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'Reel love' across ethnic boundaries? The extent and significance of inter-ethnic intimacy in Australian cinema

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Abstract

National cinemas play an important role in the construction of national identities, representing the 'self' to both domestic and international audiences. Evidence of the material impacts of media representations on individuals and society, and the pervasiveness of movie-watching as a cultural activity, underscore the importance of scholarly inquiry into film. Here, we are concerned with how ethnic diversity has been negotiated within the Australian national cinema - specifically at the scale of intimate interpersonal relationships. Our analysis of twenty-five recent Australian films considers how cinema alerts audiences to the possibilities and limitations of love within and across ethnic boundaries. We find cause for modest optimism in regard to the frequency of Australian cinematic representations of inter-ethnic intimacy, although the narrow range of ethnic groups permitted to participate in these encounters, and an apparent reticence to portray marriage, co-habitation and child-bearing across ethnic boundaries, remain cause for concern.

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Key words: intimacy, cinema, film, ethnicity, inter-racial, prejudice

Introduction

As the ethnic mix of the Australian population has expanded and shifted over recent decades, opportunities for inter-ethnic intimate relationships (involving partners of distinct ancestries[i]) have grown. These relationships have important implications for the nation's ethnic composition and identity, and for processes of integration and social connection. The likelihood of forming an inter-ethnic intimate relationship is influenced by the perceived cultural, social and economic distance between groups, the extent of residential segregation, and the size of the pool of potential partners of one's own ethnicity (Khoo 2007; Song 2009). Immigrants' propensity toward inter-ethnic intimacy is also influenced by the duration of residence in the host society (Khoo, Birrell and Heard 2009).

Knowledge of the extent of inter-ethnic intimacy in Australia is restricted to formally married and de facto (co-habiting) couples. At the 2001 Census (latest customized data published) one third of married couples were inter-ethnic (Khoo 2004). Of these, 12 per cent involved one partner who was of Anglo-Celtic Australian or European ancestry and one who was not; or a combination of two different non-European ancestries (Khoo 2004). Rates of inter-ethnic marriage have increased dramatically across immigrant generations for a number of Australia's largest immigrant groups. For instance, whilst only six per cent of Chinese males and 13 per cent of Chinese females married outside their ethnic group within the first immigrant generation, 69 and 73 per cent of those in the third immigrant generation did so (Khoo, Birrell and Heard 2009). Meanwhile, in 2006, more than half of all married Indigenous Australians had non-Indigenous partners (Heard, Birrell and Khoo 2009).

The term 'inter-ethnic' requires further unravelling when analysing popular sentiments towards these relationships. In some instances, the *perceived* social and cultural distance between the respective ethnicities of two partners is of minimal social significance – although they ostensibly have distinct ancestries. In other cases, the perceived social and cultural distance is vast, such that a meaningful ethnic boundary is crossed. While, strictly speaking, all couples involving partners of different ancestries are 'inter-ethnic' (e.g. Anglo-Australian/English), we restrict our use of this term to the latter, boundary crossing intimacies. Our analysis is thus complicated by difficulties in determining where meaningful ethnic boundaries lie, as these are socially constructed, contextually contingent and perpetually shifting. This complexity is drawn out in further detail below.

Racism and inter-ethnic intimacy in Australia

Prejudice against inter-ethnic couples is grounded in essentialist understandings of difference, whereby boundary crossing is 'unnatural' and affronts racial/ethnic hierarchies (Stember 1976; Perry and Sutton 2008). Inter-ethnic relationships have long been 'a highly-charged, emotional issue' in Australia because of their perceived role in undermining cherished individual, family, ethnic and national identities (Owen 2002, p.2). Similar observations have been made in other immigrant societies, including the United Kingdom (Song 2009; Harman 2010) and United States (Romano 2003; Golebiowska 2007; Perry and Sutton 2008).

Historically, intimacy between Indigenous Australians and their colonisers presented an extensive challenge to social norms. By rendering definitions of

white and black 'porous, ambiguous and…hybrid', these relationships undermined ambitions of a White Australia (Probyn 2003, p.64). Prior to Federation in 1901, Australian states and territories prohibited marriages between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians without written permission from the Chief Protector of the Aboriginal people[ii]. Prejudice against these 'boundary crossing' relationships was also palpable in the experiences of the Stolen Generations – children forcibly removed from their Indigenous families and communities between 1910 and 1970 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). Children of mixed ethnicity were institutionalized to assimilate them into 'white' society and breed out the colour (Probyn 2003).

Throughout Australia's history, legal barriers also inhibited marriages between Anglo/Anglo-Celtic Australians and non-European immigrants. The *1901 Immigration Restriction Act* was designed to prevent the weakening of Australia's (white, British) ethnic purity. Australian women who married 'aliens' (non-Europeans) lost their citizenship (at that time, British subjecthood) until the *1948 Nationality and Citizenship Act* came into effect (Owen 2002). Thus, the appropriateness of inter-ethnic intimacy depended both upon the ethnicities involved, and gender. The *War-time Refugee Removal Act (1949)* further discriminated against some inter-ethnic couples; non-European refugees were regularly repatriated to their countries of origin, even if they had married an Australian citizen (Owen 2002). The social and cultural significance of intimate relationships between Anglo-Australians and Europeans differed markedly from those involving non-Europeans.

