

IVAN DOUGHERTY GALLERY
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS



un imaginable
Australian chapter

Un_imaginable: Australian Chapter

Over the last decade, boundaries that have traditionally separated the visual arts from film have been blurring, dissolving, even disappearing. Today, artists make films for exhibitions and wider audiences; filmmakers are increasingly represented in gallery and museum exhibitions of contemporary art; while a Cinémathèque is now de rigueur for new art museums around the world.

At the same time, here in Australia the distinct voices that once distinguished white from black Australian stories on film are also gaining equal airplay, as the gap narrows between non-Indigenous filmmakers' version of events and Aboriginal filmmakers' own stories. The young filmmakers in this exhibition are emerging forces not only on the Indigenous film scene, but more broadly on Australian filmmaking. Warwick Thornton's work has been shown previously in a visual arts context (including the 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art), while the work of Jacob Nash, Pauline Wyman and Adrian Wills is making its first foray into a visual arts context with its inclusion in *Un_imaginable*.

These four short films are compelling, confronting and deeply political, evoking with the most personal of stories the darkness and despair that, despite changes to past social policies, still resonates in the contemporary experience of Indigenous Australians. These five-minute films remind us not only of non-Indigenous Australia's shameful past, but of the ongoing ramifications of that past. These pungent stories – of alienation, dispossession and racial prejudice – are expressed not with anger or regret, but with a palpable sense of humanity and sometimes humour that combine to make the truth of their content even more “unimaginable”.

All films are funded by the Indigenous branch of the Australian Film Commission and SBS. They are screened courtesy of Scarlet Pictures Pty Ltd and Flickerfest. Many thanks to Harriet McKern, director of the Australian Directors Guild, for bringing these films to my attention, to Kath Shelper, Producer and Bronwyn Kidd, Director of Flickerfest, for facilitating their inclusion in the Australian exhibition of *Un_imaginable*.

Felicity Fenner

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The Imperative to Feel: new intercultural Australian cinema

These four new films by Indigenous directors may be short but they pack no small punch. We do not so much ‘view’ these films as we are ‘hit by’ them.¹ These works shock, stun; they hurt, humiliate; they tantalise, delight and tickle. Their effectiveness resides in their very troubling of the supposed distinction between the drama taking place on the screen and the experience incited in viewer response. Disbelief, incredulity, the absurd – the anguish of breached identity; the violence of words; the burden of representation itself – here, the so-called unimaginable becomes palpable, proximate, inescapable. No longer do Aboriginal distinctive life worlds remain othered, over there or elsewhere. Instead, they are brought into sharp and pointed relief within the realm of experience.

Laura Marks has defined intercultural cinema as “characterised by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West”.² Intercultural films record “the unrecordable memories of the senses” experience and perception that differ from those of White Euro-American societies, particularly where optical visuality has predominated. It turns to the senses because other resources – history, records, representation in any form – may simply not exist. The violent disjunctions in space and time which characterise the contemporary diasporic condition of exile, immigration, and displacement in Marks's terms, require an appeal to memory and other non-visual forms of knowledge, both collective and individual, in order to engender otherwise unknown, unrepresented, even disavowed versions of history, experience, event. She figures intercultural cinema as the “scent that rises from the funeral garlands”,³ a figure at once resilient but tethered to a past that has yet to cease its hauntings. The past burns still in contemporary Australia, as these four pithy intercultural vignettes suggest.

