Gen. Italia: Class, Sexuality and the Melodrama of Migration in Italian-Australian Cinema

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In Kate Woods’ Looking for Alibrandi \(^1\) (2000), Serafina (Leanne Carlow), is telling the heroine, Josie (Pia Miranda) and Anna (Diane Viduka) about her new boyfriend – dark roots emerging from her bottle-blonde hair:

_His name’s Massimo and his family’s from the north of Italy and his mum’s like, ‘you know, that’s why we have blonde hair’. I mean, can you believe it? So I said, ‘Excuse me, Signora, I mean, look at my hair and my parents are from Calabria.’_

This is a joke, and partly a self deception, but on one level this anecdote communicates the way the _Looking for Alibrandi_ represents ethnicity and the importance of self-definition to its notion of ethnicity. Like categories of gender and sexuality in postmodern multicultural society, ethnicity and ethnic identity are exposed in _Looking for Alibrandi_ as, in part, cultural constructions which shun fixed and established ethnic categories. My concern here is the way notions of cultural heritage and self-definition compete in _Looking for Alibrandi_ and how the film problematises traditional representations of Italian-Australian ethnicity in Australian cinema. Considering _Looking for Alibrandi_ as the most recent, and perhaps the most widely known film of Italian-Australian cinema, I want to demonstrate how _Looking for Alibrandi_ engages with some key themes common to Italian-Australian cinema since the 1950s. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva’s writings on cultural alienation and estrangement in _Strangers to Ourselves_\(^2\) as well as the work of sociologists Maria Palotta-Chiarolli and Zlatko Skribis\(^3\), I consider the way _Looking for Alibrandi_ responds to established tropes of class, sexuality and film genre as set out in two films about second generation Italian-Australian experience, _Moving Out_ (1983) and _Fistful of Flies_ (1997), and in Italian-Australian cinema generally.\(^4\)

Blonde Hair, Ethnicity and Self Definition
Since the arrival in Australia of the high-profile Milanese actor, Walter Chiari, to play Nino in *They’re a Weird Mob* (Michael Powell, 1965), the cultural divide between southern and northern Italy has been a theme frequently addressed in Italian-Australian cinema, especially in the films of Monica Pellizzari including *Rabbit on the Moon* (1987), *No No Nonno* (1990) and *Fistful of Flies*. By introducing the myth of the fair-haired northerners, Serafina in *Looking for Alibrandi* points to the absurdity of maintaining such cultural hierarchies of ethnic purity and superiority in the age of L’Oréal – ‘Because you’re worth it’ – bottle-jobs. Just as the film’s invocation of the North/South issue expresses Italy itself as a multicultural political construction of the Risorgimento, *Looking for Alibrandi* demonstrates that Italian-Australian ethnicity and culture are hardly fixed entities. With her fake blonde hair, Serafina well represents both her generation of Italian-Australians and one of the *Looking for Alibrandi*’s central energies – the drive towards self-definition and a relative freedom from the oppression of tradition, family, class and the baggage of prejudicial and essentialist notions of ethnicity.

This desire for cultural freedom is certainly the desire of the Alibrandi women, Katia (Elena Cotta), Christina (Greta Scacchi) and, as she will discover, Josie herself. Importantly this is a desire not limited to the film’s Italian-Australian community, as we see in the narrative of Josie’s impeccably connected, Anglo blonde beau, John Barton (Matthew Newton). For all his studied normality, John also has an ethnicity extending beyond racial categories, to the associated cultural pressures applied by an overbearing father – a high-profile conservative politician. It is from the constraints of his father’s expectations that John longs to be released. Josie’s story is similarly one in which she comes to understand that she, too, is weighed down by an element of cultural ‘baggage’ beyond her previous understanding. Her well-defined sense of the ‘Alibrandi Curse’, which she thinks is the result of her own illegitimacy, gains further dimension by the end of the film when Josie learns of Katia’s infidelity with a kindly Anglo-Australian patron-lover, Marcus Sanford. In addition to this is the resultant birth of Josie’s own mother, Christina. To be free of this heritage, and to free her mother and Nonna from this Madonna/puttana ethnicity, is part of Josie’s desire and central to her journey.

