

Beyond Multiculturalism: Ethical Journeys in *Japanese Story*

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Abstract

Japanese Story (Sue Brooks, 2003) was conceived in the mid-1990s when issues of gender, ethnicity and multicultural diversity were paramount in redefining Australia as a nation, however, by the time the film was released in 2003, these multicultural and feminist agendas had been displaced by both the ‘war on terror’ and the ‘history wars’. While the ‘war on terror’ focused on non-European asylum seekers and refugees as threats to Australia’s British heritage, the ‘history wars’ debated Australia’s colonial past and issues of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians. These national agendas formed the background to the reception of *Japanese Story* in Australia – and they help to explain the film’s enigmatic ending in terms of a profound shift in Australia’s image of itself as a successful, new world, multicultural nation. However, despite its critical success in Australia and Europe, *Japanese Story* has been questioned by a number of commentators because the Japanese characters, in particular, conform to national stereotypes. But rather than position the film as orientalist or racist, as some critics have, this article proposes three overlapping frameworks for explaining the significance of *Japanese Story* in Australian cinema. The first is the genre of the road movie, used to produce a contemporary image of Japan, an image which contrasts sharply with that of the Japanese soldier in the Pacific War films made in Australia between 1981–2010. The second is Australian landscape cinema which has served several national agendas over the decades, promoting cultural nationalism in the 1970s, multicultural diversity in the 1990s, and post-colonial revisions of the colonial past in the 2000s. The third framework entails an allegorical, post-Mabo reading of the film’s geographic and ethical journeys towards recognition and reconciliation.

Introduction

On the face of it, the multi-award winning Australian feature film, *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003) poses the question of cultural translation: how can an Australian woman and a Japanese man come to know and understand each other, despite barriers of language and cultural difference? The film resolves this question through the conventions of the road movie and romantic comedy in the first two Acts. A mismatched couple come into conflict in Act 1, but then have to work together to solve a problem relating to their differences. In the process, they develop an erotic attraction which is tested and deepened in Act 2. For many critics, however, it is the third Act of *Japanese Story*

which is deeply puzzling because the central encounter between an Australian woman and a Japanese man comes to a sudden end and a new journey begins with the woman alone.¹

This sudden shift in the narrative was accepted by the Australian film industry which gave the film eight awards, including Best Film and Best Film Score, at the prestigious Australian Film Institute awards in 2003. However, the film has been accused of cutting short the narrative journey of the central Japanese character as well as misappropriating Okinawan music in ways that have puzzled and offended many Japanese viewers and some Australian critics.² I will begin by addressing these objections to the film before offering a different set of frameworks for understanding the film's place in Australian cinema.

The problem of stereotypes and cultural appropriation in *Japanese Story*

In a discussion of three Australian road movies, including *Japanese Story*, which feature an Australian and Japanese couple, Erika Smith, like many critics, argues that the Japanese characters in these films are represented as conservative stereotypes – unable to live authentically, and desperate to escape from the isolation and confinement of postmodern, high-tech, corporate Japan. As the bearers of 'otherness', a cultural process that Edward Said identified as orientalism, the Japanese characters, in this view, rarely transcend cultural stereotypes. However, as Smith points out, popular stereotypes of Japan can sometimes be a starting point for a dialogue with audiences on the perception and representation of cultural difference (50–55).

Such a dialogue took place at Otemon University in Osaka in July 2010, and the issues raised here are indebted to participants in that event.³ The symposium's dialogue on *Japanese Story* revealed the limits of the film for Japanese scholars who have a background in and commitment to the multidisciplinary field of Australian Studies. For these and other scholars, the main shortcoming of *Japanese Story* is its failure to develop the Japanese characters beyond recognizable stereotypes of the suppressed salaryman, Hiromitsu (Gotaro Tsunashima), and his impeccably modest wife, Yukiko (Yumiko Tanaka). While some critics acknowledge that Hiromitsu does embark on a soul-searching journey of his own, they object to the fact that his journey is cut short at the precise moment when he has reached a point of equilibrium, putting aside his camera to be *in situ*, to be fully present in a reciprocal moment with Australian geologist, Sandy (Toni Collette). His wife Yukiko,

1 See OffOffOff Film, www.offoffoff.com, for six blogs on the ending, eight blogs on what Hiro died from, and three blogs on Hiro's letter, read at the end of the film.

2 Australian critiques of the film, and of the use of Asian stereotypes in Australian cinema, include Rose Capp (2003), Olivia Khoo (2006), Erika Smith (2008), Rebecca Coyle (2009) and Belinda Smaill (2010).

3 The symposium, 'Negotiating Multiculturalism in Australian Media', 17 July 2010, brought together Japanese and Australian scholars in a discussion of the translation of cultural difference in *Iron Chef*, *Ten Canoes* and *Japanese Story*.

however, has only a few brief scenes and no dialogue to establish her subjectivity. Her demure appearance and emotional restraint provide a marked contrast to Sandy, whose unisex clothes and brash manner align her with the Australian national type (the larrikin male or good Aussie bloke). In this triangle of characters, critics protest that it is only Sandy's journey that is given full reign. In response, I would argue that the nuanced performances of Tsunashima and Tanaka convey feelings and responses with great subtlety and clarity, to such an extent that their gestural vocabularies call to mind another place – a cultural matrix called 'Japan'. Within this matrix, Sandy conforms to an Australian stereotype, the gauche colonial settler lacking the refinement of the old world. Early in their journey together, Hiromitsu confirms this view of Sandy in his mobile phone conversations with a friend in Japan, conversations which are incomprehensible to Sandy but subtitled for the viewer.