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More recently, the growing prevalence of inter-ethnic intimate relationships in immigrant societies – including Australia – is regarded as a 'definitive measure of the dissolution of social and cultural barriers' between groups, and as a litmus test of social cohesion (Khoo 2007, p.115). Conversely, negative attitudes towards inter-ethnic intimacy have long been deployed as a measure of social distance, following Bogardus' (1933) groundbreaking social distance scale. Studies in Australia (and elsewhere) have revealed a stubbornly persistent discomfort with inter-ethnic intimacy, contingent on the respective ethnic groups involved (Parillo and Donoghue 2005; Golebiowska 2007; Klocker and Dunn 2011). Prejudice against inter-ethnic intimate relationships has been described as 'a pernicious form of bigotry that is difficult to destroy', even among groups that have 'learned to work, play and attend school together' (Harris and Toplin 2007, p. 708). Attitudes towards inter-ethnic intimacy thus offer a unique insight into the limits of tolerance and the nature of prejudice.

In an Australian telephone survey (of 12,512 individuals) conducted under the *Challenging Racism Project* (Dunn et al. 2011), eleven per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition: 'It is not a good idea for people of different 'races' to marry one another', suggesting a continued belief in racial separatism among some Australians. The survey also asked respondents how concerned they would feel if a close relative married someone from a range of ethnic backgrounds and religious faiths (British, Italian, Indigenous Australian, Asian, black African, Christian, Jewish and Muslim). Concern was most frequently expressed at the prospect of a close relative marrying a person of the Muslim faith (49 per cent of respondents), but also surrounded marriage with an Indigenous Australian (28 per

cent), black African[iii] (27 per cent), Asian (24 per cent) or Jewish person (23 per cent) (Klocker and Dunn 2011). Respondents' concerns were centred upon intimate relationships involving members of ethnic or religious 'out-groups' – a term regularly used in racism literature to signify the perceived cultural incompatibility of some groups with dominant imaginaries of national identity and belonging (Jayasuriya 2002; Forrest and Dunn 2006). The terms 'in-group' and 'out-group' seek to highlight experiences of privilege and discrimination, not to re-entrench marginalization. These findings provide a foundation for this paper by distinguishing between intimate relationships that transgress a culturally and socially meaningful boundary, and those that do not.

In the remainder of this paper, we argue that representations of inter-ethnic intimacy in the media in general, and national cinemas in particular, provide further evidence of the extent to which certain relationships fit social norms – at the same time as they participate in shaping those norms. Our research has explored the portrayal of inter-ethnic intimacies in popular Australian films, and questions whether the Australian film industry has prioritized (and legitimized) relationships that operate within ethnic boundaries vis-à-vis those perceived to cross them. Below, we briefly situate our inquiry within the well-established body of scholarship on media effects in contexts of ethnic diversity, with a particular focus on film.

Media effects, racism and the special significance of cinema

Media images 'infuse ideological meanings into the societies in which they are produced' (Deo et al. 2008, p. 148). However, contemporary scholarship rarely conceives of the media's influence as a 'one way monolithic 'push' process',

recognizing that audiences exert varying degrees of agency in communication processes (Morgan, Shanahan and Signorielli 2009, p.37; see also Hall 1980), and that 'reality' and representation are co-constituted (Aitken and Zonn 1994; England 2004). Social cognitive theory has been widely utilized to interpret media effects, arguing that people learn attitudes and behaviours through a combination of personal characteristics, direct contact with their immediate environments and their consumption of media products (Bandura 2009; Mastro 2009; Oliver and Krakowiak 2009). Media exert substantial influence over opinions when viewers have had minimal direct contact with members of the group/s being portrayed (Goodall et al. 1994; Deo et al. 2008; Bandura 2009; Mastro 2009).

As with other media, films have 'material effects in everyday life' (England 2004, p.295). Although Hollywood cinema is globally dominant, national cinemas play an important role in the 'transmission of cultural and political values' - shaping and reifying national identities along the way (Jansson 2005, p.271; see also Aitken and Zonn 1994; O'Reagan 1996; Collins and Davis 2004). However, national cinemas are simultaneously shaped by the cultures from which they emanate – helping to legitimate the existing social order, including its racial hierarchies and divisions (Goodall et al. 1994). By representing (or omitting) ethnic 'others', films are powerfully implicated in constructing the self (Aitken and Zonn 1994, p.14). As discourses, they share in struggles for power, identity and influence and (at least in the west) participate in the construction and perpetuation of white hegemony.

