Asian Identities in Films

Exploring Representations of Asian Identities in Films for the Australian Curriculum

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Abstract: In this paper we focus on one facet of Asia literacy and examine the potential of intercultural understanding through two films about Asians in Australia, as the basis for exploring Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia ‘inside’ and not through the more accepted mode of ‘outside’ the nation. In doing so we foreground how teachers’ critical and imaginative curriculum work can realise some of the promises of the framing document for the current national curriculum project, the Melbourne Declaration (MCEECDYA, 2008). In particular, we focus on opportunities for young people to develop an Asia-related cultural literacy that goes beyond instrumental notions of engagement with Asia and explore the evolving nature of contemporary Australian society; a society that continues to develop in response to regional flows and interactions with people and cultures. To this end we engage with the notion of ‘diasporic hybridity’ as a dynamic cultural space through selected films and literature, about Asia in Australia, in particular, Bondi Tsunami (Lucas, 2004) and Footy Legends (Do, 2006) and selected prose works. Our paper introduces the policy background of the Australian Curriculum and suggests multimodal, English classroom applications for the films and literature under study.

Introduction

Teachers in some Australian states and territories are currently implementing the Australian Curriculum: English (2013) as part of the federal government’s education reform agenda. This new curriculum has been discursively positioned by the statutory body responsible for its development and implementation, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), in terms of producing a high quality curriculum that is accessible to all young Australians, regardless of their socio-economic background or specific school context. The agreed policy which informs the Australian curriculum project, and other national and state initiatives, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA), (2008) makes clear that young people need to not only acquire knowledge, understandings, skills and dispositions to be culturally and socially aware, but also to develop a global perspective. It also stipulates that young Australians need to become Asia literate, or culturally informed about Asia and that ‘engaging and building strong relationships with Asia’ (MCEECDYA, 2008, p. 4) is important as the influence of nations such China and India, amongst others in the region, increases.

Whilst the push for Asia literacy is not new (Henderson, 2012), it has emerged as a mandated component in the Australian Curriculum as one of three Cross Curriculum Priorities, namely ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’. Furthermore, the new curriculum has positioned a broad emphasis on intercultural understanding as one of seven general capabilities for young
Australians; and by implication, as teachers implement the English curriculum they will draw from the Cross Curriculum Priorities and the General Capabilities. We contend first, that teachers are not merely the ‘passive receptacles of policy’ (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 5) but rather, they ‘make’ policy come alive in classrooms. Second, as Australia continues to evolve from its white-settler colonial past into a nation transformed through waves of migration and by interactions with other cultures through people-to-people contacts such as tourism, we argue that young people need to engage with the processes and cultural products of contemporary Australia as a postcolonial immigrant society in the English classroom. In this paper we focus on one facet of Asia literacy and explore the potential of intercultural understanding in ways that challenge the instrumentalism that is common in much of the discourse about seizing the Asian century as the means of securing Australia’s strategic and economic ends. In this discourse, the Australian insider is required to access and manage a stereotyped and reified Asian other or outsider in order to achieve the nation’s economic objectives in the region. Following the work of post colonialist theorists (Bhabha, 1995) in challenging homogenised notions of others, we explore the genre of film review as a space to encounter the dynamics of cultural interaction and exchange. In particular, we focus on two films about Asians in Australia, as the basis for exploring Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia inside and not through the taken-for-granted mode of outside the nation in ways that go beyond the traditional genre of a written film review. In doing so we foreground how teachers’ critical and imaginative curriculum work can realise the promises of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEECDYA, 2008), as the framing document for the current national curriculum project, and provide opportunities for young people to explore the evolving nature of contemporary Australian society – a society that continues to evolve in response to regional flows and interactions with people and cultures. To this end we engage with the notion of what Miller (2009) terms ‘diasporic hybridity’ (p. 9) and how identities are culturally and socially dynamic, through selected films and literature, about Asia in Australia, in particular, Bondi Tsunami (Lucas, 2004) and Footy Legends (Do, 2006), and selected prose works. Our paper introduces the policy background of the Australian Curriculum and suggests multimodal classroom applications beyond the written film review, for the films and literature under study.

