, 2014, p. 71).

This article uses the same concept of doing adaptation to closely read and characterise five films as multilingual adaptations of Australian multiculturalism. Framed in this way, the analysis goes beyond considering each film's status as a representation—of Australian society, multiculturalism, migration, migrant subjects—to consider how each film has interpreted, explored, theorised, critiqued, and given expression to culture and identity. The analysis also raises questions about the effectiveness of Australian multiculturalism as a national framework in the context of an ongoing commitment to a singular national language, English (Australian Government, 2020). While it is not unusual for Australian films to include small amounts of dialogue in languages other than English, this series of films was selected because they use multiple languages and English subtitles. The article argues that this is key to demonstrating



that Australian multiculturalism is not only culturally diverse, but also involves a multilingual and multiracial discourse.

## THE FILMS FOR ANALYSIS

Each of the selected films, released between 1996 and 2007, adapts multiculturalism as a government policy and national ethos, and includes representations of Asian-Australian or other migrant subjects, as well as multilingual portrayals of Australian society. These films are: *Floating Life* (1996), *La Spagnola* (2001), *The Finished People* (2003), *Footy Legends* (2006), and *Unfinished Sky* (2007). *Floating Life* is a drama about a Hong Kong family who have migrated to Sydney, and demonstrates how more conservative representations of migrant subjects can be disrupted. *Footy Legends* is a comedy starring comedian Anh Do as a footy-mad Vietnamese-Australian man trying to raise his kid sister; in *Footy Legends*, there is a return to the genre of migrant comedy (Simpson et al., 2009), but for a twenty-first century audience. *The Finished People*, directed by Khoa Do and also set in Sydney, is a social realist film (a drama touching on pressing social issues) about a group of homeless youth. It examines the intersection between homelessness and the culturally diverse make-up of Australia's underclass. *La Spagnola* is about a Spanish woman living in a remote Australian town with her teenage daughter. The narrative is a representation of Spanish migration, and while it remains fixated on European migrant identities rather than Asian-Australian, it is predominately in Spanish rather than English, making it quite different to other multicultural Australian films. *Unfinished Sky* is a romantic, crime drama in which an Afghani woman escapes sex-trafficking and is given sanctuary by a reclusive farmer who teaches her English.

Taken together, the films explore the lives of characters from Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Afghanistan, often in the characters' native languages, thus relying on English subtitles for large parts of each film. Linguistically, the films include Cantonese (*Floating Life*), Dari (*Unfinished Sky*), English (all films), Spanish (*La Spagnola*), and Vietnamese (*The Finished People*, *Footy Legends*), a linguistic diversity that goes some way to reflecting the Australian population, but is far from the norm of the Australian screen. Together, the films were chosen because they all deploy subtitles and use two or more languages, and—in the context of an officially, English-speaking nation—can be defined as multilingual.

## AUSTRALIA AS A MULTICULTURAL NATION

When Australia became a nation in 1901, it had a population of 3.8 million people, 22.6% of whom were born overseas. The majority of those new Australians were from the United Kingdom and Ireland (79.7%). The first pieces of legislation the Australian Parliament passed were the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* and the *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901*, the latter enabling the deportation of Pacific Islander indentured labourers. While racial language was left out of the actual legislation, White racial purity was the intention (Lake & Reynolds, 2008; Markus, 2003). At that time, people from only one Asian country—China—were included in census counts; they represented 3.5% of the population in 1901. In 2016, Australia's population was 23.4 million, 26.3% of whom were born overseas. Where Australians from overseas were



born has changed dramatically. Among the top ten countries of birth, China represents 8.3% and is one of six Asian countries listed. The United Kingdom remains the country of origin of the largest percentage of new Australians born overseas; however, that group now represents only 17.7% of the total overseas-born population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). However, Australian multiculturalism continues to be contested.

With the development of multiculturalism as a new national ethos in the 1980s, Australia began to renegotiate its relationship with the Asia-Pacific region, and indeed its perceptions of its own national identity. In a landmark speech in Singapore in 1996, Prime Minister Paul Keating (ALP 1991-1996) spoke in detail about the relationship between Australia and Asia. Described as new regionalism, the outlook Keating described took into account Australia's greater reliance on economic partnerships and trade with Asian nations, as well as a shift in defence-planning towards the idea "that Australia needs to seek its security in Asia rather than from Asia." Appealing directly to national and regional values, Keating (1996) declared:

the values I believe in and most Australians believe in are precisely those that are often referred to in this debate as "Asian". The importance of family, the benefit of education, the need for order and public accountability, the inherent value of work - most Australians I know would describe these as Australian values. (n.p.)

However, counter to new regionalist views, cultural debates shifted irrevocably to the Right just a couple months after Keating's speech, when he was voted out of office and the Howard Government took power. In the same 1996 election, the Leader of the One Nation Party, Pauline Hanson, won a seat in the lower house. Famously, in her maiden speech, she conjured racist ("yellow peril") arguments associated with the White Australia policy, which was officially abolished in 1975 (Lake & Reynolds, 2008). Hanson (1996) argued that the rate of Asian immigration was swamping Australia. Her comments reflected a growing climate of contestation towards multiculturalism, and represented a reassertion of Australia as a non-Asian (or as a White) nation, despite its being part of the Asian region and home to millions of Australians with Asian heritage—especially Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese heritage.