Numerous studies have found that perceived ethnic out-groups are statistically under-represented in the media in general, and cinema in particular – parallel to an over-representation and privileging of the ethnic in-group (Goodall et al. 1994; Eschholz, Bufkin and Long 2002; Deo et al. 2008). By excluding ethnic out-groups from representation in the media, or giving them minimal screen time when present, the implication is that they 'occupy no significant social space' (Eschholz, Bufkin and Long 2002, p.300). Critics have concluded that the Australian cinema is still not the 'valid domain' of many of Australia's diverse ethnic groups (Khoo 2008, p.141); but remains characterized by a 'pre-eminent British influence' and bias towards an idealized white, masculine and heterosexual 'self' (Rayner 2000, p.8; see also O'Reagan 1996). When marginalized groups attain some visibility in the media, they are further plagued by mis-representation. Ideologies of 'Otherness' are propagated via pervasive and harmful media stereotypes, fostering (and/or reinforcing) feelings of fear, anxiety and discomfort in viewers (Goodall et al. 1994; Jakubowicz 1994; Hall 1997; Eschholz, Bufkin and Long 2002; Deo et al. 2008; Liberato et al. 2009; Mastro 2009). Ethnic out-groups are regularly pathologized in media representations, reinforcing hegemonic whiteness and perpetuating racism.

Because the film industry has an expansive reach, it is a crucial site for examining how ethnic diversity is constructed in a society. Cinema is the most highly attended 'cultural activity' among Australians aged 15 and over (ABS 2011). In 2009/2010, 67 per cent of Australians attended the cinema at least once, well above attendance rates for other cultural activities (ABS 2011). Of those attending the cinema, 23 per cent went six to ten times per year, and 15 per cent

went 11 to 20 times (ABS 2011). In 2006, Australians also spent 2.4 million person hours per day watching DVDs or videos – out of a total population of 20.7 million persons at that time (ABS 2009). Despite the global dominance of Hollywood films, large numbers of Australians do view Australian productions. The 100 Australian feature films released to cinemas between 2007 and 2009 achieved 101 million total audience viewings by February 2011 across domestic cinema, DVD, video, television and online distribution points (Screen Australia 2011). It is certainly true, in the Australian context, that cinema is 'everywhere a fact of our lives, saturating our leisure time, our conversation, and our perceptions of each other and self' (Bernardi 2007, p.xvi). For this reason, and because of the ideological work that films do, it is particularly important that academics inquire into what is represented by (and marginalized within) national cinemas (Aitken and Zonn 1994; England 2004).

Cinematic engagements with inter-ethnic intimacy

Heterosexual and mono-ethnic norms continue to pervade intimate cinematic encounters. These cinematic representations of intimacy *matter* because they operate as an 'agent of cultural orthodoxy' (Smaill 2010, no page). Under-representation and mis-representation of inter-racial[iv] intimate relationships have been uncovered in studies of Hollywood productions (Marchetti 1993; hooks 1995; Evans 2002; Beeman 2007; Perry and Sutton 2008), but inter-ethnic intimacy in the Australian film industry has received scant attention (Robinson 1996; Khoo 2006; 2008; Smaill 2010; 2011). Existing studies have found that inter-ethnic/racial relationships are infrequently portrayed in films and are rarely central to the plot when they do appear (hooks 1995; Evans 2002; Beeman 2007).

Furthermore, they are seldom 'successful' or long-lasting, rarely involve marriage and tend to be short-term, fraught, dysfunctional and tragic (Marchetti 1993; hooks 1995; Robinson 1996; Evans 2002; Beeman 2007). Ethnic out-group males (particularly black males) are regularly portrayed as a sexual threat to white women (Perry and Sutton 2006), and physical intimacy is often curtailed in order to avoid depicting sex across ethnic/racial boundaries – particularly when white females are involved (Evans 2002; Beeman 2007). bell hooks (1995, p.113) concluded that 'true love' in films almost always occurs between characters who 'share the same race' and when 'love happens across boundaries' it usually has 'tragic consequences'. These patterns arise from producers' desire to make 'safe' choices and avoid alienating viewers, and because of an inability to view ethnic 'others' as emotional equals (Beeman 2007, p. 687).

Studies of the Australian film industry have similarly argued that inter-ethnic intimacy is rarely depicted and offers 'troubled subject matter' (Smaill 2011, p.19). Goodall et al. (1994, p.95) found that 'endogamy seems to be the rule' and whilst 'cross-cultural flirtations' have been portrayed, marriages are few. Smaill (2011, p.19) found that cinematic representations of inter-ethnic intimacies between Anglo-Australian and Asian characters rarely take place 'at home, within the bounds of domesticity and the nation'. Instead, these relationships have been 'exoticized' and everyday domestic experiences 'displaced by fantasies of racialized erotic encounters' in 'exotic' Asian locales (Smaill 2010, no page). A reliable trope of Australian cinema has been that of the Asian (often Filipina) 'mail-order bride' portrayed as 'a sex-crazed, manipulative ex-bar girl who had tricked a decent, outback Aussie battler into marrying her' (Robinson 1996, p.53).

Alternately, Asian women have been portrayed as docile 'sex slaves' forced into 'loveless marriages' (Robinson 1996, pp.54, 56). In keeping with international findings, inter-ethnic intimacy in Australian films is generally 'fleeting and transitory' (Smaill 2011, pp.19, 30). These relationships have often ended tragically, with difference being 'sacrificed' via the death of the ethnic minority (usually Asian) character so that 'order and identity' can be restored (Khoo 2006, p.59; Smaill 2011).