In addition, the ending of the film reinforces the possibility of interpreting the film so that the Australian woman, Sandy, becomes 'the other'. The final scene shows Sandy standing alone at an airport window, reduced to a spectator watching a plane as it moves slowly down the runway for takeoff. In this scene, Yukiko's journey home (with Hiromitsu's body) indicates an offscreen story-space from which Sandy is excluded. While this story-space exists elsewhere, beyond the field of vision, the scene nonetheless evokes a poignant connection with this other place, not least through the repetition of the theme music – adapted by Australian composer, Elizabeth Drake, from a traditional Okinawan song, 'Chinsagu No Hana'. While Ryuchi Sakamoto first brought this song to an international audience, the appropriation of 'Chinsagu No Hana' by Australian filmmakers remains a contentious issue for Japanese critics, firstly because the song is specifically Okinawan rather than generically Japanese, and secondly because the fragility and beauty of this song, about upholding Okinawan identity, seems incongruous in an Australian film – even more so because the song's refinement and delicacy clashes with the harshness and dryness of the Australian landscape and character.⁴

A further objection to the film is its failure to understand and explore the gender politics of love, marriage and infidelity from a Japanese cultural perspective. For critics who hold this view, Sandy's 'masculine' sexuality – encoded in her name, appearance, clothes and behaviour, as well as her casual approach to sexual encounters – cannot be translated into Japanese concepts of marriage, and its alternative, 'pure love'. But rather than focusing on the cultural translation of love and sexuality, *Japanese Story* adopts a Western feminist strategy of interrogating cinema's male gaze. This strategy positions Sandy as the subject of the film, the one whose point-of-view is aligned

4 'Chinsagu No Hana' was first appropriated for a 'world music' audience by Ryuchi Sakamoto on his 1990 solo album, *Beauty*. Using the song's melody as a motif throughout the film, Elizabeth Drake orchestrates Western instruments and harmonic compositions with Japanese instruments and the vocals of jazz singer, Shelley Scown. See Brad Green (2003).

with that of the imaginary spectator. Initially, this occurs on the beach where Sandy takes the role of the voyeur, appraising Hiromitsu's semi-naked body with her eyes. Later, when Sandy puts on Hiromitsu's trousers and takes the active role in their first sexual encounter, the distance of the erotic look (the controlling gaze) is replaced by the proximity of touch (valued by feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray).⁵ Again, on their second night as lovers, it is Sandy who caresses Hiromitsu's face with her eyes and her fingers while he sleeps. In their final sexual encounter, the closeness of the couple is confirmed by Hiromitsu's active response to Sandy's touch. Afterwards, he uses words to touch Sandy's heart. In this moment of pure intimacy, if not 'pure love', he confesses the sadness that motivated his journey and reveals that, in the desert 'you have shown me something beautiful.' His farewell letter repeats these sentiments and a reprise of 'Chinsagu No Hana' ends the film.

In this context of a Western, feminist aesthetic, the Okinawan music is 'something beautiful' that the film gives to the spectator, uprooting the song from its authentic/original context to serve another purpose. Whether Drake's reorchestrated music is an instance of orientalism or postmodern fusion depends on where critics stand on the issues of preserving cultural boundaries and defending cultural authenticity. But it is also a matter of how a feminist aesthetic might frame an ethical encounter between strangers. In this regard, the film's feminist aesthetic shifts the encounter between strangers from the distance of the objectifying gaze to the proximity of the intimate touch. The appropriation of the Okinawan song is clearly a jarring experience for some Japanese critics, but for viewers at ease with the cultural appropriations of 'world music', the song 'touches' the spectator, further displacing the gaze and 'opening the heart' to grief (a theme I return to in my discussion of the film's controversial ending).

While my focus, here, is the generic, aesthetic and political frameworks which determined the positive reception of *Japanese Story* in Australia, these frameworks may not do justice to the issues that arise in other national contexts, even those located within the transnational flow of films and other cultural goods. Without diminishing the objections raised by Japanese critics at the Otemon symposium, I hope to demonstrate the extent to which the Australian national context provides important frameworks for interpreting Australian films, even while the films themselves provoke unintended responses beyond the nation's borders.

Beyond the multicultural framework

It is important to note, at the outset, that *Japanese Story* is not a film about the integration of a Japanese immigrant into multicultural Australia.⁶ Rather, it is a cosmopolitan film about how tran-

⁵ Jane O'Sullivan (2004) analyses the film's 'multiple subversions' from the perspective of queer theory.

⁶ See Rebecca Coyle (2009) for a diasporic approach to representations of Japanese culture in Australian ↗

national flows of people and capital (through tourism and trade) produce brief but potentially transformative encounters between two nations that were on opposing sides in the Pacific war. The transitory nature of the encounter in *Japanese Story* means that the multicultural framework for criticising the film's use of Japanese stereotypes (to affirm a white, settler Australian identity) needs to be rethought.

Multicultural films usually tell the story of diasporic communities coming to terms with inter-generational conflicts as migrant families seek to resolve conflicting loyalties to old and new worlds in films such as *Heartbreak Kid*, *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Death in Brunswick*, *Head On*, *Floating Life*, *Blessed* and *Home Song Stories*. In contrast, *Japanese Story* belongs to a smaller set of cosmopolitan films that look to Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region by either sending Australians abroad (often as soldiers, journalists or anthropologists) or staging an encounter between Australians and a visitor from abroad. Multicultural, diasporic and cosmopolitan films do, however, share a common aim: they attempt to decentre white, Anglo-Celtic Australia by bringing 'others' into the national story.

Like most Australian feature films, *Japanese Story* was financed by government agencies including the Australian Film Finance Corporation (now Screen Australia), Film Victoria and Screen-West, along with a number of commercial investors. As with many Australian film projects, there was a long delay (of eight years in this case) between the initial idea and the production of the film. *Japanese Story* had its origins in a proposal from Film Australia's Sharon Connolly to script-writer Alison Tilson (of Gecko Films) in the mid-1990s – a period shaped by Prime Minister Keating's focus on Australia's role in the Asia-Pacific and by One Nation's reactionary stance against Asian immigration, non-European asylum seekers and special benefits for Aboriginal Australians. With this debate in mind, Film Australia was interested in commissioning a film that would explore the cross-cultural tensions ignited by a relationship between an Australian woman and a Japanese man. Film Australia's Sharon Connolly commissioned two drafts of the script before the organisation's charter changed, preventing it from further investment in feature films.