**Background: Asia and Asia literacy**

For more than forty years, a range of policy documents and government reports have advocated that Australians need to engage with the nations of Asia. The 1970 Auchmuty Report noted that ‘more than half the population can go through secondary school without any systematic study of Asian affairs’ (Auchmuty, 1970, p. 89) and emphasised that Australia needed to reappraise its traditional attitudes towards Asia and that this should be addressed in the curriculum. Similarly, in 1988 the Asian Studies Council’s seminal report, the National Strategy stressed that ‘the proper study of Asia and its languages is about national survival in an intensely competitive world’ (Asian Studies Council, 1988, p. 2) and that a ‘revolution in our education’ (p. 3) was necessary so that Australians could require Asia-related skills. Indeed, Asia literacy was prioritised as necessary for Australia’s integration with the Asian region in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commissioned report, Asian Languages and Australia’s Economic Future (Rudd, 1994) (Henderson, 2008). Such engagement was advanced in terms of Australia’s national interest and policy documents following the 1970 Auchmuty Report reflect intersecting strategic, economic, political, social and cultural responses to globalisation and regionalisation (Henderson, 2008). For example, the significance of Asia for Australia’s future in a globalising world was emphasised by the peak body representing Australian scholars of Asia, the Asian Studies Association of Australia. Its 2002 report stressed that ‘the forces of globalisation will lead Australia to interact increasingly with the countries of Asia’ (2002, p. xvi). Moreover, engagement with Asia has become increasingly significant in the discourse of the knowledge economy (Dale, 2005) in Australia and notable in the debates about what should be included and emphasised in the first national curriculum. As Pang (2005) observed with reference to the efforts to foster Asia literacy in nations such as Canada and the USA, including Australia, ‘the emerging thinking is that the capacity of a nation to remain competitive globally depends on whether its citizens are educated and sufficiently skilled for work in the future, and not on capital and technology as before’ (p. 161).

In this sense, the Melbourne Declaration’s call for Asia literacy reflects the degree to which curricula are made responsive to securing a nation’s broader policy goals as it marks the first occasion that Asia literacy has been incorporated in a statement on the national
goals for schooling in Australia. This emphasis on Asia was reinforced in October 2012 with the release of the Australian Government’s report Australia in the Asian Century (Australian Government, 2012) which, amongst other recommendations, positions the education system as being significant for Australia’s engagement with the countries of Asia. As a White Paper, this commissioned report serves as a statement of government policy and it will receive attention from all sectors of government as well as the corporate sector. However, in noting this instrumental emphasis we caution that the term ‘Asia’ is open to contestation (Broinowski, 1992) as it can be defined with reference to varying linguistic, cultural, religious, historical and geographical perspectives. Some argue that ‘Asia’ is a European creation, brought into being ‘for European purposes’ (Ryckmans, 1993, p. 182) and by extension, the term ‘Asia’ has been frequently been appropriated, reified or ‘fixed’ in policy documents ‘to imply that Asia, or at least the knowledge of Asia, is in some sense a possession of the West’ (Milner & Johnson, 2002, p. 2). Others warn of the homogenising effects of its generic connotations and that ‘to assume a fundamentally static notion of Asia is to overlook the vast differences that exist within Asia across region, class, gender, religion and politics’ (Rizvi, 1997, p. 21). In the current curricula discourse in Australia, the term Asia literacy implies the acquisition of knowledge and understanding about Asia as young people learn about and understand aspects of the histories, geographies, art and literatures of the diverse countries of the region (Asian Education Foundation, 2011). Those skills and dispositions that stem from such knowledge and understanding are considered critical for Asia literacy so that students develop the capacity to engage with at least one national culture in the Asian region.

Following the imperatives of the Melbourne Declaration, advocates of positioning Asia literacy in the curriculum, also referred to as ‘the Asia priority’, argue that students need to develop Asia-related knowledge, understandings, skills and dispositions to deal with the opportunities presented by growing regional engagement with Asia, and to negotiate the challenges posed by those stereotypes and misconceptions evident in Australian and in Asian societies (Henderson, 2012). Thus, it is hoped that an ‘Asia-engaged’ young Australian will develop ‘intercultural skills and understandings to participate in, learn from, contribute to and engage confidently in diverse cultural environments at home and abroad’ (Asian Education Foundation, 2011, p. 9). Given contemporary Australia’s ethnic richness, increasing levels of cultural diversity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), and its shift from a post-war policy emphasis on cultural assimilation, we argue that the capacity to foster intercultural skills through the Asia priority ‘at home’ will become even more significant in Australian classrooms. Prior to articulating the theoretical constructs we deploy to position our reading of Asia literacy through two films made about Asians in Australia, the next part of the paper addresses the challenges to conceptualising what Asia literacy might mean for Australian students.

Challenges to exploring Asia in the curriculum

The most recent National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools notes the potential influence of nations such as India, China and other Asian nations and contends that ‘Asia literacy provides our young people with a competitive edge in today’s world and contributes to our national advantage’ (AEF, 2011, p. 2). As noted earlier in the paper, within the architecture of the Australian Curriculum, the Asia priority can be achieved through the Cross Curriculum Priority of Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and also through the General Capability of intercultural understanding. Intercultural understanding is defined in the fourth iteration of the online curriculum with reference to students ‘learning to value and view critically their own cultural perspectives and practices and those of others through their interactions with people, texts and contexts across the curriculum’ (ACARA, 2013b) and the current version identifies the dispositions of empathy, respect and responsibility as critical to the development of intercultural understanding in the curriculum. The Cross Curriculum Priority Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, is to be addressed where it is considered appropriate through subject-specific knowledge and understanding in each of the specified discipline areas in the curriculum. Hence under the national curriculum framework the Cross Curriculum Priorities are to be taught across the designated learning areas in the curriculum, as are the General Capabilities.