The studies described above have predominantly utilized selective and descriptive sampling strategies. For instance, Marchetti (1993, p. 1) studied seventeen Hollywood films, produced between 1915 and 1986 featuring 'Asian-Caucasian sexual liaisons'. Her analysis identified a range of themes that characterized these relationships, but did not compare their representation to mono-ethnic couples in the same films. Others, such as Harris And Toplin (2007) have described inter-ethnic intimacy as portrayed in one film (Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*) or a small number of films (e.g. Evans 2002 analysed *Made in America, Six Degrees of Separation* and *Smoke*). In each case, the film/s were chosen for analysis because the author perceived that the inter-ethnic intimate relationships depicted therein were significant. Existing Australian studies have adopted similar methods. For instance, Smaill (2011) explored Asian/Anglo-Australian intimate relationships through a detailed analysis of two films: *Aya* and *The Home Song Stories*, while Khoo (2010) based her analysis (also of Asian/Anglo-Australian relationships) on *The Home Song Stories* and *Mao's Last Dancer*. An exception to this selective and descriptive style of analysis is Beeman's (2007) study which examined 40 Hollywood films released between

1980 and 2001 to establish how (African-American/white) inter-racial relationships were portrayed compared to mono-racial relationships. Beeman's (2007) study highlighted the importance of systematic analyses exploring the consistency of media portrayals across films and ethnic groups (Eschholz, Bufkin and Long 2002). Similar research has not been conducted across a broader spectrum of ethnic differences (i.e. beyond black/white) – nor on the Australian film industry. We seek to address these gaps.

Systematic analyses of inter-ethnic and mono-ethnic intimacies may be particularly important in the context of Australian cinema, which is 'hypercritical of family life and male-female relationships' and features 'few fully developed adult love stories' and 'fewer still happy endings' (O'Reagan 1996, p.7). If these observations are correct, then fraught portrayals of inter-ethnic relationships may be part of a cinematic norm, rather than a sign of prejudice. However, if films single-out inter-ethnic intimate relationships as inherently problematic, they actively support the concept of emotional segregation – the idea that these relationships cannot survive because the individuals involved are not emotional equals (Beeman 2007). Such representations may influence broader societal judgements about the nature (and acceptability) of inter-ethnic relationships, and have tangible significance for 'real life' inter-ethnic couples, potentially contributing to 'ridicule, abuse and even violence' (Perry and Sutton 2006, pp.898).

Methods

In this study, the five highest grossing Australian produced films in each year, from 2006 to 2010, were reviewed (Table 1). Animations were excluded, as were Australian productions with no discernable Australian features (i.e. non-Australian setting *and* no Australian characters). In those instances, the next highest grossing film was included.

[BRING IN TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Our research tallied and analysed *all* intimate and/or sexual contact in the films reviewed - whether the individuals involved were actually in a 'relationship' or not. We coded across the spectra from marriages to one-night-stands and flirtations; and from consensual sexual relationships to sexual violence. It was thus not appropriate to uniformly apply the terms 'relationship' or 'couple' to our sample – particularly in cases of non-consensual sex. Instead, we have adopted the umbrella term 'sexual and/or intimate *relations*' (not relationships), and the term *'pair'* instead of 'couple'. These terms sidestep notions of emotional closeness, mutuality and consent that are embedded within everyday understandings of 'being in a relationship' or part of a 'couple'. Pairs were only tallied if both individuals appeared in the film and at least one had a speaking role. Thus, film extras (e.g. two people holding hands in a crowd) were not counted, neither were instances where a character spoke about a previous partner who was not shown.

A process was established to determine whether the perceived social and cultural distance between ethnic groups was sufficient to constitute (meaningful) ethnic boundary crossing. Perceived in-group and out-group statuses were useful

in this regard. Out-groups were identified from existing research highlighting the frequent exposure of Australians from Middle Eastern, black African, Asian and Indigenous backgrounds, and from the Indian sub-continent to racism (Forrest and Dunn 2007; Pedersen, Griffiths and Watt 2008; Khan and Pedersen 2010; Dunn, Pelleri and Maeder-Han 2011). We assigned in-group status to Australians of Anglo/Anglo-Celtic background, as well as 'white' characters from the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America. The inclusion of Europeans within the in-group is in keeping with O'Reagan's (1996, p.306) observation that cultural differences (between Anglo-Australians and those from European backgrounds) have been absorbed within the national identity in Australian films, and are 'part of the larger identity of 'us''.

As noted previously, our use of the term 'inter-ethnic' is restricted to pairs where a socially and culturally meaningful boundary was deemed to have been crossed. Three categories were used to classify pairs on the basis of the respective ethnicities of the individuals involved: i) *in-group* pairs - both individuals belonged to an ethnic in-group (e.g. Anglo-Australian/Anglo-Australian, Italian/Anglo-Australian, English/white American); ii) *out-group* pairs - both individuals belonged to the same ethnic out-group (e.g. Chinese/Chinese or Indigenous/Indigenous) and iii) *inter-ethnic* pairs - one individual belonged to an in-group and the other to an out-group (e.g. Anglo-Australian/Indigenous or English/Chinese). No pairs involving characters of two different out-group ethnicities (e.g. Chinese/Nigerian) appeared in the films analysed. We acknowledge that our categories are highly contingent, dynamic and subjective, and that other scholars would likely have delineated these boundaries differently.