However, inspired by Connolly's image of a Japanese man driving alone through the Australian desert (the image which opens the film), Tilson scripted a cross-cultural road movie, drawing loosely on romantic comedy's battle of the sexes, involving an Australian geologist, Sandy, and a Japanese businessman, Hiromitsu. The industrial and scenic backdrop to this encounter was initially located in the heavy industry region of Whyalla in South Australia (where Tilson grew up) but a decision was made (with producer Sue Maslin and director Sue Brooks) to shoot the film on location in the more remote, more spectacular, and more economically significant Pilbara iron ore region in Western Australia.

Due to the long delay between the original idea and the shooting of the film, by the time *Japanese Story* was released in 2003, profound shifts in national politics had produced new horizons for interpreting the figure of the Japanese tourist in the Australian road movie. In light of these new horizons, this article proposes three frameworks for understanding the film's use of Japanese characters to tell an Australian story. The first framework compares the road movie and the Pacific war film as two genres which offer strongly opposed images of Japan to Australian audiences. The second framework places *Japanese Story* within the context of the Australian landscape tradition, proposing that the film belongs to a new, post-Mabo cinema which challenges both the cultural nationalism of the first wave of landscape films of the 1970s and the multicultural or 'melting pot' landscape films of the 1990s. The third framework looks at how the 'rediscovery' of Australia as a settler colonial nation – with a new political agenda featuring reconciliation and apology – produced a cycle of films (exemplified by *Japanese Story*) which map ethical journeys of recognition onto geographical journeys.

The image of Japan in Australian road movies and Pacific war films

The cinematic image of Japan has been determined by two genres in Australian cinema: the road movie and the World War II or Pacific War drama. The minor of the two genres, the road movie, features an offbeat love story between an Anglo-Australian character facing a modern, existential crisis, and a Japanese tourist seeking time out or a breathing space from the 'stifling conformity' of corporate Japan. We can see this pattern very clearly in three road movies that appeared between 1997–2003. In different ways, each of these films is an oblique response to One Nation's political leader, Pauline Hanson, who was elected to Federal parliament in 1996 on a platform which opposed Asian immigration and objected to the acceptance of boatloads of 'illegal' asylum seekers and refugees. These road movies, featuring Japanese characters, challenge the political rhetoric of One Nation by insisting that Australia is firmly located in the Asia-Pacific region and that the nation's non-European location is an economic and cultural reality as well as a geographical fact.⁷

The first of the road movies was *Heaven's Burning* (Craig Lahiff, 1997), starring Russell Crowe (as Colin) and Youki Kudoh (as Midori). Their paths cross in the course of a bungled bank robbery as he seeks to pay off his debts and she seeks to escape from a hasty marriage to a Japanese salaryman (Kenji Isomura). The second road movie was *The Goddess of 1967*, directed by Australian-based, Hong Kong filmmaker Clara Law (2001), starring Rose Byrne and Kurokawa

7 One Nation's opposition to Asian immigrants and refugees advocated a return to the restrictive immigration practices known as the White Australia Policy – introduced in 1901, modified in 1949 to enable the immigration of Japanese war brides, amended in 1958 to abolish references to 'race', reviewed in 1966 and finally abandoned in 1973.

Rikiya. Their paths cross when he travels to Australia to buy a 1967 Citroen Goddess and she takes him on a road journey into her troubled past. The final film in the cycle is *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003). In all three films, the trip into the outback opens up the possibility of translating Australian experience into an international idiom through the eyes of a visitor from Japan. In this sense, the Japanese characters are cast as eye-witnesses to Australian stories. While the Australian landscape and characters dominate each film, the Japanese actors embody their own stories and come to life in their own right on the screen. Indeed, Youki Kudoh in the role of Midori, the runaway Japanese bride in *Heaven's Burning*, takes over the narrative space from her co-star Russell Crowe, creating one of the most memorable portrayals of *l'amour fou* since Faye Dunaway embarked on her fatal journey with Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). *The Goddess of 1967* and *Japanese Story* cast an Australian woman in the main role, and both are directed by women whose films can be seen as part of an international, feminist cinema – in that they explore cross-cultural difference in terms of the visual politics of gender and sexuality (discussed above).

All three road movies take their characters on a car journey which reveals the inhospitable outback as a productive – although not entirely livable – space occupied by a range of eccentric Australian characters who run farms, mines, pubs and motels. The films share a sense of the Australian outback as an ever-changing series of landscapes, providing a spectacular journey 'elsewhere' for the audience, as well as an escape for the Japanese characters from the constrictions of high-density, urban life. The Australian characters are cast as laconic locals, attuned to the dangers lurking in wide-open spaces. The Japanese characters have their own goals which are not always clear to the Australians. Older male characters in the films embody an unforgiving national memory of Australia's wartime enmity with Japan, a memory which sits alongside the younger generation's acceptance of Japanese consumer goods, tourism and foreign investment in Australia.

While the road movie provided a space to explore contemporary cross-cultural encounters, the major genre which has shaped the image of Japan in Australian cinema is the World War II or Pacific War film. In *Japanese Story*, when Sandy reluctantly accepts the job as tour guide to Hiro-mitsu, one of her colleagues gives her a piece of tongue-in-cheek advice: 'don't mention the war'. But Australian cinema itself has ignored this prohibition, with a cycle of Pacific War films reclaiming the ground briefly lost to the road movie. In the Pacific War films, undisciplined or poorly-prepared Australian soldiers (and in some cases, civilians including women and children) suffer a range of indignities – from petty cruelty to war crimes – at the hands of a highly disciplined, imperial, Japanese military machine. In the decades following the end of the White Australia policy and the emergence of multiculturalism there has been a steady flow of Pacific War films and mini-series featuring Australian soldiers and civilians captured by, or in combat with, the Japanese military. With one exception, the two-part television series, *Kokoda* (broadcast nationally in 2010), the image of the Japanese in these films revives the clichés and stereotypes of wartime propaganda.