However, as learning about Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia previously has received limited attention in the largely Eurocentric, or Anglocentric Australian education system, the pursuit of Asia literacy and the development of intercultural understanding in the new curriculum, present some challenges to
established practice. One of the legacies of the dominance of Western colonial frameworks has been their impact on the teaching profession, for such frameworks emphasised static and reified notions of culture. At the level of the classroom, in the past, Australian school children developed a view of the world dominated by European, and more recently, North American narratives and traditions in the English curriculum. In this world view, Asia was often appropriated as ‘Other’ against a normative ‘West’. Hence, whilst it is timely to take up the opportunity to *situate* the study of Asia as a significant component of the first national curriculum, achieving Asia literacy presents challenges as young Australians need to be cognisant of various narratives about Asia and Australia as they develop their capacity to think critically and creatively about the different cultures of the region. Indeed, philosophers have grappled with challenges of understanding ‘the Other’ for many years. According to Theunissen (1984):

> (f)ew issues have expressed as powerful a hold over the thought of this century as that of ‘The Other’. It is difficult to think of a second theme … that has provoked as widespread an interest as this one … the problem of the other has never penetrated as deeply as today into the foundations of philosophical thought – the questions of the other cannot be separated from the most primordial questions raised by modern thought. (p. 1)

With specific reference to theorising the ways in which the West attempted to construct the Orient in terms of what it desired from it, Edward Said (1978/1991) contemplated:

> (h)ow does one represent another culture? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilisation) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (where one discusses one’s own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the ‘other’)? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politico-historical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, ‘normality’, and even the status of ‘natural’ truth? (pp. 325–326)

Hall, Gieben, and Open’s (1992) extension of Said’s (1978/1991) notion of *Orientalism*, reminds us of the dangers inherent in adopting a homogenised notion of culture as the basis for viewing and imagining non-Western ‘Others’. However, as Milner and Johnson (2002) note, binary and essentialising constructions are not the sole domain of the West, and are also evident in various national discourses. Mindful of such binaries, we contend that a neglected aspect of Asia literacy in policy rhetoric is its potential to build the capacity of young people to view culture as dynamic and to embrace cultural and social possibilities by engaging with people who have migrated to Australia from Asia and are now part of contemporary Australian postcolonial immigrant society, as well as the increasing numbers of tourists who visit Australia from the countries of Asia. Moreover, we suggest that teachers need to be mindful that the ‘inclusion of Asia literacy’ approaches need to be theorised and adapted without reification, for as Pang (2005, p. 194) indicated, earlier efforts to embed Asia literacy in Australia, and in nations such as Canada and the USA, were shaped, if not ‘fixed’, through a ‘settled identity … in terms of policy or subject status’. We contend that young people need to engage with more nuanced, dynamic and cosmopolitan notions of identity and of culture as the basis for achieving the sort of Asia literacy foregrounded in the 21st century aspirations of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEECDYA, 2008). In the following part of the paper we draw from and extend the postcolonial scholarship of Bhabha’s (1995) notion of hybridity, in which the ‘denied’ knowledges of ‘Others’ enter the dominant discourse creating a ‘hybrid’ which is neither ‘one’ or the ‘Other’ but contests the space of both.

We argue that whilst negotiating Asia literacy can be challenging, the architecture of the new curriculum presents many opportunities and in this sense we explore the potential of film in dynamic and shifting ways to engage with cultural frameworks to theorise culture and identity as the basis for developing Asia literacy in the classroom. To this end we view the English curriculum as a key site where ‘cultural imaginaries are produced, contested, or transformed’ (Lin, 2012, p. 170) as young people explore the ways in which Asians from ‘outside’ (tourists) and ‘inside’ (migrants) are represented in Australians films. In limiting our discussion to tourists and migrants as categories to engage with in this paper, we are not proposing they are representative, rather that groups such as refugees and asylum seekers are the subject of another paper. As Lo (2000, p. 156) reminds us, there is much to learn from a ‘processual identity formation characterised by instability and hybridity.’

We will discuss exploring film in the junior secondary classroom as the means to encourage young people to respond imaginatively to Australian films about Asian identities. In English this means drawing on both critical and aesthetic faculties, that is to say,
creative and critical thinking, which is one of the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum. As the Australian Curriculum: English, (AC:E), states, ‘(s)tudents use intercultural understanding to comprehend and create a range of texts, that present diverse cultural perspectives and to empathise with a variety of people and characters in various cultural settings’ (ACARA, 2013c).

We will draw on the theoretical concept of diasporic hybridity through a postcolonial lens and ask students to reconstruct Asian identities against the stereotypical. In this paper we explore diasporic hybridity as applied to cultural identity in films representing and reconstructing new Asian identities in Australia.

Hybridity is both a norm and a strength of progressive forces … (t)he interdependence generated in today’s migrant world may shift us ‘from a time of succession to a time of coexistence’ (Bruno Latour, with Kastrissianakis, 2007), a site where historicity and commonality prevail and we are all mixed in a self conscious and self confident way that transcends the bigotry of nationalism.