Anderson's (1983) theory of nations as imagined communities proposed that a nation is imagined because it is made up of vast groups of people who will never all meet, but who are unified by their shared belief in ideas about what makes up that nation and its people (Anderson, 2006). The concept of nations as imagined also explained diasporas; nations scattered across or beyond multiple borders. Building on and adapting Anderson's (1983) theory, Taylor (2004) famously developed the concept of modern social imaginaries:

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p. 23)

The current article argues that the representation of multiculturalism in Australian film both reflects and shapes the ways people imagine their lives in relation to others, within and across



the borders of different nation-states. Indeed, film informs and shapes how Australians imagine what multiculturalism is. The article argues that the representation of multiculturalism in or through Australian film is a powerful influencer of ideas surrounding legitimate Australian nationhood. Taylor (2004) has further described the social imaginary as “that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (p. 23). Therefore, the current analysis takes the position that Australian film, especially as a nationally sponsored industry, is not only central to the ongoing construction of national identities, but also to the ongoing production of Australian cultural and multicultural heritage.

## **AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL CINEMA**

In Australia, there is a strong tradition of filmmaking about the Australian nation and its people’s stories. Within this cinema, multicultural films have been defined as films “where the main character or characters are non-Anglo Australian” (Stratton, 1999, p. 75). Multicultural filmmaking is “an important medium for migrant representation because of the opportunities it affords to subvert traditional Anglo-Celtic narratives that house, support, and rehearse discriminatory or biased forms of national identity” (Jacobs, 2010, p. 105). However, in an Australian context, multicultural films are often not what Naficy (2001) defined as accented cinema, caught on the boundaries of national cinema consumption, easily differentiated from linguistic or cultural norms. In fact, Australian multicultural films are often widely-consumed examples of Australian cinema that have huge box office earnings at home and abroad, for instance, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) (about a Spanish-Australian family, which made AUD\$80 million), *The Wog Boy* (2000) (about a second generation Greek-Australian migrant, which made AUD\$11.5 million), or *Looking for Alibrandi* (2000) (a coming-of-age narrative about Italian-Australian teenager, Josie, and which made AUD\$8.3 million). While these amounts are not huge when compared to American film earnings, for Australian-made films they are significant.

As well as differing from accented cinema (Naficy, 2001), Australian multicultural films often differ for the most part from Marks’ (2000) concept of “intercultural cinema” (p. 11). Marks has argued that, as a medium, intercultural cinema negotiated place and culture in a transnational and postcolonial world. Marks has characterised culturally diverse representation in film as more akin to world cinema, arguing it transgresses national borders, existing within and across the boundaries of nation-states, and—to employ Taylor (2004)—conjuring new forms of modern social imaginaries. Dennison and Song (2006) define the concept of “world cinema” by its “situatedness” (p. 21), suggesting that it refers mostly to practices or products that are defined as non-Western. At times, the term world cinema has been interpreted as derogatory (Byrne, 1999). In the context of Australian film, world cinema is often used to refer to those releases that—to use Naficy’s (2001) or Marks’ (2000) concepts—are interpreted as accented or intercultural, and thus take up transnational and interstitial, as well as national spaces, for example, by representing non-White and non-English speaking characters. In Australia, these kinds of films—including films such as the ones analysed in this article—tend to be positioned outside the mainstream (of Australian culture and multiculturalism), and have very small box office earnings. In contrast, to much of Australia’s multicultural cinema (which is still focused



through the language of English), the films analysed in this article include multilingual and multiracial diversity.

## **MULTIRACIAL AND MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY**

In Australian cinema (as in much of the rest of the world), there is a diversity problem even in multicultural filmmaking. There is a tendency to focus on White characters (Elder, 2007; O'Regan, 2002; Turner, 1999), or migrant subjects who are European (mostly Italian or Greek), conjuring the period of massive post-World War II migration. In this context, Asian-Australians often only receive limited representation: "bit parts" or "fleeting representation" (Simpson et al., 2009, pp. 33; 35), potentially including small parts within a larger group or chorus parts such as the Vietnamese-Australian characters in the first half of *Romper Stomper* (1992). Smaller cameos for comedic effect, for instance the Vietnamese pizza delivery boys in *The Wog Boy* (2000), or the drug dealer's harem of young Asian men in *Down Under* (2016), may also be considered bit parts.

For example, in *They're a Weird Mob* (1966), which is about an Italian migrant who arrives in Sydney in the bustling 1950s, there is only one Chinese character, a man who lives next door to the building site where Nino works and who drives a van with a golden dragon painted on the side. In this example, as well as many more recent ones, the Chinese-Australian man is stereotyped (Elder, 2007; O'Regan, 1996; Simpson et al., 2009). *They're a Weird Mob* gestures to a global political situation in which communism posed an ever-present threat to the West, and to Australia's uncertainty of its place in the Asia-Pacific region. While the Chinese-Australian man is depicted as a neighbour, he is also represented as different, silent, and culturally and physically apart from Nino (an Italian immigrant) and his White Australian friends. These examples suggest that Asian-Australian characters are simultaneously a constant fixture of Australian cinema and continuously limited in the roles they perform.

