

Films can play an important role within society. When displaying characteristics unique to a particular nation, films are effectively able to give national audiences shared cultural experiences and a sense of pride. This essay addresses the concept of national identity in Australian and New Zealand cinema by referring to two Australian films: *The Castle* (1997) and *Crocodile Dundee* (1986); and two New Zealand films: *Whale Rider* (2002) and *The World's Fastest Indian* (2005). In this essay, I will argue that these four films help to develop and reinforce a sense of national identity within Australia and New Zealand. When watching and analysing these films, it is clear that they contain elements unique to their respective countries. The filmmakers have employed features that local audiences can relate to. These include the dialogue, setting, depiction of characters, storylines, and reference to issues in society. In my opinion, all of these filmmaking devices were used successfully to contribute to a shared national identity. When viewing the films, local audiences can relate to the various aspects of their respective nations and can feel a sense of togetherness, uniqueness, and belonging.

According to Walsh, a nation refers to “a set of meanings that can be shared among a community” (5). Higson notes that traditional opinions of national cinema have seen its significance in delivering “coherent images of the nation” (69). Moran’s definition of national identity has a similar meaning: “it is an imagined sense of belonging to a community, one that is based in representation” (175). Essentially, the idea of a nation is not a tangible concept and can change over time. It is not set in concrete but is constructed through representation. If filmmakers are to incorporate elements of national identity in their films, they must do so with an important thought in mind: what does it mean to be a part of this nation and how can we express this nation’s uniqueness in the film?

In order to promote the portrayal of national identity in film, governing bodies have been set up in both Australia and New Zealand. The New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) was established in 1978 after parliamentary debate. According to Reid, the NZFC gives support and financial assistance to a production when it is “satisfied that the film has or is to have a significant New Zealand content” (16). This content includes the location, subject matter, and nationality of the filmmakers. What Reid is saying here is that the NZFC provides an incentive for filmmakers to produce films that confidently express New Zealand’s culture.

Thompson and Bordwell identify a similar situation in Australia with regards to government involvement in Australian cinema. In 1972, the Labor government came to power and founded the Australian Film Commission (AFC) which would operate to “help establish a sense of national

identity” (628). O’Regan believes that films are a “vehicle for the transmission of national cultures” and play an important role in the cultural development of Australia (27; 31). Put simply, producers of Australian films need to put forward national and cultural values in their films. National identity can be expressed both formally, through the narrative and character stories, and also stylistically, through the mise-en-scene.

The setting or location of the film can give viewers a visual representation of a country’s natural landscape and urban environment. In *The Castle*, the Kerrigan family go on a holiday to Bonnie Doon, Victoria, Australia. It can be described as a little town on a big lake, with rolling hills in the background. It offers opportunities for water skiing, fishing and boating, which are all popular hobbies for some Australians. For about the first half of *Crocodile Dundee*, the film is set in Australia’s Northern Territory. The beginning of the film makes great use of long shots and tracking shots to show the landscape as Sue goes to meet Michael “Mick” Dundee in Walkabout Creek. The open, desert landscape with large rocks and hills is typical of the Australian “outback,” which Van Driesum explains in detail: “It’s the mythical Australia ... of red dust, empty tracks ... waiting for anyone with a spirit of adventure” (11). Australians who live in the “outback” can easily relate to this location because it depicts a unique part of Australia’s attraction as a tourist destination and also Australians’ way of life.

Although the majority of *The World’s Fastest Indian* takes place in the United States of America (USA), the beginning and ending of the film are set in Invercargill, a town at the bottom of New Zealand’s South Island. Burt Munro lives in a small, suburban area where the houses are spaced out. New Zealand’s beach landscape is also shown in this film. As Harvey points out, Oreti Beach in Southland, New Zealand, is shown in the scene where Burt races his motorcycle against several younger bikers (159). *Whale Rider* is set in the small Maori community of Whangara on New Zealand’s East Coast and many scenes are filmed at a beach. Maori culture is emphasised during scenes at the marae: a building where Maori people go to have social meetings. Because *Whale Rider* uses an indigenous culture location, and because both films show New Zealand’s coastal environment and small-town communities, they are effectively able to give New Zealander viewers a sense of togetherness in terms of the landscape we share.

Wildlife and cultural objects can also be used in films to emphasise national identity. Lewis observes that Australia “is home to some of the world’s rarest animals” such as kangaroos, crocodiles and snakes, which are all featured in *Crocodile Dundee* (7). When Mick is getting beaten up by some thugs in a New York alley, Gus, his driver, first runs his car into one of the

thugs, then rips an object off his car and throws it, like a boomerang, at another thug. A boomerang is a well-known symbol of Australia. Historically, it was used as a weapon but is nowadays used for recreational purposes. Victorian Bitter (VB), a popular Australian beer, can be seen on the table during a family dinner in *The Castle*. This is also an example of product placement.