Bloodlines is less a depiction than a deployment of uncertainty. Reminiscent of Tracy Moffatt's *Night Cries* (1989), the film is driven by anxiety. It evokes in the viewer what it deports to depict: fear and anticipation; inaction and inhibition; hope, thwarted in advance. Trauma is made our own. Delay, deferral and disassociation become the only response. The real time of this film is almost unbearable. A lifetime of not knowing is at once intensified and condensed in micro visibilities of sweat, flesh, face. The human cost of a past that can have no reconciliation, the obscenity of Apology, the helpless lack of clues that Stolen Generation victims and institutions like Link Up have to go on – in an instant, all of this. From the opening haunting scenes of a telephone cord that travels nowhere, turning white to black headless snake hung; to the high stark modernism of the interior where the opulence of technology, the matte exterior of Macintosh, Bang and Olufsen,

white couch, abstract art, space itself, become prime signifiers of the vacuity that White success ultimately affords. Alienation screams with sounds from elsewhere, the crack of ice cubes shattering; the sound of a lone adult's bare (not tiny little) feet echoing; a single, lone piano note repeated turns into a heart beat amplified, and in turn, becomes our own blood coursing in sheer symptomatic sympathy. The crossed-out attempts to write words that cannot be spoken; the moment of promised resolution that finally comes in speech with the paradoxical conclusion to the film that gives at least a provisional sense of sequence to what we have subsequently witnessed; the phone call itself; cannot alleviate or resolve the crisis posed. We are not let off the hook, but left hanging literally on and at the end of the line, bloodline, lifeline, in the final closing scene.

In terms of narrative, *Backseat*, by comparison, is more conventional: the story of a young Aboriginal girl's visit to her (Aboriginal) mother and siblings with her (White) stepmother and father. But there is nothing simple in this story. Nor is anywhere safe. "Go on dear, why don't you go in first" the White stepmother says, bright blue eye shadow, white button earrings. This is thick ethnography, circa late 1960s, no less evident in the 'mother's' home, where glass ashtrays, gold trophies, as well as requisite white tulle curtains are pulled closed to entertain privately, no less bourgeois, no less proper, than her White counterparts. The Hermannsberg-esque boomerangs adorning the lounge room wall could almost be anywhere; a signifier not of Aboriginal difference but of a similitude that renders forced policies of removal or the need for fostering, a travesty. It is what happens between the subjects present - the infinitesimal attention to detail of what is offered in only a few seconds of close up held - which allows unconscious histories of affect and nuances of feeling to flood our experience. The smallest of gestures here are the greatest source of politics. Multiple points of identification yes, but it is the absencing of the daughter's experience that becomes the subject matter of this film. Her disassociation is made ours. Ventriloquist doll, struck dumb between two masters at odds, unable to mouth the polite discourse on offer; unable to speak or, rather, to scream the sole question banished; the question, as audience, we equally cannot ask: why, why, why? The camera stills to a single shot of the daughter in sharp, frontal focus, where sounds drown and diffuse, everything stills, dissolves. The subsequent slap of her hand on the car lock, each side fast, too loud, the screeching of the windows to close out what cannot be borne. The back seat the only refuge for the homeless. It is her sister who saves her, who can normalise what is revealed to be a mad, impossible, adult world. Her siblings stand in this film as her mirror equivalents who evoke, in their over-enthusiastic embrace, far more yet of the unspeakable injustice of the Stolen legacy. The hands of both sisters reach to touch across a glass dividing, palm to palm matched perfectly before the sister, also, must, inevitably, turn her back. *Backseat* finishes with the daughter rubbing sensuously time and again, a Polaroid snapshot of her happy (stolen) family. Analogous to the instigatory effects of the film itself, saturated by longing and loss, this so called family is graspable only by making visible what cannot otherwise (and even then, can it ever?) be seen.