In the 1980s, the Kennedy-Miller production company made a number of historical mini-series for commercial television, including *The Cowra Breakout* (Kennedy-Miller, 1984, 10 episodes). This series dramatized the events of 5 August 1944 when Japanese soldiers escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp in an Australian country town, Cowra. Four guards were killed and 231 prisoners died from machine-gun wounds or suicide, while 334 prisoners were recaptured after nine days. The series emphasized the humane treatment of the Japanese prisoners by the Australian guards but failed to explore the motivations behind the mass breakout and suicides by the prisoners.

Cowra Breakout contrasts with two feature films and two television mini-series, each set in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp located in South East Asia. *Blood Oath* (aka *Prisoners of the Sun*, Stephen Wallace, 1990), is a courtroom drama based on a war crimes tribunal set in Ambon, Indonesia in 1945. It focuses on an attempt to hold Japanese officers responsible for the killing of 300 Australian soldiers whose bodies were discovered in a mass grave. The film highlights the conditions endured by the prisoners-of-war, the cruelty of their treatment, and the difficulty of bringing charges against the Japanese perpetrators in the immediate postwar period when the US military was pursuing a more conciliatory agenda as part of the American Occupation.

Blood Oath was followed by *Paradise Road* (Bruce Beresford, 1997) which was set in a Japanese camp for British, Australian and European women and children after the fall of Singapore. While this film also highlighted the cruel treatment of the women at the hands of the Japanese military, its main focus was on the formation of a 'voice orchestra' which united the women despite their cultural differences and personal conflicts. Under a strong orchestra leader (Glenn Close), the plot showed the women coming to terms with their dire situation by displaying the kind of discipline, courage and fortitude valued by their Japanese captors. This film's iconography of cruel treatment had much in common with the well-known 1956 film and 1981 mini-series based on Neville Shute's novel, *A Town Like Alice* (1950).

The most recent of the prisoner-of-war dramas is the television mini-series *Changi* (Kate Woods, 2001) which featured Gotaro Tsunashima in the role of Lieutenant Aso. Written by John Doyle and set in a male prisoner-of-war camp in Singapore from 1942, the series is based on the older generation's memories of what they suffered together in Changi and how these memories shaped their lives for decades after the war. The theme of traumatic, intergenerational memory of World War II was developed further in a father-son mini-series, *After the Deluge* (2003), showing the impact of the father's unacknowledged war experiences on his three adult sons.

A new addition to the Pacific War genre involved a shift from South-East Asia to Papua New Guinea in the exploitation, horror film *Kokoda* (Alister Grierson, 2006) and the two-part television documentary-drama, also called *Kokoda* (Don Featherstone 2010). The revival of the *Kokoda* story in Australian popular culture owes much to Prime Minister Keating's attempt in the 1990s to shift

the foundation of Australian nationhood from the legendary defeat of the Anzacs at Gallipoli (in Turkey in 1915) to the successful campaign fought in Papua New Guinea in 1942 by the poorly trained 39th Battalion of 500 Australian soldiers who held the line against 6000 Japanese soldiers. The battle was fought in hellish terrain along the single-file, Kokoda-to-Port Moresby track. Grierson's 2006 film, *Kokoda*, used all the devices of the horror genre to create shock and suspense as the Australian 'chocolate' soldiers (so-called because their poor training meant that they would 'melt' in the heat of battle) struggled to survive the terrors of the jungle, the weather and the enemy. The film presented Japanese soldiers as faceless aliens emerging in the labyrinthine jungle to launch sudden, horrific attacks, such as a bayonet through the eye – an image featured on the DVD cover. In sharp contrast, Featherstone's carefully researched documentary-drama series, *Kokoda* (2010), exposes the one-eyed perspective of Grierson's exploitation film. Based on the book by journalist Paul Ham, published in 2005, *Kokoda* (2010) is the first of the Pacific War films to use interviews with Japanese and Australian veterans and historians in an attempt to understand the *Kokoda* battle from the cultural perspectives of both Australia and Japan.

A further innovation in the Pacific War genre is the epic, postmodern melodrama, *Australia* (Baz Luhrmann, 2008), which incorporates the bombing of Darwin in 1942 by Japan, the first attack on Australian soil since the British colonization of Aboriginal land began in 1788. A more mundane melodrama, the ten-part HBO television series, *The Pacific* (Jeremy Podeswa, 2010), involved some location shooting in Melbourne. It was screened on a commercial network in Australia in mid-2010, and was criticized in Australia mainly for promoting the myth that the US saved Australia from invasion by Japan.

Although these war movies and mini-series feature a range of Japanese characters – from the most militaristic to the more sympathetic – the main emphasis is on the contrast between the two armies: the discipline of the imperial Japanese soldier, loyal to the Emperor, and the irreverent Australian digger, loyal to his mates. The iconography of wartime atrocity by the Japanese military is a standard feature of these films, a convention which promotes the myth of Australian youthfulness, decency and innocence. By projecting cruelty onto the Japanese military, these films failed to consider wartime atrocities committed by the Australian military, for instance, against the natives of Papua New Guinea, some of whom were executed by Australians for being recruited by the Japanese (a fact brought to public attention in Paul Ham's book, *Kokoda*).