Whale Rider represents New Zealand culture during the scene when Koro puts on his gumboots. Maori culture is successfully promoted at the end of the film when many members of the Maori community ride a waka (canoes) out to sea. A taiaha, which looks like a large stick, is described in the film by Koro as an “instrument of war.” It is used in the film when the young boys practice how to fight with it and also used when Paikea practices with her Uncle Rawiri. *Whale Rider* plays a major role in promoting Maori culture to not only New Zealanders, but also international viewers who can learn to appreciate the Maori culture. In *The World’s Fastest Indian*, when Burt is in the USA, he jumps with shock when he sees a snake crawling around his feet. This scene reinforces the peaceful nature of New Zealand’s wildlife and can make New Zealanders feel proud that there are no snakes in their country.

The example of Burt’s reaction to a snake in *The World’s Fastest Indian* leads on to another way that locally influenced films can relate to their national audiences: the complications characters face when entering a foreign territory. When discussing *Crocodile Dundee*, Lewis identifies that the film uses a “culture-clash” theme and a primitive versus civilised contrast to produce comedy (173). When Mick Dundee first arrives in New York, he awkwardly walks down an escalator. When Sue goes to visit Mick in his hotel room, she sees that he has slept on the floor instead of in his bed. These two examples reinforce his unfamiliarity to the developed world. In one scene, Mick begins to enter a taxi, and then says that the steering wheel is on the wrong side of the vehicle. This is referring to how, in Australia, the steering wheel is on the right side of the vehicle. A similar reference occurs in *The World’s Fastest Indian* when Burt causes chaos on the street by driving on the left side of the road instead of the right side. The car salesman reminds Burt that no matter what country you are in, the driver should always be seated in the middle of the road. Therefore, both of these films contribute to national identity because they incorporate elements of a foreign culture. Both Mick and Burt are put in unfamiliar situations to emphasise that their way of life is different to the Americans.

Language and character accents can also help to distinguish between cultures and contribute to a film’s humour. Lewis rightly points out that even though Americans and Australians both speak the

English language, they speak it very differently (4). Lewis also notes that differences in national slang language exist (5). When Mick and Sue are in the Northern Territory and travelling down a road, an animal blocks the vehicle. Mick calls out: "out of the way, dopey." When Mick is in New York, he greets a man on the street by saying "G'day." This is short for "good day" and is commonly used by Australians. When an African-American says to Mick: "Hey, my man. What's happening?" Mick becomes confused and asks: "What? Where?" This allows us to understand that language can be a verbal barrier between cultures. In *The Castle*, slang language is also used. Darryl constantly calls his wife, Sal, "darl" (short for darling). Darryl also frequently says the words "bloody" and "dickhead," and when hearing that the offer for his family's home has been raised, his response is: "tell 'em to get stuffed ... tell 'em where to shove the extra twenty-five thousand [dollars]." By using every day, common slang language, both *Crocodile Dundee* and *The Castle* make viewers, local and international, realise that slang language is part of Australian life. Language also contributes to the films' humour.

This leads on to the attitude and personality of characters in my chosen Australian films. O'Regan describes Mick in *Crocodile Dundee* as a "trickster" who "recognises the rules only to disobey them" (165). In other words, Mick is quite cheeky and has a laid-back attitude towards life. When Sue asks Mick about the time he was attacked by a crocodile, and why the crocodile did not kill him, he casually explains: "I talked him out of it." In a New York restaurant after Sue's partner, Richard, makes a joke to Mick about no kangaroos being on the menu, Mick distracts Sue then punches Richard in the face. Later on in the taxi, Mick tells Sue: "He [Richard] was being a pain." One more example of Mick's personality is expressed when he and Sue are outside the hotel at night time and a mugger draws a knife on him. Mick laughs and tells him: "That's not a knife," then pulls out his own, larger version, smiles, and says: "That's a knife." Essentially, Australian audiences are able to relate to Mick because he is an amusing and clever man, who never backs down from a challenge.