More recently, the character-motif of the Chinese cook (e.g., Sing Song in *Australia*, 2008) is an example of entrenched typecasting for people with Asian heritage (Bertone, 1998). Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) portrays the homestead cook as a racist Asian stereotype. The cook, named Sing Song and played by Hong Kong actor Yuen Wah, is characterised as a loyal servant to the White station owners. He is denigrated and made fun of by his "Yellowface name, his frantic rants in Chinese, and his relegation to the feminine realm of the kitchen" (Hogan, 2010, pp. 69-70). In their detailed study of the representation of Asian characters in Australian film, Khoo et al. (2013) claim that even though Asian characters have been present in Australian cinema since the 1920s, they continue to be represented in stereotypical ways. Asian characters, especially Chinese and Vietnamese characters, tend to be associated with the "social problems of drugs, prostitution and gambling" (p. 25). In Australian cinema, it is often the case that Asian characters are marginalised or represented in token ways—what Turner (1989) calls a "social process" that is "seemingly extraneous to the process of gendered nation-building" (p. 33). The depiction of Asian characters in the examples just listed illustrates this theory. While there is a much larger body of research examining the ongoing exoticisation in Australian film and television of Asian-Australians (a term which, in itself, comprises many different nationalities



and ethnicities), this article analyses some examples of Asian-Australian and multilingual representation (i.e., film) that act as adaptations of multiculturalism as a multilingual phenomenon in ways that foreground and sometimes give agency back to non-White or non-English speaking identities by representing multicultural and multilingual characters.

## **MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND GENDER**

However, as intersectionality reminds us (Crenshaw, 1986), race, culture, nationality, and language are also intersected by gender. It is common for young Asian women to be portrayed as caught up in sex-trafficking exploitation, such as in *Australia Day* (2017), where Lan Chang (Jenny Wu) is sex-trafficked. Analysis of films like these further provides insight into ways in which, even in multilingual films, female “ethnic” characters are frequently silenced (i.e., the character lacks agency or no sub-titles are provided for the character, meaning she cannot be understood by an English-speaking audience). Where male characters tend to have speaking roles, female migrant characters are frequently sidelined physically and verbally (through a lack of language), thus reducing their power in the context of the narrative and limiting the amount of screentime they receive. Through the lens of adaptation studies, these examples illustrate how multiculturalism has been interpreted as a multilingual and transnational discourse, yet also how it is intersected by gender.

## **WHAT IS FOREIGN-LANGUAGE FILM?**

In *Floating Life*, multiple languages are used in addition to English, which is typically the language of the subtitles. The film was selected as Australia’s entry for “Best Foreign Language Film” in 1997 at the 69<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards; yet the nomination was refused. This is relevant because it indicates the interstitial space that Australian multilingual films (like those in other predominantly English-speaking countries) exist in: they are considered neither part of mainstream Australian film culture, nor officially part of the foreign-language sphere. In the rule book for the Oscars, a “foreign language film”—or now, an “international feature film”—is defined as “a feature-length motion picture ... produced outside the United States of America with a predominantly non-English dialogue track” (Oscars, 2019). However, there have been many instances where multilingual films that meet the rule book’s criteria are deemed to have too much English and are therefore disqualified from nomination. *Floating Life* is an example of such a film.

Chan (2008), on the subject of the rejection of the Singaporean film *Be With Me* (2005) from Oscar nomination, argued that “[i]n a world that is becoming increasingly dependent on English for inter-cultural communication, the Academy’s conservative criteria in the Best Foreign Language Film category are starting to appear more and more out of sync with the social and cultural realities of the present time” (p. 98). For a multicultural film, missing out on an Oscar, a massive indicator of global success, is one thing; not even being able to be nominated (and therefore not having access to any associated world promotion) is a further barrier to reaching potential new audiences. The Academy’s exclusion criteria ensures that their awards primarily go to films in English, and implies that films made in other languages do not entirely fit in any



available category, even though they reflect the multilingual reality of societies around the world.

### ***Floating Life***

*Floating Life* is about a family from Hong Kong who settle in Sydney. The Chan family arrive in Australia in a state of fear and unease. The sun is too bright, the native animals are deadly, and there is endless space. The parents keenly feel the distance from their ancestors, and the older daughter, Bing, who has been living in Australia for seven years on her own, enters a state of deep depression when she is unable to provide for her family in the way she wants to. Summarised by the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) as portraying “[a]n Asian family ... caught between two cultures” (Byrnes, 1996), the film was critically acclaimed, but struggled to achieve the exposure many critics thought it deserved (Elder, 2007; Jacobs, 2011). Like many examples of accented cinema across the Western world (e.g., Marks, 2001; Naficy, 2001; Stam & Raengo, 2005), *Floating Life* reached a very specific international audience, excelling at international film festivals, but not necessarily at the box office. *Floating Life* appealed to a niche, film-going audience, and is no longer widely accessible for viewing (Byrnes, 1996). Without access to awards systems like the Oscars and the publicity and attention that awards garner, films like *Floating Life* risk being starved of publicity and distribution options (Chan, 2008). While *Floating Life* won a number of prizes, including the Silver Leopard Award at the Locarno International Film Festival and awards at the Hawaii, Hof, Locarno, Melbourne, Rotterdam, São Paulo, Seattle, and Singapore International Film Festivals, it made only AUD\$141,138 at the box office. Therefore, while *Floating Life* is illustrative of alternative voices in both the Australian and multicultural film communities, and while it is widely-known by Australian film critics, its public recognition was limited.