This also suggests the need for a more hybrid means of interpreting cultural objects … because texts accrue and attenuate meanings on their travels as they rub up against, trope and are trooped by other texts and the social, we must consider all the shifts and shocks that characterise their existence as cultural commodities … (i)t seems to me that this is the way to inhabit diasporic hybridity as a denizen and a reader. (Miller, 2009, p. 12)

With this suggestion in mind, let us now turn to two very different films about Asian identities in Australia which explore cultural objects in their making as well as in their representations of cultural identities through character, narrative and the trope of sport. The two films represent cosmopolitan, contemporary Asian identities in Australia. The first film is a complex exploration of the culturally syncretic identities of young Japanese tourists through surfing. The second film is less complex in its exploration of the lives of marginalised young men of various ethnic hybrid identities bonding through football.

Films representing Asian identities in Australia: Bondi Tsunami and Footy Legends

Bondi Tsunami (Lucas, 2004) is an ‘indie’ film, written and directed by an Australian Rachael Lucas. The title emerges from the wave of Japanese tourist surfers visiting Australia. This film is a hybrid text; part hyperreal, satirical road trip in an old EK Holden station wagon, and part music video. Director Lucas combines a culturally syncretic approach to Japanese pop culture and Australian surfing culture. Bondi Tsunami was the brainchild of Rachael Lucas and her small crew of relatives who wrote, directed, shot, and marketed the film themselves. Bondi Tsunami was shot as a video, originally to be viewed on large television screens in public places. When it was first released in cinemas, however, to highly positive public approval it caused a media frenzy, which gave it cult status. The DVD extras reveal that the filmmaking in Bondi Tsunami resembles the process that a news or documentary crew would deploy when shooting a news story on location; with a digital camera in natural light. The result is an interesting blend of cinematic styles, which encompasses elements of a series of Haute couture, ultracamp, fashion shoots, accompanied by music and the occasional dialogue in Japanese and English. The mise en scene incorporates iconic aspects of both Japanese culture and kitsch alongside Australian clichés and stereotypes, tourist and landmarks. The characters resemble Japanese dolls and they move both on water and land with a particularly Japanese, theatrical hyperbole, which results in the film’s unique comic style and blended visual design. As a hybrid form this film unsettles the viewer by ‘focusing on the process of negotiation and contestation between cultures’ (Lo, 2000, p. 153) which explores quite deliberately and profoundly the temporary, cultural hybridity of the Japanese tourist in Australia.

The film’s unconventional narrative structure echoes the surreal meanderings of the central character’s mind. Shark (Taki Abe), an insomniac, chain smoking asthmatic is part surfer tourist and part samurai warrior. The other characters ‘picked up’ on his road trip represent aspects of Shark’s personality. He sets off on his road trip by first picking up a Japanese friend, Yuto (Kieta Abe) from the airport. Yuto is a comic book caricature, however, he also symbolises a shadow aspect of Shark’s alter ego, since Shark’s uber cool exterior may yet hide a hyperactive, impulsive comedian.

The small film crew and meagre budget shot on one camera, often in one ‘take,’ meant the sound was often captured separately. Bondi Tsunami is like a Music Television (MTV) feature film, where no one bursts into song, however, the interesting soundtrack unique to each character echoes their sentiments at specific points in the narrative. The two young men, Shark and Yuto pick up a young Japanese hitchhiker, the kitsch souvenir-collecting Kimiko, (Miki Sasaki) whose heightened Hirajuku outfits become more bizarre as the trip and the film progresses. Kimiko is part femme
fatale, manga character and part kewpie doll. She symbolically represents Shark’s desire and combines Japanese femme fatale with the vulnerable appeal of a cute, immature young girl. Attention-seeking Kimiko is attracted to Shark, but his cool ego rejects her and she tries to make him jealous by flirting with the uncontrolled Yuto. If Kimiko represents Shark’s desire, the scene where she invokes akogare (yearning or longing) for him and rejection by him, is a particularly Japanese concept. In contrast to this and the submissive, tiny geisha steps she takes running after the car through various locations, a ‘reverse orientalism’ (Mitchell, 2000) is enacted when Kimiko gets Yuto’s attention by competing with him and beating him in various physical and sporting activities. Whilst this may appear non-stereotypical of Japanese male-female relationships, it is common in Japanese Anime (a Japanese graphic novel form) and Manga (a Japanese animation film form) for some female characters to be very powerful indeed (Norriss, 2000). She also tries to appeal to the final character on the road trip, the magical Ganja Man (Nobuhisa Ikeda). The mute, expressionless, dreadlocked Ganja Man represents the shaman in any culture, who can transport himself to another place instantly, like an Aboriginal man of high degree. If we read all the characters as an aspect of Shark’s existential self examination, perhaps this character symbolises Shark’s fear of death and the inexpressible aspect of his personality.