In the world of Josie Alibrandi, Serafina can successfully problematise notions of ethnicity by changing the colour of her hair. This does not stand as a mask or a disguise, or even a self-deception – but as a confident drive towards self-definition. Like Josie’s narrative, Serafina’s act strikes out against fixed notions of ethnicity which mean captivity, discrimination and exploitation. Problematising these categories, the role of second and third generation Italian-Australians, liberates. Blonde hair, as Serafina might say, ‘doesn’t mean shit’. 
I am not arguing that *Looking for Alibrandi* is a sophisticated postmodern debate about the nature of Italian-Australian ethnicity. What I am arguing is that through Josie, the film represents a contemporary reality about the prospects of second/third generation Italian-Australians which are pursued beyond class stereotypes and with an appropriate confidence towards achievement. What I consider a key issue of this film, is that Josie is a character who has a psychological make-up which is not overwhelmed by the dilemmas of her ethnicity. Her ethnicity is part of her story – but only one part. It does not stop her from pursuing (and presumably achieving) her desire. Nor does Josie’s ethnicity play a central role in the infidelity narrative involving her *Nonna* – which stands as a significant factor in her life. In terms of film genre, *Looking for Alibrandi* allows its central Italian-Australian protagonist a late-teen rite of passage narrative which has an optimistic outlook and which does not have to be overwhelmed by her ethnicity. Josie Alibrandi thus stands as a character who challenges conservative government attempts at multiculturalism roll-back. Josie has moved beyond the ‘aspirations’ to which contemporary conservative thought has endeavored to restrict the socially mobile ethnic underclass, to the great ‘expectations’, of the Dickens novel we see Josie reading early in the film.

**The Italian-Australian as Child**

A pioneer of Australian avant-garde and ‘art cinema’ film making, Giorgio Mangiamele (1926-2001) was one of the first Australian directors to make films about migrant experience in Australia. Treating the experience of Italian migrants in Melbourne since the early 1950s (*The Contract* (1953), *Unwanted* (1955), *Ninety-Nine Percent* (1963)), Mangiamele’s Carlton neo-realism of *The Spag* (1962) begins a constant motif of Italian-Australian cinema which frequently represents the central protagonist of the narrative as a child or adolescent. In *The Spag*, Tony, a boy trotting though his paper-round between Rathdowne and Canning streets, endures the full force of Anglo prejudice and violence until, finally, he is hit and killed, by a beer-soaked drink-driver. An early short film by Geoffrey Wright, *Arrivederci Roma* (1979), literally plunges a teenage migrant into an alienating experience of linguistic and cultural isolation when he is forced to take part in a school swimming lesson at the Melbourne City Baths. More recently, the central protagonists of Monica Pellizzari’s feature *Fistful of Flies*, and Michael Pattinson’s *Moving Out* (1983) bear witness to this tradition of the representation of the Italian-Australian as child or adolescent.
The notion of the Italian-Australian as child is similarly prominent in the infantilisation of adult Italian migrants. Julia Kristeva sees the migrant/foreigner/exile/alien of any age as having ‘lost his mother’, as orphan, even as possessor of a ‘matricidal anguish’.\(^7\) When is one more child-like than at point or realisation of such a loss? Defined, in part, by this type of loss, the Italian-Australian in film is easily infantalised. Just as the immigrant has lost her/his mother, this experience of exile, according to Kristeva, easily plunges the migrant back into the realm of the infant deprived of a ‘mother tongue’ – ‘the silence of the polyglots’.\(^8\) The pre-acquisition of language is a particularly common moment for the infantilisation of adult Italian migrants in the cinema. Giovanni Culotta, known by the diminutive title ‘Nino’, in _They’re A Weird Mob_ may be a journalist and writer but his embryonic English skills render him as child again, a point emphasised when the ever-present policeman scolds him for using a ‘swear word’ – ‘Kings Bloody Cross’. Furthermore, this process of rendering the Italian as child is increased in the representation of Nino as a man of gentility and courtly refinement. Nino opens doors for ladies, presents flowers and calmly reassures some compatriots when he finds them disturbed by an drunk on the Manly ferry. Furthermore, Nino is frequently seen at ease in the company of women. These acts may be considered the social refinements of old Europe, but in a country defined by pioneering, building and foreign war, such graces render Nino as child because they place him in the domain of women. That is to say, Nino is child because he is not quite man and will thus be a child until he can prove himself to have grown-up again in his new country – ‘for its a man’s country, Sweetheart,’ as the film’s theme song has it.