*Floating Life* reflects director Clara Law’s family’s own experiences migrating to Australia, joining the many other Hong Kong-Chinese who settled there in the early 1990s (Byrnes, 1996). Law trained as a filmmaker in Hong Kong, where she worked before migrating to Australia in 1991 ahead of the British handover of Hong Kong to China. Despite its existential subject matter, including themes of alienation, depression, and intergenerational expectations, *Floating Life* was marketed as a comedy. The poster for the movie features the heads of the four members of the Chan family who come to live in Australia. In an image that recalls the White Australians walking on their heads in *They’re a Weird Mob*’s opening scene—which plays on the idea that the “land down under” is “upside-down”—the Chans are pictured at the top of the poster, looking down upon a made-up tableau where the Chan-father is squaring up to fight a large red kangaroo in the middle of a suburban street. This scene does not actually appear in the film, but is a stereotype of Australian past-times, one that illustrates the broader mythologies of Australian nationalism that the Chans must confront. The Chans’ upside-down faces literally turn the “land down under” right way up; it further suggests a story about outsiders looking in—or a story that is being told from the perspective of “outsiders-within” (Collins, 1986). As a critique of Australian identity, the Chans “drop in” to this inverted world. They are immediately different in the context of a White Australia, even though geographically they remain in the Asia-Pacific region.



*Floating Life* situates the audience's gaze directly on the Chan family and the trials and tribulations of their integration. They mostly speak Cantonese, which is subtitled in English. The film's entire focus is on the family unit, consigning the position of White Australians to the "periphery", thereby reversing their insider-outsider status (Kim, 2009, p. 108). Father, mother, and brothers typically wear white sun hats and dark sunglasses. This choice of traveller-chic apparel makes the family look like perpetual tourists, also serving as a metaphor for their ongoing sense of alienation from and within Australian society. It also recalls Simpson et al.'s (2009) categorisation of the "tourist" in migrant representation, which describes a diasporic subject who can never be fully integrated into Australian culture. Unlike many other multicultural films, the Chans do not function to teach Australian characters a lesson (see *Alex & Eve*, 2015; *Looking for Alibrandi*, 2000). In fact, White Australian characters barely feature in *Floating Life*. Instead, the Chans' story reveals the idiosyncrasies of Australian culture, making the culture seem strange from the perspective of new migrants looking in.

Unlike most multicultural films, the migration experience in *Floating Life* is portrayed as personal, complex, and specific to the Chan family, who are intersected by transnational and familial bonds (Jacobs, 2010). It is also shaped by the political reality of China regaining control of Hong Kong in 1997, which spurred significant migration from Hong Kong to Australia during the 1990s (Sherlock, 1997). *Floating Life* deals "with quandaries that are familiar to many migrants whose struggle to adjust to their new lives is characterised by a determination to break free of the past and the urge to maintain old connections" (Jacobs, 2010, p. 112). In the Australian context, and raising the issue of mono- versus multilingualism, the Chan family is made even more visible as migrants because of their Asian appearance, limited English, and commitment to speaking Cantonese in the broader context of English-speaking—"monolingual"—Australia, as authors from Bostok (1973) to Hordacre (2017) have theorised. The majority use of Cantonese despite English being Australia's national language increases the Chans' visibility linguistically, especially given the history of the White Australia policy. For example, one of the ways that the White Australia policy was enforced was by mandating a European-language dictation test, which was used as a mechanism to exclude any immigrants who were not seen as desirable future citizens (Reynolds & Lake, 2008)—the test could be given in English or, if officials chose, in another European language that the prospective immigrant may or may not have spoken. The Chans' migrant journey and their experience of cultural integration and adaptation is one that bridges a divide between a past they had to leave, and their need to retain a connection to their cultural heritage. *Floating Life* is a classic Australian film about migration, as well as part of its multicultural heritage (Elder, 2007; O'Regan, 1996). It illustrates the prevalence of linguistic and cultural diversity in an Australian social context.

In contrast to many of Australia's multicultural films, which focus on the lives of second-generation migrants (see *Head On*, 1998; *Romper Stomper*, 1992, 2018), *Floating Life* reveals some of the specifics of the migrant experience—missing home, being connected to multiple places and identities, and feeling like an outsider (Jacobs, 2010). The unsettledness or discomfort of the Chan family also reflects a growing political climate of anti-immigration sentiment in Australia at the time the film was made (for instance, the views of Far-Right politician, Pauline Hanson). While *Floating Life* does not directly address government



immigration policy, Kim (2009) argues that the theme of home in the film is intersected by Australian policies of border protection. *Floating Life* suggests that “the hospitality offered to Asian migrants in Australia is haunted by the historical conditions in which Asian migration was encouraged in the years following the abolition of the White Australia policy” (Kim, 2009, pp. 108-109).

In the 1950s, Australia’s immigration program was extended to the Asian region, but in ways that revealed the extent to which discrimination associated with the White Australia policy was ongoing. In 1951, Australia adopted the Colombo Plan, which allowed students from Asian countries to study at Australian universities and, by 1957, immigration channels were opened to nations across Asia, but only to entrants deemed to be “distinguished and highly qualified”, amounting to just 100 entrants between 1957 and 1964 (Markus, 2003, p. 180). Even though immigration was increasing in rate and scope, documented limits to entry for non-White arrivals during this era show its management continued to be highly discriminatory; similar xenophobic sentiments continue to permeate portions of Australian society today.

In *Floating Life*, the Chan family’s sense of alienation is a metaphor more broadly for the historical discrimination against people from Asia by Australia’s migration system. Even though they have been allowed entry, they are not necessarily made to feel welcome. For instance, the Chan-daughter, Bing, who has lived longest in Australia, is positioned as both guest and host to her own family, causing the audience to rethink the binary nature of these roles; the film emphasizes the instability of the guest/host relationship. Kim (2009) argued that:

[h]ospitality in a national context is largely dependent upon the conceptualization of the nation as a home. ... in spite of the conditional hospitality offered to Asian migrants in Australia, the Chan family is able to negotiate a tentative sense of home in Australia: their sense of home and belonging is not entirely contingent on the offering of hospitality by the nation in which they reside. (p. 117)

Bing hosting her family in her own home serves as an allegory of the wider implications of nation-states hosting new arrivals. As Noble (2011) reminded us, Australia’s multiculturalism has often been imagined as made up of discrete cultural variances, or ranges of difference, that fit together as a set of “nationally defined cultures transplanted through migration” (pp. 829-830). Hage (1998) famously critiqued this system, which he called White multiculturalism, an assumption he argues is shared by proponents of multiculturalism and racists that Australia is first and foremost a White nation. Bing’s hosting role in *Floating Life* highlights the expectations placed upon both new arrivals and those who have been in Australia for longer, showing that the two roles rarely run in even alignment; this unevenness plays out in the film through Bing’s inability to bridge the worlds of her country of origin and her new home, Australia.