Shark’s complex character is contradictory and fluid, he occupies a third, ‘ambivalent’ space where the Japanese surfer tourist and haiku poet blends with behaviour more recognisable as ‘typically’ Australian. As an identity portrait, Shark represents a study of cultural hybridity which offers an ambivalent construction of masculinity. In the first part of the film the two characters, Yuto and Shark impersonate mainstream, Australian ‘blokes,’ by engaging in ironic activities, including drinking beers in the RSL club, dancing in a club, eating Nutri-Grain, smelling Vegemite, consuming fish and chips straight from the wrapping paper by the beach, playing football and teasing each other physically as they walk to the water with their surf boards. In this way the film contests essential and stereotypical notions of homogeneous or monocultural masculinity. Instead of seeing Asian identity through Western eyes, here the situation is reversed and we are invited to see Australia through Asian lenses. The other male character in the film, Ganja Man, represents Shark’s dark, side, magically appearing in front of various significant landmarks along the eastern coast of Australia including tourist attractions such as the ‘big’ prawn; sheep; pineapple; cow; and even a big rock facsimile of Uluru. The director explains in the extras that this ‘big’ tourist attraction phenomenon is not only representing Australian kitsch but also stands for a particularly Japanese pop culture aesthetics associated with Manga, in which everything is depicted as hyper-real, where grass is super green, the characters are caricatured and the landscapes are huge. In this way, Queensland’s ‘The Big Pineapple’ is like a temple where Ganja Man pays homage to Kimiko, ironically, with a small pineapple offering.

The road trip’s destination, the Gold Coast, is like the paradisiacal Emerald City of Oz. The various settings as well as other filmic, TV and popular cultural intertextual references abound and this may be the most interesting aspect of this film to study in schools. The filmic style is particularly culturally syncretic (Hall, 1989) and hybridised, blending a pastiche of intertextual references. There are references to other films and television, such as the soap series, ‘Home and Away’ (Bateman, 1988-) will be easily accessible to secondary students. Also familiar would be the references to the coming of age, proto-feminist surfing film Puberty Blues, directed by Bruce Beresford originally in 1981 and reprinted for DVD (Beresford, 1981/2003), and which has recently been adapted for TV on the Channel 10 network (Banks & Edwards, 2012). Young people could also recognise references to Japanese popular culture through Japanese video games, and through accessing Manga and Anime (Mitchell, 2000). Some of the earlier filmic references may have to be explained, by teachers, such as the coming of age Australian film, The Year my Voice Broke (Duigan, 1987) which is referenced in the school uniform sequence where Kimiko flirts with Yuto at the beach. The surfing beach setting has an obvious parallel in Puberty Blues, which is also echoed in the sexist scene, where Kumiko is sent into the shop to buy fast food for the boys who wait in the car and then drive off and leave her behind. It could be argued that the libertine way the girls act in Puberty Blues renders it a feminist text, which also parallels the way Kimiko beats Yuto in terms of physical prowess. The actual surfing scenes reference 1970s Australian surfing films, now available on DVD, such as The Endless Summer (Brown & Brown, 2010) and The Morning of the Earth, (Ellick & Falzon, 2003).

The film also deploys elements of Japanese fantasy film conventions, such as Ganja Man’s ability to
instantly manifest in various locations, and Kimiko ‘s ability to magically appear, running in very high heels through different landscapes as she chases the boys in the car, carrying a tray of fast food. Other stylistic genres are also blended in the filmic deployment of advertising conventions, and Japanese *Manga* and *Anime*. Although the latter two forms would no doubt be too morally transgressive to study in schools, cosmopolitan Australian young people are nevertheless aware of these Japanese popular culture forms (Norris, 2000) and indeed may refer to them in terms of negotiating sub-cultural hybrid identities within themselves and with fellow fans.

**Bondi Tsunami: Multimodal classroom applications**

There is a myriad of possible ways of responding to film that go beyond the traditional film review, which is more receptive than productive, since it relies more on critical and persuasive analysis than creative or imaginative response. Most of the suggestions here also deploy Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), in the creation of multimodal texts, which is another AC:E General Capability. The AC:E glossary (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013a) definition of multimodal is, ‘a combination of two or more communication modes; for example, print, image and spoken text, as in film or computer presentations’. In terms of the cross curriculum priority of Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, in English, students draw on knowledge of the Asia region, including literature, to influence and enhance their own creative pursuit. They develop communication skills that reflect cultural awareness and intercultural understanding’ (ACARA, 2013c). The film *Bondi Tsunami* would be suitable for study in advanced Year 10, 11 or 12 classes in a unit on Australian cultural identity and/ or icons. The comparison of cultural artefacts, and youth popular culture could be an interesting study as many young Australian people are familiar with Japanese aesthetics through *Manga* and *Anime* as well as video games (Norris, 2000). Australian identity in literature and popular culture is a popular unit theme in English classrooms. Instead of concentrating on Australian stereotypes through the often studied and much loved films such as *The Castle* (Sitch, 1997), *Bondi Tsunami* offers an interesting alternative which integrates the study of Asian identity in Australia. Activities could range from tracing through the references to Australian icons and Japanese film conventions to mapping the film’s stylistic use of advertising conventions, as well as exploring the intertextual connections between the various popular cultural traditions.