The focus of my argument, however, is not the one-sided representations of the Japanese military in Australian films about the Pacific War. Rather my point is that we need to understand the contemporary figure of the Japanese tourist-businessman in the context of the older generation's memory of the Pacific War and the renewed, popular interest in Australia's military history in the Asia-Pacific. Two questions arise from the predominance of the Pacific War film over the road movie in the representation of Japan on Australian screens. Why did the figure of the Japanese

tourist replace the figure of the Japanese soldier in Australian cinema in three road movies released between 1997–2003? And how did this image of the Japanese tourist serve the national interest?

On the first question, the three road movies offered a new, cosmopolitan image of Japanese-Australian relations as part of the global flow of people and capital in the postwar shift to a consumer economy. In each of these films, the Japanese character is neither a soldier nor a migrant, but a lone figure on a personal journey. By taking their Japanese and Australian characters out of the city and into the vast ‘emptiness’ of the Australian outback – the road movies, *Heaven’s Burning*, *The Goddess of 1967* and *Japanese Story* – provided their characters and audiences with a breathing space from the pressure of the past. A trilogy of such films opened up a space to explore the ways in which a new generation might negotiate popular stereotypes of the Japanese ‘other’ through narratives of mutual recognition.

On the second question, the figure of the Japanese tourist, framed against the vast backdrop of the Australian outback, served the national interest in several ways. Firstly, the marketing of Australia as a tourist destination for the nation’s ‘Asian neighbours’ defuses the longstanding ‘threat’ of Asia, embodied in the White Australia policy of 1901–1973. Secondly, the image of Hiromitsu, the Japanese salaryman-tourist with his camera, and Sandy, the Australian geologist with her laptop, are globalised images of transnational relations mediated by communication technologies. The road movies offer an image of Australia, not as a nation of shearers and soldiers, but as a primary resource provider networked into a global economy – epitomized by the success of the Japanese electronics industry in the postwar period. Thirdly, the image of the Japanese tourist and his Australian guide traveling off the map, beyond mining towns and tourist destinations, offers a liminal or heterotopic space to explore cultural and other differences with a view to a less nationalistic and more cosmopolitan future for both the Japanese visitor and the Australian host.

However, the pressure of the past – in the form of latent, nationalistic feelings about the Pacific War – can still be felt in the road movie through the memories of the older generation. In the 1997 film *Heaven’s Burning*, Colin and Midori visit Colin’s father, a war veteran with an unforgiving attitude towards Japan which he expresses first to Midori and then, more strongly, to her avenging husband. In *Japanese Story*, however, the memory of the war is dealt with more lightly by a nameless character whose function in the film is to remember the war by commenting on the irony of postwar Japanese investment in Australia and Australian demand for Japanese consumer goods. This scene involves an extreme wide-shot of a glistening expanse of water, with Sandy and Hiromitsu in a small boat listening to the old-timer trying to make sense of the new order. But revising the inter-generational memory of the Pacific War is only one pre-text for the film. A recent constellation of events in Australian politics – and its impact on the landscape tradition in national cinema – is a far more pressing concern, at least for Australian audiences.

Landscape cinema, cultural nationalism and multicultural diversity

When *Japanese Story* was first conceived as an idea for a script in the mid-1990s, Australia was undergoing a shift in the cultural nationalism that had underwritten the revival of the national cinema in the 1970s. The 1970s resurgence of cultural nationalism had two elements: firstly, the desire by a new, postwar generation to assert an Australian cultural identity (in literature, theatre, music, art, cinema and television); secondly, the desire to distance Australia from both its British cultural heritage *and* its postwar alignment with American consumerism and Cold War interventions in Korea and Vietnam. The spectacular landscape films of the 1970s established Australian cinema as an arthouse cinema, as famous for its cinematographers as its actors and directors. A series of high quality, period films such as *Sunday Too Far Away*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *My Brilliant Career* and *Gallipoli*, as well as the popular films of the 1980s, *The Man From Snowy River* and *Crocodile Dundee*, reproduced a late nineteenth-century image of Australia as an Anglo-Celtic nation of shearers, soldiers, horsemen and bush battlers – white settlers defined by their relationship to the harshness of the Australian landscape.

By the 1980s, however, a political consensus had successfully redefined Australia as a European-derived, multicultural society shaped by postwar immigration from non-English speaking nations such as Italy and Greece. In response, the landscape film shifted its narrative focus from the past to the present, starting in 1979 with the *Mad Max* trilogy and culminating with *Crocodile Dundee* in 1986 – both of which succeeded in the tough international market, including the US. But it wasn't until the 'glitter cycle' of the 1990s – *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Strictly Ballroom* – that Australian landscapes (from the suburban coastal strip to the sublime void of the desert) became places that could accommodate a melting pot of ethnic, gender and sexual types. This 1990s shift in the landscape tradition opened the way for the cosmopolitan road movie with its motley collection of quirky characters – derived from but surpassing national types – most evident in the comic-book cast of Australian, Japanese, Afghani and European characters in *Heaven's Burning*. The advent of a cosmopolitan landscape cinema, however, was shortlived. The populist and quirky vision of a melting pot nation of immigrants was challenged from three directions: the 1992 *Mabo* decision on native title; the 1997 report on the Stolen Generations; and the defeat of the Republican movement in the 1999 referendum.

The Post-Mabo landscape cinema

In 1992, the High Court of Australia's *Mabo* decision on the continuity of native title caused a traumatic shift in the image of Australia as a diasporic, immigrant nation of many ethnicities gov-

erned by a British-derived state. The *Mabo* decision overthrew the colonial myth of *terra nullius* – the myth that the British Crown had taken lawful possession of ‘land belonging to no-one’ when British settlement began in 1788. This decision divided Australians into three groups in relation to the legitimacy of a nation-state founded on colonial violence: settlers with a direct link to British colonisation, recent immigrants from non-British nations, and Indigenous Australians.