Nana also is told from the child's point of view. Classic documentary turned upside down, the child's voice is here the expert voice-over, speaking directly to us throughout the film as if reading a script in word perfect English (a subtle thumbs up to the supposed need for current government driven accelerated literacy programs in remote communities perhaps?). Nana by contrast, speaks, sings, whispers and yells in Warlpiri. This is a third world linguistic zone of the contemporary real, where languages vie, shift and aren't necessarily shared or spoken by the same generation. *Nana* not only represents this complexity but harnesses it in order to address the equally real, contemporary intercultural viewing audience, that is, to address a Warlpiri audience directly. Crucially however, this reality is not disturbing to the child - no two worlds of bilingualism, no bifurcated experience, no alienation is here proffered. This is in fact a poignant story of family, safety and security. "Wurra", Nana breathes out, after a tender nit removal and hair brushing session replete with head scarf to frame the contented face of her granddaughter on her knee: "Wurra" - wait, stay, be here. Nana is a superhero in her granddaughter's eyes, feeding elders of the community, hunting, fooling Whitefellas, warding off grog runners. Here, the child's perspective becomes the source of the absurd, where exaggerations of the everyday and un-natural naturalness become ludicrous in extreme. The laughter that erupts may evoke the realm of childhood innocence, but this absurdity is an embittered criticism, subversive and cathartic, dislodging repression and affording relief to what cannot be said: That the reverence for tradition, art, ceremony, for so called 'high' Aboriginal culture privileged by both the ethnographic and tourist gaze is perhaps too great; that it is this that kills off the living, the perversity of picking peaches in order to preserve them, creating a cauterised culture that cannot live, breathe, self-determine, laugh at itself, at us. That speaking English doesn't mean a loss of culture. That old people aren't left starving in camps like dogs (and indeed, that old people are, like those Ancestors they always emulate, cheeky, licentious characters - the slap on Nana's bottom by that old man in camp is a slap in the face literally to those who might think otherwise). The child's perspective is cleverly, strategically, mapped onto that of 'our' own, where as John von Sturmer has figured it, Aborigines are always represented in dominant discourse in terms of excess, as he puts it, Aborigines "fight too much, fuck too much and drink too much".⁴ Here, the abject and the innocent coalesce: do 'they' really cook that many sausages at once? Don't 'Warlpiri' really use their bonnet of cars (pace *Bush Mechanics*⁵) to transport hunted meat? Are the dots on those paintings really too big, faux, or might this be new 'Emily'? The irreverence is sombre and sobering, laced with the fact that any and all images of Aborigines can never be dislodged from a violent history of colonial representation that is not yet past, as the mocking terms of both the film, and the mirth it engenders, attest.

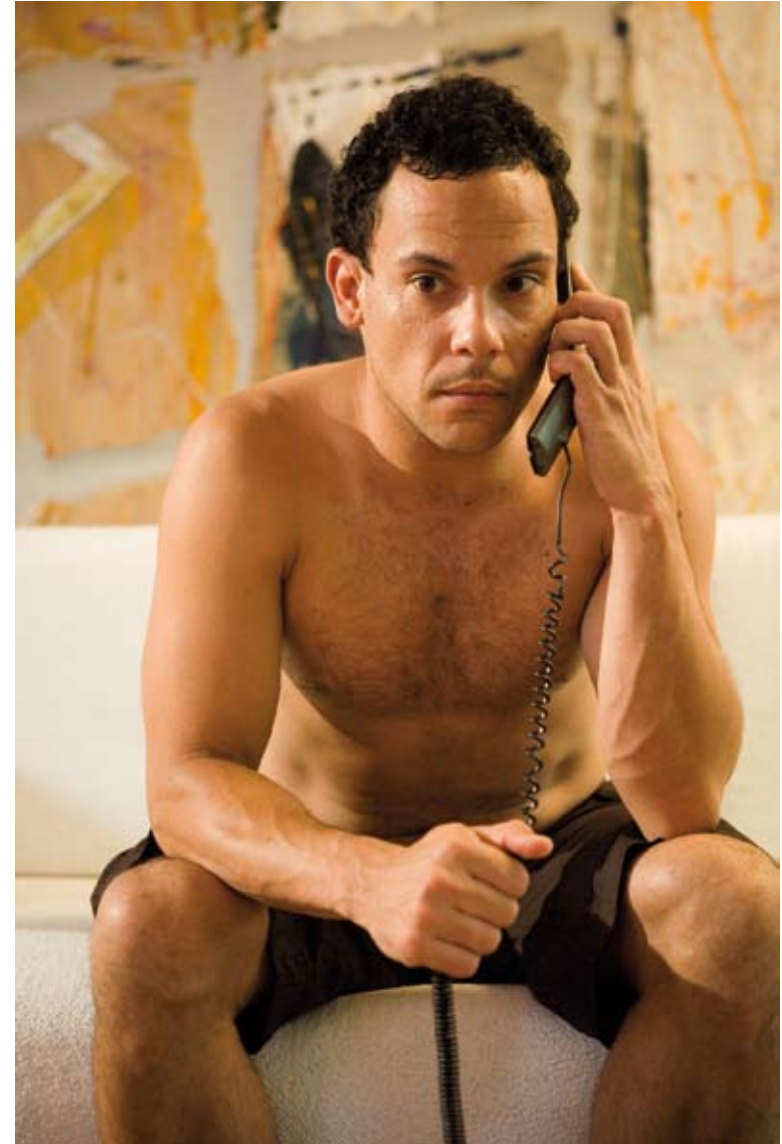
Jackie Jackie is a story of gleeful, girly, redemption. Its art is not so much an excavation of the past as it is fantastical fabulation. It blends hyper real estrangements to offer new affective resonances and resources to what in fact,