*Bondi Tsunami* would also be interesting to study as an unconventional non-linear narrative. This lends itself to the production of digital, recreative, multimodal, textual responses to gaps in the film’s narrative. A multimodal response in the form of a digital story or blog would be a fitting way to respond to the identity concepts in the film. The idea of central characters with alter egos would be familiar to students through popular culture superheroes from recent films, based on iconic comic books. Students could consider the ways in which the story and characters would be different if an alternative sub culture was selected. Students might also investigate what specific aspects of Australian and Japanese identities are being represented and being satirised in the film and they could employ both critical and creative thinking to present these observations as a multimodal speech. Since the film’s aesthetic style borrows elements from many popular cultural traditions, such as the spaghetti western, karaoke videos and Japanese and Australian pop iconography, it can be read as a satire of a series of highly contrived popular western clichés. Tracing these popular culture elements through could be an interesting critical exercise in itself and could be written about in various persuasive forms contextualised within film blogs or online popular culture sites.

Although this film probably suffers from being too long, *Bondi Tsunami* could be studied in segments, for its masterful editing and colour control, by the film’s editor, Michael Jones. Like most music videos, this feature length video was mastered in the edit suite, and the post production drives the unconventional narrative. This film might also sit in a unit on representations or semiotics of advertising and how these are different across cultures. Director Lucas plays on the idea that surfing culture is used to sell everything in Australia and a great many advertising conventions are actually deployed in the film. Lucas (2004), suggests, ‘it is a very Japanese idea that the style of a product is more important than the substance’ and this is also common in western advertising. Responding to this aspect of the film could result in students constructing a story board and/ or making a film trailer. Since the whole film resembles a ‘mash up’, this is an appropriate way to ask students to respond to it. There are many examples of film trailer ‘mash ups’ on Youtube and indeed the assessment cache on the AC:E website
shows some film trailer samples (ACARA, 2013c).

Students could also explore creating a ‘mash up’ narrative subtext which combines conventions of one genre with those of another. What could Yuto, Kimiko or Ganja Man, who are often silent voices in the film, be thinking or saying in various scenes? Students could also take freeze frames from the DVD and capture them as still images and provide speech bubbles and narratives which explore the character’s thoughts – and comic strip or story board an alternative scene. Students studying a film unit could trace how the soundtrack echoes each of the characters’ internal feelings. The film’s techniques could model how to create a soundscape design for a different text, such as a poem or a series of original poems. Students could work with their own compositions or those of an established poet such as Ouyang Yu (Yu, 1995) or stories, in particular those by Asian Australians, such as the various writers in Alice Pung’s collection (Pung, 2008). Using Shark’s monologues as an inspiration, students could take an introspective character from a novel or play and create a PhotoStory narrative, working with images, a spoken and a music soundtrack and uploaded to a school’s intranet. One example could be the short story Tourism by Chinese-born Australian, Ben Law, in which his separated parents insisted on taking their children to theme parks.

For parents raising five children, theme parks made so much sense. They were clean. They were safe. There were clear designated activities, and auditory and visual stimuli that transcended barriers of race, language and age. Also you could buy lots of useless s*** (Law, 2008, p. 147).

This last reference to tourist consumption is exactly what Kimiko does in Bondi Tsunami and echoes many of the kitsch tourist places visited by the Bondi Tsunami characters. Segments of the short story, Tourism, (Law, 2008) could be transformed into a spoken monologue with a narration and soundtrack. Original poetry written by students on their own cultural backgrounds could be created with visuals using simple programs such as PowerPoint, or Photo Story 3, after semiotic study (Dezuanni & Jetnikoff, 2008). These suggestions for classroom applications follow the substantive notion that students learn about film very effectively by physically engaging in elements of production (Sefton-Green, 2012). This is a more effective way of understanding how moving images create meaning than just theoretically analysing and writing about them in print based forms. Students are assessed across both receptive and productive modes in the Australian Curriculum. In this paper we encourage students to respond to media texts by making media texts (Dezuanni & Jetnikoff, 2011): to imaginatively produce, rather than merely analytically ‘receive’ texts.

Footy Legends

Footy Legends (Do, 2006) is the second Australian film which could be utilised to explore aspects of Asia through culture and identity in the secondary school curriculum. The themes of hybrid identity and masculinity are explored rather differently in this feature film collaboration between brothers Khoa Do (Director) and Ahn Do (lead actor and Producer). Footy Legends is a feel-good film based around the notion of displaced families staying together at all costs. Young Vietnamese-Australian, Luc Vu (Ahn Do), is trying to care for his much younger sister, Anne (Lisa Saggars), in Western Sydney. Their grandfather is in aged care, and these two siblings have bonded since the death of their mother. In spite of having lost his job due to a factory closure, Luc does his best to care for his sister, even taking her to job interviews. When Luc is accused of neglectful guardianship, and Social Services threaten to take Anne into care, Luc deploys desperate measures to try to keep his sister with him. Luc’s dream of making money through football success emerges as the only solution, so he marshalls his erstwhile local Yagoona High School team, which he once captained.