A second challenge to the legitimacy of the multicultural nation-state was triggered by the release in 1997 of *Bringing Them Home*, the Human Rights report on the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families as a matter of government policy up until the 1970s. The 1992 *Mabo* decision and the 1997 report on the inhumane treatment of the Stolen Generations became part of a long-running debate, referred to as ‘the history wars,’ over two main issues: the origin of the nation in colonial violence and Aboriginal dispossession; and the need for reconciliation with Indigenous Australia. In the lead-up to the 1988 Bicentennial, Australia’s rediscovered identity as a settler colonial nation with blood on its hands, was vigorously rejected by many Australians who clung to myths of a youthful nation forged on the battlefields of the British empire, including Gallipoli, Singapore and, more recently, Kokoda. In contrast, recognising the dispossession of Indigenous peoples by colonialism from 1788, and the catastrophic impact of government policies on Aboriginal families and communities in the twentieth century, dealt a severe blow to the nation’s founding myth of a democratic, egalitarian and just society.

A third challenge to the idea of the successful, multicultural nation-state was the defeat of the 1999 referendum to cut Australia’s ties to the British Crown by becoming a republic with a new Constitution which would include recognition of Indigenous peoples and non-British settlers. The defeat of the republican movement undermined the potential of multiculturalism to deliver a vision of Australia as a settler nation-state – derived from multiple diasporas *and* reconciled with Indigenous sovereignty. However, out of this constellation of events, new political and cultural alliances emerged between Indigenous, settler and immigrant Australians around reconciliation, the republic and the treatment of asylum seekers.

After the 1992 *Mabo* decision, these alliances gave rise to new forms of landscape cinema and television drama. The first form was the revisionist historical film that recognized the nation’s founding myth of *terra nullius*, including such films as *Oscar and Lucinda*, *One Night the Moon*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, *The Proposition*, *First Australians*, *Ten Canoes* and *Australia*. The second form highlighted Indigenous perspectives in contemporary narratives, including films such as *beDevil*, *Radiance*, *Yolngu Boy*, *Beneath Clouds*, *First Australians*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Stone Bros* and *Bran Nue Dae*, along with television series such as *RAN* and *The Circuit*. A third category acknowledged the colonial past, and its impact on the present, in implicit or incidental ways. This category includes a wide range of films such as *Vacant Possession*, *Australian Rules*,

Japanese Story, *Call Me Mum*, *Lucky Miles*, *Blessed* and *Beautiful Kate*.

Together, these three categories comprise a post-*Mabo* cinema defined by the anti-colonial project of decentring the settler subjectivity of Anglo-Celtic or white Australia. This decentring of settler subjectivity takes place in post-*Mabo* cinema through ethical encounters between familiar and strange others. These encounters entail some form of mourning or grief-work for settler Australian characters who begin to recognize that their story is not the only Australian story. Defined in this way, post-*Mabo* cinema offers a new way of understanding the geographic and ethical journeys that take place in *Japanese Story* – particularly in the third Act of the film which many critics and bloggers have found so puzzling.

Ethical recognition and reparation in *Japanese Story*

In a recent discussion of *Japanese Story*, Peter Mathews (2009) resurrects the long-standing literary argument that the outback landscape is a space where deep-rooted fears of otherness have been projected by settler Australians since colonial times. Current fears of otherness are said, by Mathews, to derive from two sources: anxiety about the legitimacy of the nation, given its origin in colonialism; and ambivalence about the nation's status as a minor player in world affairs. While most critics of *Japanese Story* have emphasized the dominance of Sandy's story and the subordinate roles of Hiromitsu and his wife Yukiko, Mathews reverses this reading. For him, the film is an allegory that imagines white Australia (embodied by Sandy) as submissive and resentful in the face of Japanese arrogance and imperialism (embodied by Hiromitsu, representing his father's mining interests in Western Australia). During their trip to the desert, Mathews argues, the balance of power between Hiromitsu (in the position of 'the conquistador') and Sandy (in the position of 'the geisha') shifts to a utopian state of equality. But this utopian moment is fatally disrupted by the shock of Hiromitsu's accidental death by drowning. While many bloggers have puzzled over the reason for Hiromitsu's death (and the long finale of the film which focuses on Sandy's grief), Mathews concludes that Hiromitsu's drowning opens a narrative space for a 'revised model of human exchange' based on ethical recognition of the 'complex particularity' of human beings. While I agree that 'ethical recognition' is at stake in the film, I argue that this recognition needs to be understood in a different framework from that of individual humanism, proposed by Mathews.

The constellation of political projects around reconciliation, the republic and refugees provides a historically specific framework for interpreting *Japanese Story* as part of an anti-colonial project of ethical recognition. Since the High Court of Australia's 1992 *Mabo* decision on *terra nullius*, it has not been possible to look at the cinematic image of the Australian landscape as a source of consoling myths to resolve the anxieties of a nation that has turned a blind eye to its origins in the violent conquest of Aboriginal land. The *Mabo* decision redefined Australia as a settler colonial na-

tion comprised of two cultures/two laws. This recognition of the myth of terra nullius produced a new kind of landscape film because the landscape could no longer be understood (through the lens of colonialism) as an empty space. If the 1970s landscape film was steeped in myths of survival in an empty, untamed land, the post-Mabo landscape film is characterized by shock, shame and the unsettling of Australian identity through a particular mode of mourning or grief-work.⁸ It is this framework of shock, shame and the indulgence of grief that makes sense of the sudden shift, at the end of Act 2, that disrupts the narrative unity of *Japanese Story*.⁹

Why does a story that *begins* with a journey into the outback, *end* in shock, grief and a public apology? From *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Thelma and Louise*, the road movie has been a vehicle for *l'amour fou*, or mad love – a story that ends with the spectacular death of the ill-fated couple who have ventured too far beyond the bounds of society. While *Heaven's Burning* follows this pattern, *Japanese Story* changes the fate of the outlaw couple and opens up a space *within society* where processes of grief and remorse enable an act of reparation.