The different locations of the Chan family around the globe—Hong Kong, Australia, and Germany, where another daughter lives whom they speak to by phone—and their separation from their spiritual ancestors in Hong Kong, is less a depiction of the construction of Australian nationhood as it is a representation of the distance felt by many migrants from their former



homes (Noble, 2011). The Chans' geographical and spiritual distance also communicates a sense of shared and divided loyalty between the competing aspects of migrant lives: family, nation, and self (Elder, 2003; Jacobs, 2010; Stratton, 2011). *Floating Life* is an example of an alternative voice coming to light through Australian multiculturalism and migration. According to the idea of "doing adaptation" (Elliott, 2014), *Floating Life* shows that there are multiple and multilingual voices present in Australian society. Adapting and reframing an "Australian" narrative as a story of migration and multilingual identity, in this case foregrounding a story of migration from Hong Kong, largely told in Cantonese, opens new insights, interpretations, and concepts otherwise inaccessible in the theorising of Australian national identity. However, as constructions of multicultural nationhood, some voices are not necessarily as loud, or as well listened to, as others as demonstrated by *Floating Life's* box office earnings: AUD\$141,398.

### ***La Spagnola***

*La Spagnola*, which translates as "the Spanish woman", is a comedy in Spanish and English. Famous Australian film reviewer, Margaret Pomeranz (2009) described it as unusual in the context of Australian cinema because it is what she called a "foreign-language Australian film" (n.p.). Like *Floating Life*, *La Spagnola* was Australia's submission to the 74<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film, but it was not accepted. The film made just AUD\$477,197 at the Australian box office, which, like much other accented and intercultural cinema (Marks, 2000; Naficy, 2001), was a small amount compared to English-language films such as the adaptations of *Mad Max* (1985; 2015), or even *Looking for Alibrandi* (2000), which is about a family of Italian women (not dissimilar thematically to *La Spagnola*), but which is almost entirely in English.

*La Spagnola* was shot on location at the Caltex Refinery at Kurnell on the Botany Bay Peninsula south of Sydney. It is about Lola, who is Spanish, and her Spanish-Australian daughter, Lucia. It is the 1960s, and Lola, who has just discovered she is pregnant, has been left by her husband for a White Australian woman. Lola is portrayed as passionate, flamboyant, and exotic. Lucia, the daughter, is plain and bookish, desperate to fit in during an era of assimilation. Changing tack in the mid-twentieth century, assimilation rather than rejection was in force, grounded in the assumption that "immigrants could be culturally and socially absorbed" by a dominant White Australian society (Castles & Miller, 1993, p. 116). Mother and daughter must renegotiate their personal relationship against the backdrop of mid-twentieth century cultural conservatism. At the end of the film, both mother and daughter are far more socially integrated, reflected in Lola's comparatively tamer demeanor and Lucia's increased rebelliousness and zest. This suggests a creative interpretation or adaptation (Elliott, 2014) of contemporary multiculturalism, through a historical lens of assimilation: The characters achieve cultural sameness, rather than the right to individual expression. The film, released in 2001, also gestures towards critiques of multiculturalism, as the national discourse was moving into a post-multicultural phase in the early 2000s. Kymlicka (2010) defined post-multiculturalism as marked by the mischaracterisation of multiculturalism as a failed project; an exaggeration of the extent to which multicultural policies have been abandoned; and a misidentification of the actual limits or problems that multicultural



discourse has encountered. Through its reference to the assimilation era, *La Spagnola* highlights, as well as questions, how far multiculturalism has come.

Writing about migrant cinema during the period that *La Spagnola* is set, Mischa Barr (2009) argued that anecdotal evidence suggests that continental cinemas, by which she means European-language films shown in Australia, “were predominantly patronised by educated, middle class Anglo-Australians, while foreign language popular cinema venues catered more specifically to migrant groups” (p. 1). By continental film, Barr means high-culture art films as opposed to foreign-language films, which, she argued, tended to be screened at migrant cinemas, and could include anything from popular international releases to subtitled Hollywood films. Thus, there is a separation between the sophisticated film-going elite and Australians with non-English speaking migrant backgrounds, “in part premised upon the severing of European ‘culture’ from European migrants” (Barr, 2009, p. 14). In contrast, *La Spagnola*, released in 2001, was very much received as an example of accented or intercultural cinema (Marks, 2000; Naficy, 2001), targeted and appreciated by a film-going elite, as remarked upon by Pomeranz (2009) in her reference to it as both an Australian and foreign-language film. Ironically, in the context of multicultural Australia, a foreign-language film is recast as high-culture.