In _Looking for Alibrandi_, Josie Alibrandi again testifies to the need Italian-Australian cinema has to employ the second/third generation ‘cultural brokers’, as Ellie Vasta calls them,\(^9\) to represent Italian-Australian experience. Given the repetition of the child protagonist in Italian-Australian cinema and the popular success of _Looking for Alibrandi_, it is worth considering whether this need matches the ‘tolerance’ of the wider film-going community, or at least film distribution’s understanding of it. That is to say, are we able to consume narratives of Italian-Australian (migrant) life only when they are located within the safety of the child’s domain? For all the emphasis on the second generation’s cultural brokerage, as that generation ages will narrative cinema look to the third and fourth generation, as it has in _Looking for Alibrandi_, to provide mainstream Australia with a comfortable, infantilized view of multiculturalism? _Looking for Alibrandi_ is, after all, not the story of the second generation, Christina, but that of Josie, who belongs to the third generation – a generation which, as yet, sociologists and statistics know very little about.\(^10\)
Before leaving this notion of the child/adolescent in Italian-Australian cinema, it is important to explain the fact that, for the purposes of this paper, I am not making a distinction between Italian-Australian cinema by Italian-Australians and by non Italian-Australians – although there is certainly good reason to do so. What interests me here are those themes of Italian-Australian experience which are common to films both by and about Italian-Australians. What this more general approach allows us to observe is that, as in the motif of the child, the persistence of key themes and structures is due to the conjunction of Italian-Australian and non Italian-Australian voices in film. As I will consider below in relation to my categories of ambivalence, sexual frenzy and melodrama, the persistence of the child motif may well be the result of the convergence of, at least, three key and often conflicting voices: Italian-Australian filmmakers rendering the Italian migrant as a child to comment upon their own experience relating to the Anglo mainstream culture (Pellizzari, Mangiamele), non Italian-Australian filmmakers commenting on that experience (Wright) or exploiting that relationship (Powell), a collaboration between the two for commercial and cultural ends (Woods). Thus the representation (stereotype) of the Italian-Australian as child may be read as a reflection of Italian-Australian experience, the mainstream culture’s only viably (or preferred and empowering) method of digesting that experience, or as the Italian-Australian filmmaker buying into, what Palotta-Chiarolli and Skribis call, the ‘myth of homogeneity’.11 This notion employs an important cultural collaboration which stages, what we might call, a mutually beneficial trade in cultural stereotypes.

Josie Alibrandi: ‘No more curses’

At the beginning of Looking for Alibrabdi, between the icons of Tomato Day in ‘Little Sicily’ and Bondi, Josie challenges the preservation of the traditions of the old country and the new country, just as she outlines her ‘big plans’ for the year. Including ‘blitzing’ her final exams and going to university to study law, Josie has high ambitions. What Josie’s initial relaxed confidence and the narrative as a whole tell us is that these plans are legitimate and achievable. Despite the sociological accuracy of past representation of Italian-Australian experience, this film gives no sense that Josie’s ethnicity will have any part in prohibiting her from achieving her goals. Even the pressures closer to home, ‘getting Nonna off (her) back’ and the associated, comically portrayed, surveillance of her comings and goings, in no way frustrate her drive, despite their arguable relationship to the more negative aspects her Italian-Australian environment. Furthermore, I suggest that when the information of Katia’s infidelity does come to light, and Josie gains the third
part of her quest for self understanding (a quest partly associated with knowledge of her paternity), it is largely unrelated to her Italian-Australian heritage and community. Josie’s own illegitimate birth is the cause of community scandal. As Josie explains, the Alibrandi women have not been excluded but tolerated from the Italian group as a result of her birth. This increases the community surveillance and anchors them to the superstitious Italian-Australian tribe and its moral prejudice. Katia’s indiscretion with Marcus Sanford is no scandal and produces no curse because nobody knows about it. The explanation Katia gives for her liaison with Marcus Sanford is related to specific concerns of Italian migrant experience in Australia, particularly those of proxy brides – although Katia is not one. These experiences, however, are not further located within the social politics of Italian-Australian community life. Unlike Josie’s illegitimacy, Katia’s indiscretions are unknown to the network. Thus for Josie, a major part of her mystery is largely unrelated to the Italian community and its mores and more directly related to issues of gender, sexuality and generational relations, common enough to, but hardly the sole property of, Italian-Australians.