Japanese Story is structured in three Acts, each of which maps an affective and ethical stage in Sandy's journey of recognition and reparation. In each Act, this affective journey is mapped onto the geographical journey through different landscapes. These landscapes pose particular kinds of danger which must be negotiated as part of the ethical journey. The opening credit sequence features a spectacular overhead shot of the Pilbara landscape, the iron ore mining region of Western Australia. The title of the film is displayed and then dissolved, as if the story about to be told will disappear in a cloud of dust at the end of its telling. The narrative proper begins with Hiromitsu driving a hire car along an empty road in central Australia, several hours flying time from the Pilbara. He is listening to an Aboriginal band, Yothu Yindu, singing their hit song 'Treaty', a song associated with a post-Mabo politics demanding recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty. After taking a photograph of himself as a lone figure dwarfed by the landscape, Hiromitsu swaps the Yothu Yindi CD for something more familiar. The scene then cuts from the outback tourist landscape to the modern city of Perth where we are introduced to Sandy in a series of scenes with her mother, her workmates and her best friend. She is living a distracted, professional life organized around the demands of email and telephone messages. What Hiromitsu and Sandy have in common, at this point in the narrative, is their dependence on communication technology and their isolation.

Their first journey together will solve the isolation of their 'busy' lives by taking them beyond the reach of mobile phones and computer screens. On Hiromitsu's insistence, they embark on a journey that takes them from the gargantuan iron ore processing operation at Port Hedland to the

8 See Collins and Davis (2004) on the post-Mabo landscape film (75–93) and grief-work in *Japanese Story* (174–182).

9 One blogger explains the ending of the film this way: 'this movie manages to capture something very hard to describe: a state of complete shock and deepest grief. Guilt, shame and other extremely powerful emotions' (OFFOFFOFF Film, 24 June 2010).

vast ‘Mayan temple’ mine at Mount Newman, then off-road along a dirt track to a place where, according to Sandy, there is nothing to see but ‘debris and desert.’ Here, technology fails them and they are forced by circumstances to overcome their mutual antagonism and recognize their dependence on each other for survival. This recognition has to take place *before* they can work together to devise a low-technology solution in order to unbog their vehicle and return to the safety of the road.

Sandy and Hiromitsu’s escape from death at the end of Act 1 frees them up in Act 2 to undertake a detour, to review their perceptions of each other, to listen and translate for each other in a roadside cafe, to try on each other’s skin (and clothes) in bed, and then to go off-road again, deeper into the space of the outback, to a secluded waterhole. By the time they arrive at this rocky oasis, their love affair has been complicated by Hiromitsu’s admission that he has a wife and two children. This admission allows him to confess to the sadness that led him to undertake this journey ‘off the map’. But his attempt to take time out, to steal a moment away from the ‘heavy obligations’ of family and business is not without its dangers. Here, in the idyllic scene at the waterhole, the material reality of the Australian landscape becomes fatal. The spectacular vista of the desert landscape, a reified image of space and beauty captured by Hiromitsu’s camera throughout his journey, is transformed into a shocking reminder of the materiality of the natural world – for Sandy and the audience.

In their first feature film, *The Road to Nhill* (Sue Brooks, 1997), Gecko Films explored the disruption of human time and space by the accident – specifically, a car accident caused by a blinding flash of the sun. In *Japanese Story* they take this theme further. When Hiromitsu races Sandy into the waterhole, the knowing spectator is aligned with Sandy at the horrified moment when she realizes, too late, that Hiromitsu is about to take a *deep dive* into the waterhole at the exact spot where the tree has spread its deadly network of roots underwater. Hiromitsu has not grown up with the Australian habit of checking what lies beneath the surface of rivers, waterholes, lakes. Sandy’s frozen realization – of what is *about* to happen – produces a state of shock from which there seems no way (for Sandy, the spectator, or the film) to recover.

While for some critics this narrative event makes no sense, for others, the shock of Hiromitsu’s death marks the moment when the road movie’s journey of recognition takes a deeper and more ethical turn. Rather than end its story in the 1970s landscape tradition of melancholic defeat by an antipodean landscape that punishes the attempts of settler Australians to possess it *or* belong to it (exemplified by the unexplained disappearance of the schoolgirls in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*), *Japanese Story* takes this old tale in a new direction. The spectator, like Sandy, is in a state of shock that lasts for the rest of the film, but the narrative has to move forward. It does this by focusing on the demands of the material world. At the beginning of Act 3, Sandy is alone at the waterhole with Hiromitsu’s body, cut off from any form of help. Her immediate task is to grapple

with the material world, to find a physical solution to lifting Hiro's body into the back of the four-wheel drive. She will then have to endure a long journey down the highway, with the air conditioner switched to the coldest setting in order to preserve the body. Somewhere on the journey, she will have to recover her voice in order to communicate the catastrophe to strangers. A large freezer at the back of a hotel will have to serve as a morgue until the body can be transported back to Perth. In Perth, Sandy will face the most difficult task of all, that of becoming physically and ethically present in order to make a public apology for Hiromitsu's death.

Rather than entrap its characters in the unresolved melancholy of a loss that cannot be acknowledged or articulated, *Japanese Story* returns Sandy to the ordinary world, to the everyday demands of work, family and social life. It is here in this everyday world of practical tasks that Sandy has to recognize her existential situation and make an ethical choice: to stand on the sideline and let others take care of the arrangements for handing over Hiromitsu's body to his wife, Yukiko, or to step forward into the unpredictable public space of ethical responsibility. The film shows how easy it would be to stay in the background, to remain invisible and to avoid the task of fashioning an ethical response to a situation where, in the bigger picture, Sandy's personal shock, grief and guilt are of little consequence.