By harking back to the 1960s in which *La Spagnola* is set, and when the “continental films” Barr describes came of age, *La Spagnola* crosses boundaries; it appeals to a “film-going crowd” in the early 2000s with an interest in cross-cultural narratives and multilingual texts, but also evokes the popular genres of comedy and romance and a retro aesthetic. Continental cinema helped to facilitate the move away from an understanding of Australia as a White, British, monocultural society (Barr, 2009, p. 14), but *La Spagnola* motivated a new discourse of multiculturalism at a time when an Australian film largely told in a language other than English was still an oddity. The film’s portrayal indicates more broadly that, while multiculturalism is a normative discourse and ideology in the Australian context (Lopez 2000)—accepted as fact that the population is both culturally diverse and tolerant of that diversity—multiculturalism as a national ethos is also popularly interpreted and conveyed through English. When it is not, this article argues, the intersection of multiculturalism and multilingualism gives rise to a reading of *La Spagnola* as an example of world cinema (Dennison & Song, 2006), crossing national and transnational boundaries to represent national/transnational/Australian/migrant subjects at the same time.

*La Spagnola*’s reception was predicated on its own identity as an artefact of cultural difference—non-English, or not entirely English-speaking, in contrast to the assimilatory White Australia or multicultural Australia in which it was set. *La Spagnola* is a nostalgic representation of early multicultural Australia, in which, through the migrants’ continued use of Spanish, (multi)cultural expression endured, and assimilation was deterred. As Fishman (2012; see also 1991; 2001) noted, one of the socio-functions of language is to attain and augment intergenerational mother-tongue transmission. Retaining the Spanish language in an Australian setting, as the characters do in *La Spagnola*, is therefore an example of resisting language shift.



### ***The Finished People and Footy Legends***

*The Finished People* (2003), set around the time of its release, was made on an ultra-low budget as part of a community project. The film production was derived from a series of video-making workshops that Vietnamese-Australian director Khoa Do taught in Cabramatta in Sydney's south, a part of the city that has a low socioeconomic status. The film examines issues of homelessness, poverty, and drug use, and includes a diverse cast; local involvement in the film brought new stories and faces to the big screen, and promoted investment in the communities that the film represented. *The Finished People* dazzled critics; it relocated what began as a Community Cultural Development project from the suburbs to the "audiences of art-house cinema" (Brooks, 2008, p. 177), thus raising the project's status among the cinema-going elite, and increasing its visibility among those in positions of power—a group who director Khoa Do was specifically hoping to address (Brooks, 2008). Therefore, by drawing "elite" support for the issues of an underrepresented community, *The Finished People* demonstrates there are benefits to filmmaking beyond the box office. *Footy Legends* (2006), the second film directed by Khoa Do, is, by contrast, a light-hearted comedy that channels Australia's obsession with sport. It tells a redemption story through a social transformation narrative. *Footy Legends* only made a minimal return, AUD\$382,243 worldwide, but it did solidify the successful career of the film's star, Anh Do, who is a comedian, painter, TV personality, and the brother of the film's director. Anh Do is also the author of a memoir, *The Happiest Refugee* (2010), in which he recounts his life as the child of a Vietnamese-Australian family struggling to make a living in Sydney. Do's story is one of great achievement through hard work and social contribution, set against the backdrop of a family breakdown that is partially explained by the horrific circumstances that prompted the family's migration to Australia.

An adaptation of the happy-go-lucky persona in Anh Do's autobiography, the main character in *Footy Legends*, Luc Vu, is a young Vietnamese-Australian man, obsessed with rugby league, unemployed, and the sole caregiver of his kid-sister. When Luc is unable to fulfil his responsibilities, the welfare authorities—represented by well-known White-Australian actor Claudia Karvan—threaten to take his sister away. The choice of Karvan as actor here is significant, because her character stands in for the Australian Government's institutions and political leadership, which is still predominantly White (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). To stop his sister being taken away, Luc reunites his high school rugby team and eventually wins a ute (Australia's version of a flat-bed truck) in a local competition. The vehicle enables the men to start a rubbish disposal business, thus beginning a period of employment and greater contribution to Australian life and economy. Impressed by the family's industriousness, the social worker (Karvan) does not remove the young sister, and the film ends with the suggestion of a flourishing cross-cultural romance between Luc Vu and Karvan's character.

As well as subscribing to the notion of romantic love, *Footy Legends* perpetuates a philosophy of immigrant contribution, similar to that which Fleegler (2013) described in the American context in the 1950s and 1960s as a newfound recognition of migrant value. *Footy Legends* demonstrates how popular contribution-based attitudes remained in early-2000s



Australia. *Footy Legends* checks the migrant-issues boxes of unemployment, family difficulties, and sporting prowess, and establishes Luc Vu and his teammates as firmly part of the Australian nation via the stereotypical theme of sport. *Footy Legends* also includes a number of so-called slapstick moments (Hansen, 1999; Simpson et al., 2009), reminiscent of *They're a Weird Mob* and *The Wog Boy*.

Collins (2018) argues that Australian migration films are usually portrayed in either “comic or tragic modes” (p. 301). Migrant tragedies—which feature the inevitable downfall of the main characters—tend to be set in the past. Migrant comedies are most often set in the present, contemporary to their release, and paint multiculturalism in an aspirational light (Collins, 2018). *Footy Legends* is an example of the latter, in that Luc and his Vietnamese-speaking family encounter economic and social opportunity under the guise of a neo-liberal pursuit of progress. His desire to have a job is directly tied to his acceptance by Australian society. The film seems to suggest that if Luc tries hard enough, he will succeed, even though the reality, as noted by the Australian Human Rights Commission (2018), systemically disadvantages migrants such as Luc. *Footy Legends* represents the Vus as national, as well as migrant, subjects. They are Australian—and they aspire to become more so—as well as being linguistically different.