In Looking for Alibrandi the Italian-Australian narrative has stood aside from the social and class angst which has dominated Italian-Australian cinema in the past. This is perhaps best explained in terms of film genre. Although films such as Moving Out and Fistful of Flies use traditions of the teen-flick in their rite of passage narratives, unlike Looking for Alibrandi, they linger to a large extent on the best traditions of melodrama of cultural and sexual tribal oppression. Although Gino Condello (Vince Colosimo) in Moving Out and, to a greater extent, Mars Lupi (Tasma Walton) in Fistful of Flies, demonstrate a certain achievement of freedom, they are largely characters who are acted upon and locked into their environment of oppression. Thus the stories of Gino and Mars have more in common with melodrama than Looking for Alibrandi and the teen light tragi-comedy of the Dead Poets Society (1989) mould.

The Melodrama of Migration: The Ambivalence of Strangers

In Moving Out, the Italian born Gino initially rebels against, what he perceives to be, the nostalgia and ghetto mentality of his parents. In a key scene, Gino explains to his cousin, Maria (Nicole Miranda), the failure of his parents to learn English and their associated fears of losing something of the old country. In arriving at this insight, Gino demonstrates great sensitivity, but it is an understanding mixed with a sense of frustration and adolescent rage. His parents’ inability to assimilate into mainstream Australian culture divides Gino from his own immature desire to fit in with a somewhat dead-end gang of
local Anglo-Australian kids. For Gino, the proposed family move from Fitzroy to Doncaster, ‘wogsville’, as one of his ‘skip’ mates calls it, threatens to cement the family’s cultural difference, and his own fears of loss, by placing them in another form of ghetto – albeit an enclave for more socially and financially mobile Italian immigrants. When, in an argument with his parents, Gino announces that he is not going to Doncaster, his mother laughs and says, ‘Allora, che fai, scemo? (Well what are you going to do, Silly?)’ Gino’s rebellion is thus easily put down. Moving Out is as much a male melodrama of Gino’s hopeless attempt to separate from the Italian-Australian tribe which restrains one part of his desire, as it is a teenage rite de passage narrative. The tight-clenched and raised fist of rage that Gino sketches and then sculpts in ‘art period’, both signifies his personal rage and desire to rebel, as it marks the containment of that rebellion. This plaster model of melodramatic discontent can be contrasted with the triumphant clenched-fisted air-punching of Judd Nelson indicating the vague shattering of teen oppression in John Hughes’ iconic and emblematic teen-flick, The Breakfast Club (1985).

Beyond this vague articulation of rage, the melodrama of Moving Out operates to reconcile Gino with his parents, his cultural heritage and the move to Doncaster. This reconciliation is achieved by means of a fascinating mix of Gino’s growing sense of ambivalence towards the Anglo culture which surrounds him and the sense that in the meeting of his own cultural heritage with the Anglo mainstream, he is left with little choice. In Strangers to Ourselves Kristeva points out ‘the non-existence of banality’ the foreigner sees in him/herself as opposed to the narrowness of mind and lack of perspective of those who are not foreign:

In the eyes of the foreigner those who are not foreign have no life at all: barely do they exist, haughty or mediocre, but out of the running and thus almost cadaverized.

Furthermore, just as the foreigner/stranger holds a certain degree of ambivalence for his/her parents and origins, s/he holds a similar sense of ambivalence for his/her hosts, for s/he perceives in them a lack of biography and the tedium of humdrum and mediocre lives:

He readily bears a kind of admiration for those who have welcomed him, for he rates them more often than not above himself, be it financially, politically, or socially. At the same time he is quite ready to consider them
Accordingly *Moving Out* shows Gino’s encounter with an Anglo culture which is, at best, incomprehensible and, at worst, sterile, indolent, miscreant and without ambition. In an encounter with his English teacher, Mr. Aitkens (Brian James), Gino seems to see through the teacher’s out-of-touch selfishness. Urging Gino to memorize Dorothea Mackellar’s, *My Country*, with its ‘sunburnt country’ and ‘sweeping plains’ imagery, as he once urged another student many years ago, leaves Gino cold. If this is, as the teacher considers it, a gift, it is a gift more pleasing in the giving and seems to Gino both pointless and meaningless. Like the Anglo students kicking the footy as Gino is leaving the school for the last time, Mr. Aitkens has no understanding of the significance of the moment for Gino. Mr. Aitkens merely advises him to ‘stay out of trouble’, falling back on the ethnic crime stereotype that finally divides Gino from his rather dull, blonde Anglo stereotype of a girlfriend, Sandy. By seeing him as different from the other kids of their dead-end gang, she, too, has offered Gino an opportunity to improve himself on Anglo terms. She quickly and easily becomes disillusioned, however, blaming him for an encounter the gang has with the police after a petty breaking and entering episode.

By the end of the film, only his Italian-Australian friend Renato (Maurice de Vincetis) and his cousin, Joe (Charles Garzarella), have any understanding of the significance of Gino’s journey. This points to the way in which the film portrays the Italian-Australian tribe as Gino’s only option, when faced with the, perhaps stereotyped, bleakness of his host culture. The stereotyping of Anglo-Australians as fish-and-chip eating barbarians is a common motif of the Italian-Australian cinema. Although reflective of the ambivalence the foreigner may hold for her/his new host culture, as Kristeva has pointed out, and having an amusing ring of truth about much of it, this stereotyping may hold some adverse aspects for the way the Italian-Australian can be represented. Monica Pellizzari takes a great delight in lampooning and correcting Anglo-Australian bastardisations of her characters’ names, especially when Lupi and Stroppi become ‘Loopy’ and ‘Stroppy’. This practice attains its comic absurdity in *Looking for Alibrandi* when Josie seems genuinely happy for Jake in his lack of ‘culture’ and ‘religion’.

Acknowledging his father’s vision of success and his parents personal struggle to attain that vision, accordingly Gino becomes reconciled to play his role in his parents aspirations. For better or for worse, Doncaster and all it signifies is presented as a culturally more substantial option for Gino, but it is also his only option. Locking Gino into an environment of, what Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skribis call, ‘ethnic group cohesion’
threatens to contain him within a bi-polar construction of ethnicity which serves the interests of the Italian-Australian and the Anglo host communities but not the concerns of Gino to free himself from discrimination. Just as Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skribis explain the way the notion of ethnic group cohesion serves the bi-polar model of ethnicity which Gino seeks to avoid:

*a myth of homogeneity serves the purpose of an ethnic group by presenting a stronger ‘unified’ identity to the wider society. It also allows the host society to easily label and locate ethnic groups according to its own political and socio-cultural purposes.*

Similarly the rejection Mars Lupi and Josie Alibrandi stage of the host culture, or lack thereof, threatens to contain them within their own, potentially fanatical, ghetto of linguistic and cultural isolation – tradition preserved in vinegar. For as Kristeva makes clear, beyond the ‘paternalists’, ‘paranoid persons’ and ‘perverse people’ who befriend the foreigner, what choice does the foreigner have but to join with other foreigners in ‘communities cemented by pure, hard fantasies’:

*Here, on foreign soil, the religion of the abandoned forebears is set up in its essential purity and one imagines that one preserves it better than do the parents who have stayed ‘back home.’ As enclave of the other within the other, otherness become crystallized as pure ostracism: the foreigner excludes before being excluded, even more than he is excluded.*

As I have explained, given her illegitimacy and the taboo it confers upon her, Josie Alibrandi, too, is threatened with being locked into the potentially oppressive environment of ‘old country’ prejudice and superstition. As we see in the Tomato Day scene, however, her attitude to these threats is both feisty and defiant. Josie demonstrates a great level of understanding of, and a sense of humor about, the Little Sicily thing, which has so often trapped and frustrated characters, such as Gino and Mars, as it has trapped and oppressed Josie’s Nonna. Furthermore, *Looking for Alibrandi* shows Josie taking an active role as a liberator or plumber of the unconscious of others – particularly her Nonna. Unlike the heroine of the melodrama, Josie does not allow herself to be taken away by the ‘importance’ of rules, rituals, curses and *La bella figura* which inhibit others. As such, Josie has no place in melodrama, a genre which is all about being trapped by these things. She refuses to become trapped herself and she refuses to allow others to
remain victims – as she demonstrates in the unlocking of her Nonna’s infidelity with the Anglo, Marcus Sanford and in getting Christina to articulate her desires and frustrations.