There are comparisons to be made here between Bondi Tsunami and Footy Legends in terms of representations of masculinity and cultural identities. The Japanese tourists in Bondi Tsunami take on unlikely ‘Aussie Bloke’ behaviours such as drinking beer in the RSL and kicking a football, in Footy Legends. The young men in this film are all Australian citizens who have grown up with Australian male behaviours. The team of AFL football players are bonded by being working class, and unemployed and represent various hybrid ethnic identities, including Shane (Shane Mc Donald) who is Indigenous-Australian, Donald (Tristan Fereti) who is South Sea Islander, Walid (Paul Nakad) is Lebanese, Luc (Ahn Do) is Vietnamese, and Terry (Steven Rooke), Boof (Jason McGoldrick) and Lloydy (Angus Sampson) have Anglo, Scottish and Welsh names respectively. The players are also depicted as marginal to powerful, mainstream masculine Australian stereotypes by their behavioural and physical characteristics. Boof has a history of drug abuse,
Shane is morbidly obese, Terry is skinny and ‘geeky’ and Luc’s best friend, Lloydy is described as being ‘too soft to join the army’ (Do, 2006). These young men are all potentially socially marginalised characters, whose bond in the game brings them together to escape from long term unemployment, poverty and obscurity. In this sporting context, however, as in the film Australian Rules (Goldman, 2002) based on the Phillip Gwynne novels, Deadly Unna (Gwynne, 1998) and Nukkin Ya (Gwynne, 2000), the game of football represents an escape from small town obscurity and social invisibility for the male central characters. It seems that this archetypal way of expressing Australian masculinities offers talented but aggressive sportsmen a means to success. 

This film is more than a narrative about winning a football game, however, as Luc is spotted by a talent scout who offers him a full time job playing for the opposing team. Accepting this job could result in an easy victory and more importantly an ability to keep his sister in his care. He has to make an ethical decision to either take the position on the opposing team job or back his team and potentially lose the game. This would also mean losing a lucrative advertising contract with Lowes, which would jeopardise his guardianship of his sister, Anne.

At one comical point in Footy Legends, when all seems lost and Luc is exercising his leadership as captain of the Yagoona team, he says to his team mates, ‘we don’t have jobs, we can’t do maths, we can’t spell for s***. If we’re ever going to do anything for anyone in our lives, it’s this’ (Do, 2006). Playing sport is a way for young men to be accepted in Australia and is echoed in the Goldman (2002) film, Australian Rules, as well as Do’s autobiography, The Happiest Refugee (Do, 2010). Like Luc, the character he plays in Footy Legends, Ahn Do participated in every sport he could at school, but unlike Luc, the Do brothers in real life excelled academically and were awarded scholarships to study at a private school. Diasporic hybridity reveals itself in Ahn’s memoir in that he conceals part of his identity from his school friends. This Vietnamese-born Australian discloses the poverty which forced him to wear ‘improvised uniforms’, and to pretend that he had left his unaffordable text books at home, borrowing from his friends. As Do ambivalently explains in Chapter 7 (2010, p. 75):

St Aloysius was a great school. But what caused a lot of discomfort for Khoa and I was the socioeconomic mismatch of our private school expenses, versus our single mum’s wages. We were on half scholarships, which helped, but even with fifty per cent off the fees, it was a massive struggle.

The idea of struggle is central to the history of the depiction of the ‘battler’ in Australian culture. Australians do seem to identify in the cultural imaginary with those who struggle, and cut down ‘tall poppies’. As the commentator in Footy Legends says at the opening of the grand final, ‘We gotta back the underdog, ‘cause that’s the Australian way’ (Do, 2006). Even though the Do brothers have emerged from poverty and ethnic marginalisation, what is emphasised in both the film and the autobiography is the mythologised view of Australia as ‘the land of opportunity’, where battlers can thrive and survive. What resonates in Ahn Do’s life story, however, is the strong desire to ‘give back’ to the country which supported his family as refugees. This story shows clearly the positive contributions made by Asians in Australia and deserves to be read within the framework of the Australian Curriculum.

Footy Legends: Multimodal classroom applications

In responding to the film Footy Legends and the Ahn Do memoir, we can ask students to empathise with the character’s dilemmas and struggles with identity. One of the AC:E general capabilities is ‘intercultural understanding,’ which ‘involves students in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect’ (ACARA, 2013c). The film’s final montage could be included in a unit on atypical and culturally diverse advertising representations in conjunction with Bondi Tsunami. As noted earlier in this paper, Australia’s population is increasing in its ethnic diversity. Jakubowicz (2009), for example, contends that by 2015 almost half of all school students will be either born overseas, or have a parent born overseas. This demographic reality serves to reinforce the need for young Australians to develop their capacity to be Asia literate as part of their personal and social skills set. Footy Legends could also be explored for what it says about Australian masculinity and compared with feminine representations in various Asian cultures, such as those explored in many of the stories and extracts in Alice Pung’s collection of life writing, Growing up Asian in Australia (Pung, 2008). The most fruitful response could be a live or mediated panel discussion exploring some of the issues, where students ‘take on’ roles of
characters in the literary works and substantiate their points with audiovisual aids. An examination of Footy Legends and some of these autobiographical extracts could be viewed and read in conjunction with the controversial SBS documentary series, Go back to where you came from (O’Mahoney, 2011), where Asians are not tourists and which could also engage students in thinking about the General Capability of ‘ethical behaviour’ (ACARA, 2013c).