In contrast to Anh Do’s memoir, which is filled with Vietnamese-Australian friends and family, and unlike *Floating Life’s* focus on the Chans, in *Footy Legends*, Luc and his sister exist predominantly in a community of non-Vietnamese Australians. Enhancing Luc’s cultural difference is his racial identity in a sport (rugby league) that, within Australia, rarely attracts players of Vietnamese or, more generally, Asian backgrounds (Walter, 2020). As a result, the characters in *Footy Legends* represent individuals in their own right, with individual interests. Luc is obsessed with rugby, his sister is preoccupied with the care of her freshwater tortoise, and they both grieve for their mother, her death seemingly contributing to Luc and his sister’s ongoing fear of abandonment and social isolation. The film’s portrayal of Luc and his sister are positive, insofar as it gives the characters individual agency and universal relatability; yet it is also negative or simplistic, because the film represents the Vietnamese-Australian characters’ Otherness as non-specific and out-of-context, positioning them as representatives of a much larger but invisible group, again as outsiders-within (Collins, 1986). In this depiction, multicultural Australia is determined through the presence of a non-White Other and his family in the context of a majority White cast. Cultural difference, enhanced by language difference, is defined against the norm of White, English-speaking Australia.

While the approach of *Footy Legends* is much lighter than *The Finished People*, the two films similarly lack cultural specificity. *The Finished People* is a social realist film (touching on themes of drugs and homelessness) and *Footy Legends* is a feel-good comedy about a migrant son pulling himself up by the bootstraps. Despite the generic differences, the multicultural casts in both are a sign of what Yue (2000) and Brooks (2008) have both argued is a move towards post-ethnic representation in multicultural societies. Post-ethnicity is a representational strategy in relation to cultural diversity for adapting and subverting patronizing discourses of ethnic Otherness, and for re-negotiating directorial identity beyond the frame of ethnic filmmaker. *The Finished People* offered “a counter-vision to the Australian imagined community that has been



anxiously reconfigured by assertions of a singular, homogenising national identity threatened by the different and the unassimilated" (Smaill, 2007, p. 43). Rather than portray limited or clichéd representations of characters based on or determined by their ethnicity, both films developed new ways of representing different, multiple, and complex identities through attention to diverse cultures, experiences, and languages.

### ***Unfinished Sky***

In *Unfinished Sky*, the migrant protagonist is also a woman; Tahmeena, an Afghani woman, escapes sexual-slavery in a rural Australian town and is rescued by a local farmer who falls in love with her, and later she with him. Where *The Finished People* is about a range of diverse characters, it is worth noting that *Footy Legends* represents a return to the mainstay of the male lead in the visual renegotiation of Australian national identity (Elder, 2007; Nile, 2001). In contrast, *La Spagnola* and *Floating Life* are predominantly about women, thus offering an alternative to the typical view of the nation portrayed on screen. This is particularly important in the Australian context, since even Screen Australia (2016)—the government funding and statutory body—has noted that Australia has a gender and diversity problem. It is notable that many of the multilingual films discussed in this article foreground women, and do so in ways that give agency to their characters despite their lack of English—not silencing or limiting the women by their accents (Ilott, 2018; Marks, 2001), a fact that further indicates that multiculturalism is intersected by both language and gender.

However, in the *Unfinished Sky*, while Tahmeena has most of her lines subtitled, thus enabling her to be understood by a mostly English-speaking audience, the film also portrays her as infantile rather than traumatised. That is, unlike the other two female-driven films discussed in this article, Tahmeena's lack of English contributes to a child-like characterisation, reinforced, for example, when the farmer buys a child's alphabet book to teach her English. The child-like representation is consistent with issues of power-imbalance between guest and host, new and old arrival. Hage (1998) referred to this power-imbalance as a White multicultural outlook that obscures alternate realities where White people are not the central occupiers of the national space. In the United States, Roediger (2005) argued that the term "new immigrants" is a "racially inflected" term that highlights the difference between "the whiter and longer established northern and western European migrants to the United States and ... non-white Chinese and other 'Asiatics'" (pp. 5-6). In Australia, as in other Western nations, the concept of new immigrant is similarly applied; in *Unfinished Sky*, the power difference is obvious in the positioning of the migrant subject as not only new, but child-like, because of her lack of English.

Over the course of *Unfinished Sky*, Tahmeena's English improves, and in an unlikely romance-meets-crime-drama, she becomes the farmer's lover. Beyond her language difference, however, Tahmeena's cultural specificity as an Afghani woman in Australia is erased, especially given that the farmer's attraction to her is explained by a photo that shows she is the spitting image of his late wife (who was not an Afghani refugee). This blurring effect, or ambivalence towards race or cultural background, is attributable to the fact that the film is an adaptation of a Dutch movie, *De Poolse Bruid* ("The Polish Bride", 1998). Dutch actor Monique Hendrickx plays the



rescued woman in both *De Poolse Bruid* and in *Unfinished Sky*, making the character's identification as Polish or Afghani entirely arbitrary. Further, through the performance of broken-English and visual portrayals of "ethnicity", Hendrickx's portrayals in both films are examples of migrant-face (McCarthy, 2020). The result of the adaptation is to produce a stereotypical migrant or sex slave figure rather than a culturally-nuanced narrative of forced migration.