Results and discussion: How do Australian cinematic representations of inter-ethnic intimacies measure up?

Ninety-two pairs were tallied across the 25 films reviewed. Of these, 66 per cent included two in-group individuals, 21 per cent included two out-group individuals, and 13 per cent were inter-ethnic (in-group/out-group). Eighty per cent of in-group pairs were comprised of two Anglo/Anglo-Celtic Australian characters. The remaining in-group pairs incorporated characters from the United Kingdom, with a few European and white American characters thrown into the mix. Most out-group pairs (79 per cent) were comprised of two Indigenous characters. The respective ethnicities of characters in inter-ethnic pairs are outlined in Table 2.

[BRING IN TABLE 2 AROUND HERE]

These statistics suggest that inter-ethnic (in-group/out-group) pairs have appeared with some regularity in recent Australian films – they constituted 13 per cent of all pairs recorded. However, a broad range of intimate and/or sexual relations (beyond marriage and co-habitation) were incorporated in this tally, and Census data cannot elucidate the comparable rate of inter-ethnic pairings within the Australian populace. Nonetheless, our analysis offers promising signs that contemporary Australian film producers may be less hesitant to portray inter-ethnic pairs than other studies have suggested (Goodall et al. 1994; Smaill 2011). Indeed, almost half of the films reviewed (10 of 25) featured an inter-ethnic pair. Furthermore, all but two of the films analysed were set either wholly or predominantly in Australia; contrasting with Smaill's (2010, 2011) observations that inter-ethnic pairs are rarely portrayed in national spaces.

The out-group members of the inter-ethnic pairs depicted in the films analysed were usually Asian (42 per cent) or Indigenous (25 per cent). Thus, the diversity of groups permitted to participate in intimate and/or sexual relations across ethnic boundaries was limited. Pairs involving Anglo-Australian characters and migrants from African backgrounds or from the Indian sub-continent were entirely absent. Anglo-Australian pairings with individuals from Middle Eastern backgrounds were also scarce – despite evidence that (some) of these relationships are common in Australian society[v]. This study recorded two pairs involving an Anglo-Australian male and Afghan female – but the same film (*Unfinished Sky*), and indeed the same female character (Tahmeena), was involved in both. By-and-large, our findings indicate that Australian film producers have not stretched the boundaries of inter-ethnic intimate and/or sexual relations far beyond the types of pairs that already have an extensive history within Australian cinema. Table 3 summarizes how inter-ethnic pairs were portrayed vis-à-vis in-group and out-group pairs present in the films under analysis. The coding framework used was designed to test some of the key concerns articulated in the existing literature on cinematic portrayals of inter-ethnic intimacy.

[BRING IN TABLE 3 AROUND HERE]

Our results both confound and support the existing literature on this topic, providing promising signs whilst also highlighting areas in which Australian cinematic engagements with inter-ethnic intimacy could improve. First, existing studies have argued that inter-ethnic pairs rarely occupy central roles in popular films (Goodall et al. 1994; hooks 1995; Beeman 2007; Smaill 2011). In our

sample, inter-ethnic pairs were central to the plot *more* regularly than the other couple types (see Table 3). The inter-ethnic pairs occupying central roles included: Ellie and Lee (Anglo-Australian/Thai) in *Tomorrow When the War Began,* John and Tahmeena (Anglo-Australian/Afghan) in *Unfinished Sky,* Li and Liz (Chinese/white American) in *Mao's Last Dancer,* and Annie and Slippery (Anglo-Australian/German-Indigenous) in *Bran Nue Dae.* Although it is promising that one third of all inter-ethnic pairs occupied central roles and were portrayed with considerable depth, it is of some concern that half of those tallied were of minimal (if any) consequence to storylines of the films in which they appeared. The low frequency with which out-group pairs (primarily Indigenous/Indigenous) appeared in central roles is also cause for concern and appears to be an artefact of the 'ghettoization' of Indigenous characters into films with large Indigenous casts (Goodall et al. 1994; Eschholz, Bufkin and Long 2002; Mastro 2009).