**The Melodrama of Migration: Sex Frenzy**

The psychological ambivalence of the atavistic pull on Gino is signified though a sexual stereotype. Throughout the film Gino fights the cultural connotations of his attraction to his cousin, Maria, by rejecting her and the maintenance of their shared cultural heritage which she advocates. As his cousin, the desire she arouses in him is taboo, but beyond that, this desire is dangerous in the way the archaic connotations of in-breeding threaten to place Gino deeper within the ghetto culture from which he seeks to escape. Taboo, however, always arouses the desire to violate taboo and, according to the Italian vulgar colloquialism, *non cè cosa più divina, che farsi la cugina* (nothing is so divine as fucking your cousin). When Gino is forced by an pushy paesana to dance with Maria to the tune of *Ti amo*, his fate is sealed by this perverse attempt to ‘monitor’, as Palotta-Chiarolli and Skribis consider it, Gino’s sexual behavior ‘in order to maintain ethnic purity, family cohesion and the continuation of community strength.’

Maria Palotta-Chiarolli has undertaken extensive research into the way second generation Italian-Australian women have brokered new personal identities and exposed ‘the myth of the good Italian girl’ through non-compliance to established structure of patriarchal authority. Amongst the many issues raised, this work charts the way the myth has been exposed by second generation Italian-Australian girls; changing dynamics of parental influence (especially that of mothers), rejecting traditional religious and moral codes as guiding forces in making life decisions, relying on personal rather than communal/societal imperatives in making such decisions, while at the same time maintaining a certain connection to their parents’ traditional values. This is, in part, the trajectory of Monica Pellizzari’s extraordinary film *Fistful of Flies*, in which the central teenage protagonist, Mars Lupi (the wolves), is forced to confront an ugly nexus between her own sexuality and the violence of her father’s confused response to it. This is an encounter explored by Pellizzari with a revealing formal strategy. This formal emphasis provides Mars with a fantasyscape which represents an inner self by which she can, to a large extent, combat and extract herself from the violence around her.

A scene in which Mars’ Nonna (Anna Volska) tells the story of her wedding night points to the generational association between sex and violence which has overcome her
mother, Grace (Dina Panozzo), and threatens to engulf Mars also. Nonna’s husband, we learn, became terrified at the thought that his new wife was not a virgin because she ‘didn’t bleed’ and his ‘prick didn’t hurt’ her. The violent male response to such ignorance is carried through the generations and plays a large part in Lupi family life. The only sexual advance Joe Lupi (John Lucantonio) makes towards his wife is when she is ripping the pus out of the pimples on his back. When Grace, who refers to the clitoris as a ‘trigger-button’, returns the favor by grabbing his ‘gnocchi’, Joe slaps her viciously and knocks her to the floor. Accordingly, when Grace and a neighbor return from the Feast of the Virgin to find Mars masturbating on her bedroom floor, Grace shows her initial compliance with this regime of sex and violence by having Joe beat Mars with his belt. This is a pattern of parental ‘instruction on femaleness’ observed by Palotta-Chiarolli which alternates between a collaboration with the patriarch called upon to enforce traditional ‘female’ gender roles, and the desire to expand their daughters’ experience beyond their own.\footnote{Later, as he is penetrating Enzo’s mother from behind, Joe spots Enzo (Mario Gamma) and Mars flirting innocently. At this, Joe pursues Mars threatening to shoot her. The association between married life, sexuality and domestic violence is graphically made in a sequence towards the end of the film when Mars wears her mother’s wedding dress as she rigs-up her father’s gun in an apparent suicide attempt below a statue of the Madonna made by her father.}