In the Dutch version of *Unfinished Sky*, which is called *De Poolse Bruid*, the farmer's love interest is Polish. In the Australian version, she is Afghani and speaks Dari. These adaptation differences reflect the different contemporary events in each national context. The success of an adaptation relies on its relevance and meaning to its new audience; in this case, *Unfinished Sky* represents issues surrounding Australian multiculturalism and migration (Elliott, 2014). Hendrickx's performance as both a Polish and an Afghani woman, respectively, serve as ongoing appropriation of cultural identities, and positions them as inferior to White culture. *Unfinished Sky* is also an example of an adaptation that accords more with its source text (*De Poolse Bruid*) than with the context to which it was transposed; in reality, it is likely that Tahmeena and her daughter would have been immediately deported under Australia's strict policy of border protection, rather than humanely and speedily processed and allowed to stay in the country.

## **MULTICULTURALISM INTERSECTED BY GENDER AND RACE**

The above representations of non-White female migrants to Australia are indeed problematic. Yet, to their credit, the female protagonists described above are at least given agency enough to speak in their own voices, which is in stark contrast to *Australia Day's* (2017) portrayal of Lan Chang, a former sex-slave who speaks only in Chinese and is not translated or given subtitles, making her voice inaccessible to the film's largely English-speaking audience. Further, while there are plenty of examples of nuanced Australian films depicting complex identities in multiple languages, there is also a long history of a lack of representation, or when representing Asian-Australian characters, doing so in stereotypical ways that drastically limit their agency by diminishing their power to speak and/or be translated and therefore understood by a majority English-speaking Australian audience. To give a brief example, in *Red Dog* (2011), which is not a foreign-language or international feature film, there are no Asian-Australian characters at all. Instead, when one of the characters babbles from heatstroke, he is diagnosed as "speaking Chinese," which the scene seems to suggest (and as we might interpret as a racist dog whistle or undercurrent) is a diagnosable form of madness (Yue, 2000). Lack of or (mis)representation of non-White migrants in film is not unique to Australia. Film adaptations of White nationalist ideologies and immigration restrictions in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States in the early twentieth century (Lake & Reynolds, 2008), late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and other screen examples around the Western world, continue to echo historical lines of racial demarcation.

What this also demonstrates is that, while films such as those discussed are typically categorised as foreign-language films in Australia because they differ from the English-language norm (Stratton, 1999), globally, they may not be officially judged as foreign-language. In Australia, these films stand out as world movies, or alternative kinds of narratives to those that are



marketed as classically Australian (often involving adaptations of White colonial history or mythology; McFarlane, 1993; O'Regan, 1996), simply because they demonstrate linguistic diversity. The versions of Australianness constructed by *Floating Life*, *La Spagnola*, *Footy Legends*, *The Finished People*, and *Unfinished Sky* are, as a result of the use of multiple languages, transnational as much as they are national. They are nuanced and diasporic representations, implying that what is multicultural exists in an ever-growing web of global cultural diversity and connection (Simpson et al., 2009). They are multicultural films, but they are also adaptations of migration and multiculturalism that foreground a transnational perspective through languages other than English.

### **CONCLUSION: AN ONGOING PROBLEM**

Australia, like many multicultural nations, has an ongoing problem with diversity—and representing the extent of that diversity—in its national products, such as film. By using multiple languages, the films discussed in this article are examples of more inclusive visions of Australian national identity. They are accented and intercultural cinema (Marks, 2000; Naficy, 2001), and multicultural films (Stratton, 1999), and they are adaptations of multicultural policy (Elliott, 2014), creatively interpreting such policy as not just culturally—but linguistically-diverse. While the Oscars offer an opportunity to reach mass audiences, as this analysis demonstrates, being able to speak in one's own language(s) or being translated to English for a majority English-speaking audience to understand, is the first step to being adequately represented in film culture. Australian non-English language films deconstruct the notion of a fixed Australian identity by invoking multiple languages and cultures. They reveal characters who are embedded in individual and family projects and whose identities are complex, constitutive, and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989). They also reveal the many different communities that multicultural Australia gives rise to, nationally and transnationally, and the languages required to move between and within those different spaces.

The results of this analysis speak to the ongoing diversity problem on the Australian screen. As revealed in the textual analysis, when multiple languages are present in a film, it is far more likely for the film to be categorised as world cinema (Dennison & Song, 2006), or as a transnational representation of migration, rather than an adaptation of Australian nationhood told through a multicultural lens. It is far more likely that a film will be considered multiracial and multicultural when multiple languages are present. As interpretations or adaptations (Elliott) of multiculturalism as a concept, the films analysed in this article also reinforce the creative interpretation of multiculturalism as part of Australia's national heritage as a contemporary, rather than historical, phenomenon. With the exception of *La Spagnola*, each film is set at the time it was released—a trend in multicultural filmmaking, which enables a culturally-diverse present to be contrasted with a fictional, exclusively White past.

In historical Australian multicultural film, migrant subjects are usually at the point of almost fitting in, often shown to be implicitly Australian, but still in contrast to a more established form of being Australian that is historically grounded or has the historicity of White or colonial versions of Australian nationhood (Elder, 2007). This article has shown that this is also the case for



multilingual Australian films. Australian film has developed a permanent tradition of culturally-diverse filmmaking, while simultaneously and continually disproportionately favouring White Australia. The result is a contextualisation of multiculturalism as a form of national heritage within an overarching commitment to the idea of a White or English-speaking Australia, even as it becomes ever more dissonant with the experience of actually living in Australia. Evoking multiple languages in film is an expansion of multicultural discourse, but it is also a reminder that Australia is officially an English-speaking nation—and that for the time being, multilingual and multicultural portrayals in film remain outside the norm.

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