Existing studies have argued that cinematic representations of inter-ethnic pairs rarely involve marriage or co-habitation (hooks 1995; Khoo 2006; Beeman 2007; Smaill 2011). These findings were matched in our study. Only one third of inter-ethnic pairs were married, co-habiting or engaged, compared to 56 per cent of in-group pairs, and 74 per cent of out-group pairs. Furthermore, one quarter of the inter-ethnic pairs tallied were not even in a 'relationship' - one involved a rape scene (Carl and Tahmeena in *Unfinished Sky*), another portrayed a schoolgirl crush (Esther and Braces' Boy in *Hey, Hey It's Esther Blueburger*) and another an attempted seduction which did not culminate in a relationship (Benny and Rosalita in *Boytown*). The married/co-habiting inter-ethnic pairs included Li and

Liz (Chinese/white American) and Li and Mary (Chinese/Anglo-Australian) in *Mao's Last Dancer*; Rick and his wife (Anglo-Australian/Asian) who appeared in one fleeting scene of the drama *Animal Kingdom*; and John and Tahmeena (Anglo-Australian/Afghan) in *Unfinished Sky,* who lived together to hide Tahmeena (an asylum seeker) from the authorities. Only two of the inter-ethnic pairs had children (Li and Mary; Neil and Daisy), compared to one third of those in the other categories. Our data also confirmed Smaill's (2010; 2011) observations that inter-ethnic pairs are rarely portrayed in domestic spaces. Only three inter-ethnic pairs were shown in the home: John and Tahmeena, Li and Liz and Rick and his wife (whose domestic space only appeared for a matter of moments). By contrast, almost half of the in-group pairs were portrayed inhabiting ordinary domestic spaces. These observations confirm that long-lasting and committed intimacies and domesticities are rarely portrayed across ethnic boundaries.

However, our data confounded Beeman's (2007) finding that inter-ethnic (in her case, inter-racial) pairs seldom engage in physical intimacy on screen. In our analysis, inter-ethnic pairs were shown engaged in sexual intercourse or sexual touching, or kissing intimately, more often than the other couple types (Table 3). Inter-ethnic pairs were rarely limited to casual touching or non-physical forms of intimacy. On the surface, these observations counter claims that producers are reticent to portray sexual relations across ethnic boundaries (Evans 2002; Beeman 2007). However, further explanation of the films analysed tempers this initial optimism. Of the three sexual encounters portrayed across ethnic boundaries, only one clearly involved sexual intercourse – the other two were

limited to sexual touching. The sole inter-ethnic sex scene was Tahmeena's rape; characterized by violence not intimacy. The second inter-ethnic sexual encounter recorded featured the characters Annie and Slippery in *Bran Nue Dae*. Slippery was only revealed to have Indigenous parentage in the closing scene of the film, to much comedic effect. When the sexual encounter between Annie and Slippery occurred viewers would have been entirely oblivious to his stereotypically German character's Indigenous ancestry. The third inter-ethnic sexual encounter was in the comedy *Boytown*, with the scene lasting only moments and involving the attempted seduction of the married lead singer of a 'boy band' (Benny) by a stereotypically sexually aggressive Brazilian female (Rosalita). Thus, a deeper analysis indicates that emotional intimacy was only present in one of the three sexual encounters portrayed (Annie and Slippery) and, in that case, Slippery's ethnic background was hidden from the viewers.

The intersecting significance of race and gender in inter-racial intimate relationships was highlighted by Stember (1976, p.35), who argued that 'sexual racism is differentially applied to males and females' – such that the 'idea of a white woman in the arms of a black man, especially if she is there of her own free will' gives rise to 'the most phenomenal emotional reactions in the white man'. Black men, in particular, have been portrayed as uncivilized and sexually dangerous to white women (Perry and Sutton 2006); but Marchetti (1993) argued that Asian males have been similarly positioned in Hollywood films. Angry emotional responses to inter-ethnic relationships involving white women did not occur in our sample of films – and this is a promising finding. However, the scarcity of inter-ethnic relationships portrayed involving white women (only four

of 12 inter-ethnic pairs) may suggest a lingering wariness on the part of producers. Filmmakers may still be reticent to violate the 'purity' of the white woman by portraying her in an inter-ethnic intimate relationship (Marchetti 1993; Jakubowicz 1994; Perry and Sutton 2006; Beeman 2007). According to previous studies, some films have used the rape of a white woman (by an ethnic 'Other') as a metaphor for the broader threat posed to western culture – that is, the nation becomes 'personified in the young white woman, whose purity is to be protected' (Jakubowicz 1994, p. 90; see also Marchetti 1993). But in our study, the respective genders of out-group and in-group members had minimal bearing on how relationships were portrayed. The only gender-related trend we observed was that (contra to existing accounts) white males were portrayed as sexually threatening or otherwise aggressive towards ethnic out-group women, rather than out-group males being depicted as threatening to white women.

When compared to the other couple types, inter-ethnic pairs were similarly likely to be harmonious, contradicting claims that inter-ethnic pairs are more commonly portrayed as being dysfunctional, fraught and problematic (Marchetti 1993; Robinson 1996; Evans 2002; Beeman 2007). However, inter-ethnic pairs were more likely to feature physical violence than any other group - in all instances an Anglo-Australian male character was the aggressor. More than half (56 per cent) of inter-ethnic pairs who were actually in a relationship (married, co-habiting or dating) were still together at their last appearance in the film, similar to the rates observed for in-group and out-group pairs (Table 3). However, when inter-ethnic pairs were not together at their last appearance, it was always due to a break up. When in-group pairs were not in a relationship at the end of a film, this

was almost always due to the death of one partner. Our observations suggest that Australian films may have moved beyond the tendency observed by Khoo (2011) to use death as a way 'out' of the dilemma posed by inter-ethnic intimacy. However, a more pessimistic interpretation may be that inter-ethnic couples can be readily fractured by a break-up (suggesting that they are less compatible), whilst those existing within ethnic boundaries can only be ruptured by death. Although none of the inter-ethnic couples in the films reviewed explicitly broke up because of ethnic differences, there remained a sense that inter-ethnic intimacy is untenable over the longer term (Smaill 2011).