The final scenes of the film bring Sandy and Yukiko into the same frame – into the mundane spaces of corporate meeting rooms, reception areas and airports. In these spaces of public proximity rather than personal contact, the ethical question of recognition in the encounter between strangers, explored initially by Sandy and Hiromitsu, comes into play once more in the encounter between Sandy and Yukiko. At this point, the film poses the question: how can the encounter with 'the other' be transformed into an ethical encounter between two subjects? Orientalism offers two options: to assimilate the other as the 'same' as the self, or to objectify the other on the basis of cultural stereotypes. To some extent the film solves this dilemma through mimesis. The mimetic capacity to recognize and embody cultural difference enables Sandy to fashion an ethical response to the problem of making herself visible to Yukiko *without* putting herself at the centre of the story. To achieve this, Sandy has to find a way to compose and comport herself in relation to Yukiko – while surrounded by male colleagues and Japanese delegates. In the meeting room, at the funeral parlour and at the airport, Sandy begins to embody the gestures of stillness and composure that marked her intimate encounter with Hiromitsu – gestures that now distinguish the presence of Yukiko from that of the laidback and restless Australians. At the funeral parlour, for instance, Yukiko and her minders enter the inner room to view Hiromitsu's body. The camera, along with Sandy and her colleague Baird, remains outside the viewing room. While Baird paces the floor, talking on his mobile phone, Sandy sits quietly alert on the arm of a chair. Her stillness and attentive presence in this scene contrasts strongly, not only with Baird, but with her own impatient and distracted presence in earlier scenes.

I have argued elsewhere that one way of thinking about Sandy's new capacity for a form of self-composure which is attentive to others, might be to revisit Melanie Klein's notion of mourning as grief-work, as a work of reparation that moves the subject from numbness to affect, from guilt to love.¹⁰ Sandy begins the journey from numbness to affect, initially, through the affair with Hiromitsu. But the journey from guilt to love – from shock to reparation – begins when she takes on the full weight of responsibility for his body. The film makes us feel this dead weight, literally, as Sandy struggles to lift his body into the back of the four-wheel drive. When she reaches the first town she has no words for what has happened. Unable to communicate, with night falling, she parks beside the river, washes the mud from Hiromitsu's body and dresses him as best she can. Only then can she drive through the night to another town and ask for help. Her colleague, Baird, take over the arrangements, telling Sandy to take a break – she's done a good job. Although Hiromitsu's story now passes into the hands of his wife, Sandy's work of bearing witness to his death is not complete until she formally admits her guilt and remorse. Sandy has to struggle against protocol and against pragmatic arrangements in order to create a moment – at the airport departure gate – when she can step forward, take responsibility and express remorse, adopting a modicum of Yukiko's composure (and a few halting phrases in Japanese) to do so. The film shows how easy it would be *not* to take that step.

Although the point-of-view of the final shot belongs to Sandy, the final words of the film belong to Hiromitsu: 'today I stand in the desert . . . and my heart is open.' But Sandy only comes into possession of these words because Yukiko accepts her public apology. Yukiko is able to do this because she recognizes (in the photographs of Sandy and Hiromitsu together at the waterhole) that something happened between her husband and this stranger who is now accepting responsibility for his accidental drowning. In making the apology, Sandy has demonstrated the ethical capacity to become a minor player in Yukiko and Hiromitsu's larger story. In turn, Yukiko demonstrates the ethical capacity to become a minor player in Sandy and Hiromitsu's brief encounter. This capacity to decentre ourselves from the stories of those who come into proximity with us, yet remain strangers to us, is an ethical capacity that is affirmed by the way the film draws its narrative to an end.

In conclusion, I want to draw what might seem to some readers a long bow by connecting the politics of reconciliation with Sandy's ethical obligation to recognize Yukiko as a subject in her own right – to show remorse and accept guilt without diminishing Yukiko's grief and loss. Allegorically, Sandy's ethical dilemma raises this question: how might the nation come to terms with the violence of its colonial past, its exclusionary White Australia policy, and its wartime enmity with Japan in a way that recognizes those who have been dispossessed by, excluded from, or de-

10 Here, I revise and extend my argument in Collins and Davis (181–2).

monised by the nation? Ross Gibson argues that a mature citizenship ‘attains composure’ through processes of ‘realisation’ which enable participation ‘in the complex dynamics of social and historical obligation’ (160–1). It is the ‘opening of the heart’ to these processes of ‘realisation’ that I take to be the unexpected move which connects *Japanese Story* to a politics of reconciliation which does not attempt to assimilate the other.

From a post-Mabo perspective, *Japanese Story* can be interpreted as a film about Australia learning ‘composure’ from an encounter with Japan. But why ‘Japan’? Is it because of the unique place of Japan in the Australian social imaginary as a result of the Pacific War? Or is it because of the postwar importance of Japan to Australia as a trading partner? Perhaps it is precisely the disparity between wartime enmity and postwar partnerships that makes ‘Japan’ a fertile figure of otherness or alterity for Australian cinema as it rethinks settler-Indigenous relations in the post-Mabo era.

If this is the case, then the question we might end with, here, is whether or not Hiromitsu and Yukiko transcend the role of mere ciphers of alterity for Australia, represented by Sandy. My argument is that Hiromitsu and Yukiko bring the ‘difference’ of Japan into proximity with the ‘specificity’ of Australia. The proximity of this other cultural matrix decentres the Australian story. As the final scenes of the film suggest, there are other stories happening elsewhere, beyond the horizon of this film, this national cinema. What cinema can do is touch us, open us, make us receptive to these other stories. Perhaps this is not enough for critics who feel affronted by the film’s cultural stereotypes and appropriations, but, in my view, the opened heart of the Japanese salaryman, and the ethical grace of his widow, offer important alternatives to the predominant image of the Japanese soldier in the Australian social imaginary. The film’s layered ending – interweaving Yukiko’s departure, Sandy’s restricted field of vision, the reprise of the Okinawan song, and Hiromitsu’s posthumous voice-over – leaves the viewer with a powerful sense of the fragility and specificity of national identities, tested and blurred in the processes of cultural translation and ethical encounter.

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