ought to be by now an all too trite parable of modern racism. The very terrain of this film seems intentionally un-original, in harkening back to familiar terrain and devices in order to harness the already known of memory, mood, gesture, and fashion to new effect. This film excels in the Derridian adage that it is only through repetition that the new can emerge. A modern mall melodrama, set in the contemporary past of the 1970s. Shades of Baz Luhrman and Andy Warhol both, where helmet headed White blondes predominate the fantasy, domestic and deeply feminine world of shopping, consumerism, and whose dazzling and facile façade hides the no uncertain truth of what is really at stake. Through an inventive series of classic reversals and strategic reclaiming of self-identity through speech, “Jamimah, Gin-a-loo, Jedda” the manager calls her, our heroine, Jinaali renames herself an ‘(ab)original’, in a performance that simply outdoes both her white male boss’s and Jackie Jackie superhero’s equally pejorative anti-racist (that is, racist) redress. In so doing, racism becomes ludicrous, and stereotypes on both sides, laudable. Whiteness is shown to be what it is: performative, banal, obvious, repetitive and boring ultimately. It is simply uncool to not get where the the human race is ‘at’. A performance of Blackness (not, pointedly, loin-clothed, spear-toting, Jackie Jackie) by the very genuine Jinaali, outshines any other possibility. Her check-out line is now the place to be checked ‘in’. The White shoppers gleefully surge forward to join Jinaali’s queue, to where her cheeky direct wink at the camera in the final moment dissolve flirtatiously invites us all. Theatricality is not outside or separate from the real world of politics, race, economy; the theatricality of affect resides precisely in the artful act of the everyday.

Jennifer Biddle

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- 1 I borrow this phrase from Michael Taussig (1993), *Mimesis and Alterity: A particular history of the senses* (Routledge: London and New York) who in another context altogether, discusses the illuminations affective imagery has to literally ‘hit’ its mark.
- 2 Laura Marks (2000:1), *The Skin of the Film: intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses* (Duke University Press: Durham)
- 3 Marks (ibid:5)
- 4 von Sturmer, John (1989), ‘Aborigines, Representation, Necrophilia’ *Art and Text* 32: 127-139.
- 5 *Bush Mechanics* 2001 (Dir. David Batty), a Film Australia National Interest Program in association with Warlpiri Media Association Inc.



Jacob Nash (writer/director) *Bloodlines*, 2007



Warwick Thornton (writer/director) *Nana*, 2007



Pauline Whyman (writer/director) *Backseat*, 2007



Adrian Wills (writer/director) *Jackie Jackie*, 2007

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Bloodlines, 2007

single channel film

5 min, 46 sec

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