Encouragingly, storylines did not explicitly focus on problems associated with inter-ethnic intimacy. Potential exceptions were *Mao's Last Dancer*, in which Li's desire to remain in the United States was a partial motivating factor behind his (ultimately failed) marriage to Liz; as well as *Australia*, where the relationship between Neil and Daisy raised the spectre of exploitative and abusive relationships between white men and Indigenous women during the colonial period; and *Unfinished Sky*, where Tahmeena's vulnerability was due to her status as an undocumented Afghani asylum seeker. Although it is undeniably important for films to reflect the real complexities and racisms faced by inter-ethnic pairs, it is also important to portray their ordinariness (King 2009). This was the case in a number of the films reviewed. The challenges facing inter-ethnic pairs often had nothing to do with their respective ethnicities. For Ellie and Lee (Anglo-Australian/Thai) in *Tomorrow When the War Began,* their fight against 'invaders' was at the root of their relationship woes; pressures on Carmel and Rocco's relationship (Indigenous/Greek) in *Jindabyne* related to a storyline surrounding

the murder of an Indigenous teenager; in *Animal Kingdom*, Rick and his wife (Anglo-Australian/Asian) fought when a criminal sought refuge in their home; and Benny and Rosalita (Anglo-Australian/Brazilian) in *Boytown* argued as Benny attempted to resist an extra-marital affair. In these cases, ethnic differences were relegated to the background and became an unremarkable facet of the storyline.

Concluding remarks

From a post-modern scholarly perspective, boundaries between reality and representation (the 'real' and the 'reel') are blurred, such that the camera does not 'mirror reality' but participates in creating it (Aitken and Zonn 1994, p.21, England 2004). If we acknowledge that cinematic representations and the 'real world' are co-constituted, then decisions about who and what are included (or excluded); as well as the manner in which people, issues, places and things are portrayed, are crucial matters for scholarly inquiry (Aitken and Zonn 1994). The political and social significance of film, and its capacity to have material effects, have been well-established (Aitken and Zonn 1994; England 2004; Bernardi 2007). The important role of national cinemas in articulating and reifying (exclusive) national identities has also been documented, and cinematic representations of perceived ethnic out-groups have been a major focal point for scholarly research on media effects (Aitken and Zonn 1994; Goodall et al. 1994; Jakubowicz 1994; O'Reagan 1996; Collins and Davis 2004; Jansson 2005). Research on inter-ethnic intimacy has attracted considerably less attention, particularly in Australia.

In this paper, we have sought to uncover the meanings endowed upon different 'types' of intimate and/or sexual relations in the Australian national cinema, with a focus on the respective ethnicities of the characters involved. We have argued that the frequency with which inter-ethnic pairs feature, and the manner in which they are portrayed, *matter*. Our objective has been to shed light on the dominant ideologies of intimacy sustained (whether consciously or unconsciously) through our national cinema, and to open a conversation about how these may be subverted and contested. Evidence of sustained prejudices against certain types of inter-ethnic intimacy within the Australian populace (Dunn et al. 2011; Klocker and Dunn 2011) underscores the social and political significance of this task.

Cinematic portrayals can perpetuate racism and stigmatize inter-ethnic relationships – or do the opposite. Our findings were mixed. We found that inter-ethnic intimate and/or sexual relations were portrayed with some frequency in our film sample, but that the diversity of ethnic groups permitted to participate was limited. We found that Australian film producers did not appear to have any qualms about depicting physical/sexual relations across ethnic boundaries, but emotional intimacy was often lacking, and considerable work remains to ensure that inter-ethnic pairs are portrayed in meaningful, committed and long-lasting relationships – particularly involving marriage/co-habitation and children. Further, although one third of the inter-ethnic pairs portrayed occupied central roles, the overall amount of screen time devoted to inter-ethnic pairs was meagre, and this may work against the normalization of these relationships in popular imaginings.

We are unable (due to the limitations of this study) to determine how these portrayals have impacted on Australian cinema audiences, and thus fall short of England's (2004, pp.295-296) call for scholars to 'trace' the mutually constituted and 'messy terrain between visual discourse and everyday life' - particularly in contexts where 'discrimination and oppression are at work'. Although scholarly research has established the media's capacity to perpetuate racism amongst ethnic in-group audiences, and to contribute to internalized racism and low self-esteem among perceived ethnic out-groups, similar research is lacking in relation to inter-ethnic couples. Audience research exploring the material effects of media portrayals of inter-ethnic intimate and/or sexual relations is urgently required – both in Australia and internationally. Such research must ascertain how representations of inter-ethnic intimacy and/or sex (in cinema, and other mediated images) impact on inter-ethnic couples and their children, as well as broader audiences.