The SBS series, Go back to where you came from, documents how some Australians confronted their own unexamined prejudices, as they experienced and then responded to the horrific conditions in countries from which recent waves of refugees have escaped and sought asylum in Australia. Such was the impact of this series in featuring the power of examining a range of cultural assumptions and stereotypes of ‘others’ that the ABC panel program, Q & A, featured this series in one of its episodes in 2012. Teachers could adapt this panel talk format by deploying an intertextual investigation of such television resources, in conjunction with the film Footy Legends, as the basis of inquiry into stereotypes and assumptions about ‘Others’ to foreground Asia literacy in a junior secondary English unit. This approach would assist students in exploring the cross curriculum priority Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, as well as developing students’ understandings of the general capabilities of intercultural understanding and ethical behaviour. This could also take the form of an online forum where students from one school correspond, either in real time with one another or in an asynchronous chat using an online forum or wiki.

The recreative possibilities for responding to these films are only limited by the equipment available and the willingness of the teachers and students involved to experiment with media forms and to include them in the school’s work program. In this multimodal way of responding to texts, students are not only learning about intercultural understandings and using ICTs, another of the General Capabilities of the ACE but also exploring the cross curriculum priority of Asia literacy.

Conclusion
The implementation of the new Australian Curriculum: English provides an important and useful opportunity for teachers to reflect on the nature of curriculum work done in schools and classrooms. In this paper we have discussed the potential of the national curriculum’s tripartite structure (Cross Curriculum Priorities, learning area disciplines and General Capabilities) to explore an underdeveloped aspect of Asia literacy in the English classroom. We have also made brief links to the third element in the curriculum’s design, the General Capabilities, by identifying three of the seven General Capabilities in the suite, namely ‘intercultural understanding’, ‘critical and creative thinking’ and ‘ICT’s. Within this context, we’ve addressed the potential of two films about Asians in Australia through multimodal approaches. Rather than pursuing the curriculum’s goal of Asia literacy in the more commonly accepted way of exploring elements of Asia culture and society ‘outside’ Australia, we’ve looked ‘inside’ and asked students to do the same.

The White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century (Australian Government, 2012) emphasises the fundamental importance of deeper Australian engagement with Asia across its broad range of policy objectives and reinforces longstanding policy pushes for a greater emphasis on Asia in the school curriculum. In her Foreword to the paper, Prime Minister Gillard (2012) referred to the economic opportunities and strategic challenges that will accompany the rise of Asia whilst also noting the social, cultural and economic benefits to be gained from broadening and deepening people-to-people links across the region. If young Australians really are to embrace the potential of Asia literacy in ways that goes beyond learning about static representations of externalised cultures for instrumentalist means, they need to be mindful of the complex and shifting realities shaped by the movements of peoples and intercultural exchange. The English classroom is a site where young people can encounter this dynamic space and develop the dispositions for cross-cultural exchange. Creative, critical and innovative approaches which engage young people in exploring film in multimodal ways can be a first step in a range of ways to achieve Asia literacy in the English classroom.

References


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Let’s not squeeze the Orange Trees

Paul Sherman

Les Murray’s weeping bloke in Martin Place could not describe the salt source of his tears.

A watching man grew queasy from felt grief.

A watching woman trembled, shone in blessing.

The weeping one ignored his watchers’ probes.

And so with John Shaw Neilson and the girl who won’t explain the wonders in the tree, can’t answer questions from the nearby man who poses possibilities beyond her ken but who will not listen to the texting tree.

But is the poet ‘I’? I think not so.

When ‘Jock’ was young no smart curriculum lanced lessons with today’s Criteria.

School windows opened on the Wimmera.

He planted poems in ‘poor, poor country’ fields.

If we see lights within our Poet-Trees, let our globes glow for us before we seek to verbalise with Discourse-driven claws.

Let passion pound us first, before we shield our raw responses in teach-preachy terms.

Restrain our questions till the time be ripe, till youth’s absorption (if absorption be) transcend the terminus ‘twixt land and sea, till wonder weaves its own words, sipping juice of mellow meaning from life’s Orange Tree.

Paul Sherman is a retired English teacher from Woolowin, Qld. This is a rewritten version of a poem used during a recent ETAQ day at The Gap High School. Teachers looked at verses of ‘The Orange Tree’ by John Shaw Neilson, whom Judith Wright regarded as Australia’s greatest poet. The opening reference is to his favourite Les Murray poem ‘An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow’.