I believe that both of my chosen New Zealand films revolve around motivated characters determined to achieve their goals. In *Whale Rider*, Paikea Apirana is determined to prove to her community, but mainly her grandfather, Koro, that she has the ability to become a leader. Although Koro constantly tells Paikea she cannot be a leader, she remains resolute in terms of her goal. The same theme is expressed in *The World's Fastest Indian*. Babington argues that "voyages of discovery [are] an allegory of the New Zealand cinema" (228). In other words, one of the reoccurring themes in New Zealand cinema involves characters embarking on a journey. *The*

World's Fastest Indian is based on a true story. Cairns and Martin argue that "it is important we [New Zealanders] see our own stories told on film because they affirm our sense of identity and our uniqueness as New Zealanders." The story of Burt Munro is unique to New Zealanders because it is based on a real New Zealander who went on a real journey. Therefore, New Zealanders who view this film can feel a sense of national pride in seeing a fellow countryman achieve something remarkable.

When analysing *The World's Fastest Indian*, Smith explains that "just about everyone thinks that Burt is too old and incompetent and that his motorcycle is a pile of trash" (201). However, at the end of the film, Burt defies all the odds and breaks the record at the Bonneville Salt Flats. Throughout the entire film, Burt never doubts his ability to succeed and never seems to worry about any problem. Robson argues that an "unofficial motto" of New Zealanders is: "She'll be right, mate" (43). To use Robson's words, this means: "Don't worry, let things run their course and everything will be all right in the end." When Burt gets into his motorcycle, ready to break the record at Bonneville, he realises that his leg will not fit because of some asbestos cloth he strapped around it. This was to prevent his leg from burning from the heat. Burt decides to take the cloth off. When asked about his leg and the heat, he replies: "Screw it." This example reinforces the "she'll be right" attitude that is common amongst New Zealanders.

Lay believes that New Zealanders have a "do-it-yourself" attitude (22). In other words, New Zealanders like to use their own skills and innovation to make things. Burt's motorcycle in *The World's Fastest Indian* does not have the flashy, modern look of the other contenders' motorcycles at Bonneville. It was moderated in his shed in Invercargill. During the film, Burt mentions that his motorcycle contains a kitchen hinge and a bottle cork to plug the fuel tank. In one scene we even see him using a kitchen knife to cut the tread off his tyres to smooth them out. Therefore, this film contributes to a shared New Zealand identity because Burt's motorcycle is a symbol of the "do-it-yourself" attitude that Lay identifies (22).

O'Regan argues that if filmmakers want to "inscribe films into public discourse," they need to "register public discourse" in their films (160). In other words, another way that films can connect with their local audiences is by referring to real issues in society. O'Regan also points out that *Crocodile Dundee* addresses issues such as Aboriginal land rights, the current tourism industry and uranium mining (160). Kangaroo poaching is also brought to our attention in the film when a group of, to use Mick Dundee's words, "city cowboys," shoot at kangaroos.

The Castle makes strong reference to Australian law and society. The film refers to Eddie Mabo: an aborigine who campaigned for indigenous land rights in the 1980s. In the film, Darryl Kerrigan and his family have been asked to leave their house in order for an airport development to take place. In one scene, Darryl explains to his wife: "I'm really starting to understand how the Aborigines feel ... this country has got to stop stealing other people's land." Later on the film Darryl fronts the court and his lawyer, Lawrence Hammill, refers to section 51(xiii) of the Australian Constitution and one phrase in particular: "on just terms." Lawrence then tells the court, "You can acquire a house but you can't acquire a home." Some Australians who view these films will be familiar with these issues; by being Aborigines themselves or involved in constitutional law. These issues allow local viewers to share their own opinions and experiences and therefore contribute to a national identity.

Whale Rider addresses gender roles and other aspects of Maori culture. In the beginning of the film, Maori ladies are seen sitting round a table, smoking. Paikea comes into the room and tells them: "Maori women have got to stop smoking." Hemi, a young boy in the film, is also seen smoking in one scene, and during the film we learn that his dad has spent time in jail. Koro has a very strong view on gender roles in Maori society. Although Koro spends time with his granddaughter, Paikea, he becomes angry whenever she shows enthusiasm in wanting to learn how to become the new leader. In one scene on the marae, when all the young boys sit down on benches, Paikea sits down at the front. Koro tells her: "you're a girl go to the back." New Zealand viewers, especially Maori, can relate to these films. Therefore, *Whale Rider* reinforces national identity because it gives representations of real, contemporary issues in New Zealand society.

In conclusion, the four films analysed all help to establish a sense of national identity for Australian and New Zealanders. The representation of natural features, cultural objects, character personalities and attitudes, and real issues in society, all bring forward a sense of togetherness and reinforce that cultural experiences are shared among national audiences. Apart from *The Castle*, which does relate to Australians in many ways and therefore contributes to national identity, all films were distributed globally and performed well in important overseas markets such as the American market. Their success outside the local box office is a credit to the filmmakers' ability to create films that appeal to a universal audience, who can then appreciate the various, unique aspects of Australian and New Zealand culture.

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