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Table 1: Films analysed: Australian box office revenue (millions)

2010: Tomorrow When the War Began ($13.5); Bran Nue Dae ($7.6); Wog Boys 2: Kings of Mykonos ($4.9); Animal Kingdom ($4.7); Beneath Hill 60 ($3.2)
2009: Mao's Last Dancer ($15.4); Charlie and Boots ($3.9); Sampson and Delilah ($3.2); The Boys are Back ($2.1); Beautiful Kate ($1.6)
2008: Australia ($37.6); The Black Balloon ($2.3); Unfinished Sky ($1.0); Hey Hey, It's Esther Blueburger ($0.9); The Square ($0.3)
2007: Romulus, My Father ($2.6); Rogue ($1.8); Bra Boys ($1.7); Razzle Dazzle: A Journey into Dance ($1.6); Clubland ($1.5)
2006: Kenny ($7.8); Jindabyne ($5.3); Ten Canoes ($3.5); Kokoda ($3.1); Boytown ($3.1)

Source: Screen Australia and Film Victoria, original figures compiled by Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia.

Table 2: Ethnic backgrounds of inter-ethnic pairs in Australian films, 2006 to 2010[a]

Tomorrow When the War Began: Ellie (Anglo-Australian) and Lee (Thai)

Bran Nue Dae: Annie (Anglo-Australian) and Slippery (German-Indigenous)

Mao's Last Dancer: Li (Chinese) and Liz ('white' American); Li (Chinese) and Mary (Anglo-Australian)

Hey Hey, It's Esther Blueburger: Esther (Jewish[b]) and 'Braces boy' (Anglo-Australian)

Unfinished Sky: John (Anglo-Australian) and Tahmeena (Afghan); Carl (Anglo-Australian) and Tahmeena (Afghan)

Australia: Neil (Anglo-Australian) and Daisy (Indigenous)

Clubland: Shane (Anglo-Australian) and partner (unspecified 'Asian')

Animal Kingdom: Rick (Anglo-Australian) and wife (unspecified 'Asian')

Jindabyne: Carmel (Indigenous) and Rocco (Greek)

Boytown: Benny (Anglo-Australian) and Rosalita (Brazilian)

[a] When characters' ethnicities were not made explicit, ethnicity was determined via a combination of physical appearance, name and information from official film websites.
[b] Jewish was coded as an 'out-group' ethnicity due to the conflation of ethnicity and religion in Judaism and evidence of substantial ongoing discrimination against Jewish Australians (Klocker and Dunn 2011; Klocker, Trenerry and Webster 2011).

Table 3: Key characteristics of pairs coded in Australian films, 2006 to 2010

	Inter-ethnic (n.12)	In-group (n. 61)	Out-group (n. 19)
Was the pair central to the film? [a] (%)			
Central	33	26	11
Peripheral	17	34	42
Fleeting	50	39	47
Relationship status (%)			
Co-habiting / married / engaged	33	56	74
Dating	42	31	21
No relationship (one night stand, crush)	17	10	5
No relationship (sexual violence)	8	2	0
Other	0	2	0
Did the pair have children? (%)			
Yes	17	33	32
No	83	67	68
Was the pair depicted together in the domestic sphere? (%)			
Yes	25	44	37
No	75	56	63
Was the pair generally harmonious? (%)			
Harmonious	67	69	58
Conflicted (verbal)	17	29	42
Physically violent	17	2	0
Nature of most 'intimate' interaction shown for each pair (%)			
Sex/sexual touch	25	21	11
Intimate kiss	33	16	5
Casual kiss	17	10	5
Casual touch	8	20	21
Looks / glances	8	2	32
Conversation	8	31	26
Was the pair together at their last appearance in the film? (%)[b]			
Together	56	61	61
Not together (split up)	33	6	17
Not together (death)	0	30	17
Unclear	11	4	6

[a] *Central*: of pivotal importance to the plot, incorporating the film's main characters; *peripheral:* consistent presence but tangential to plot; *fleeting:* appearance together restricted to few scenes.
[b] Percentages calculated on the basis of pairs who were in a relationship for at least part of their film.

Notes

[i.] Ancestry is the term through which ethnicity is operationalized in the Australian Census.

[ii.] Each state and territory had an Aboriginal Protection/Welfare Board which exercized extensive paternalistic control over Indigenous Australians. The 'Chief Protector' acted as a legal guardian to make decisions in the 'best interests' of Indigenous Australians (Probyn 2003).

[iii.] 2,566 respondents were asked about Black Africans, compared to 12,512 for all other groups.

[iv.] The U.S. literature refers to inter-racial intimacy, reflecting the use of racial categories in the U.S. Census. We use 'inter-ethnic' unless referring to the U.S. literature.

[v.] Khoo (2004) found that 58 and 49 per cent of third generation Lebanese Australian men and women (respectively) had spouses with 'Australian'/Anglo-Celtic ancestries. The comparable figures for Indian Australians were 65 and 55 per cent.

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