The masturbatory fantasies of Mars floating though an oasis of water and light, as well as the childhood flash-back sequences give great depth to Pellizzari’s psychological portrait in Fistful of Flies. Too frequently Italian-Australian films are compared with the Cinecittà canon, but in the way Mars seeks release in these fantasies and in the richness in representation of these subjective moments, Pellizzari has obviously made much of her Centro Sperimentale days and her assistant work with directors such as Federico Fellini.\footnote{Just as the scene of the statue of Christ being helicoptered over Rome in La dolce vita (1960) is cheekily invoked in Fistful’s beginning, Fellini’s first colour feature, Giulietta degli spiriti (1965), and the visions and voices which appear to its heroine (Giulietta Masina) seem to haunt Pellizzari’s film.}

Mars’ fantasies and visions are, however, an internal escape. If contemporary melodrama allows the female protagonist an experience of melancholia it must not be expressed in public. These escapes provide Mars with an inward exit from the violence and cultural prejudice around her. As Enzo says to Mars, ‘You live in your head most of the time’. By the end of the film, Joe has lost his gun and surrounded his belt. Things may appear to have changed but there is little reason to believe that Mars will break free from the cultural constraints blocking her, unless she can do it internally. The patriarchal
ignorance and confusion, and the cultural compliance to it, are so powerfully portrayed here. Despite the sense of resolution with the return of Mars’ Nonna and the sense of change and optimism which pervades the narrative, the film can only leave the audience secure in Mars’ imaginary oasis. The final lyrical image of a naked Mars in a garden opening her fist and releasing the flies suggests little which may release her from her endemic cultural victimisation.

As with Gino and Mars, stories of Italian-Australian experience in film frequently place an emphasis on sexualising the Italian-Australian subject. This stereotype works along gender lines, the divisions being no more apparent than in a comparison between two Italian-Australian characters such as the sporty, Latin lover (Nino Culotta) and the somewhat depressed, return of the repressed, randy teenager (Mars), of the Italian-Australian cinema. Taken together, however, the sexualisation of the Italian-Australian subject in film – either by Italian-Australian or non Italian-Australian filmmakers – may contribute to a representational motif which reinforces Italian-Australian estrangement and marginalisation.

Kristeva discusses the way in which states of exile and foreignness can be accompanied by ‘sexual frenzy: no more prohibition, everything is possible.’ Frequently freed of the religious, social and cultural oppression of their country of origin, the foreigner can easily give way to sexual permissiveness and perversion where the breaking of boundaries and taboos allows the foreigner ‘to joy in their bodies unto death!’ As in the example of Kristeva’s ‘strait-laced’, fellow migrant friend turned swinging 60s ‘group sex’ kitten, sexual frenzy can turn, literally and psychologically, to ‘disease’:

"The unbridled drive no longer encounters the check of prohibitions or earlier sublimations but fiercely attacks the bodies cells. Eros crosses the threshold of Thanatos... The foreigner who imagines himself to be free of boarders, by the same token challenges any sexual limit. Often, but not entirely. For a narcissistic wound – insult, betrayal – can disturb his economy of boundless expenditure, which he had thought for a moment to be unshakable, and invert it into a destruction of psychic and corporeal identity." 21

It is just such a ‘destruction’ which threatens to overwhelm the Italian-Australian subject, so often stereotyped and self-represented in the cinema in relation to the marginal, infantile/transitional (Mars, Nino), or even perverse sexual identities (Gino) discussed above. A marker of her maturity and, perhaps the maturity of Looking for Alibrandi’s
representation of Italian-Australian life, is Josie’s recognition of the connection between sexual excess and this threat of destruction. Josie has seen the repression and social containment which has been the result both of Nonna Katia’s violent husband and his ‘disgusting ways’ and Katia’s emotional release from that situation in her illicit liaison with Marcus Sanford. Katia’s life of secrets, propriety obsession and the punishment of her daughter’s and grand daughter’s public ‘shame’, stands as a key example of the way the Italian-Australian in film can be a victim to his/her own sexuality. Katia’s sexuality is both the site of her oppression and a release from that oppression – but a release which has contained her all over again. Born as both a sign of that love and containment, Christina also sought escape in her own sexuality. Becoming pregnant to Michael, however, she became trapped again.

Central to her narrative, these events are key indicators to Josie and tell us something of her reluctance to ‘go all the way’ with Jake. Looking somewhat like the ‘good girl’ in an American Family Association documentary on the evils of sex before marriage, Josie, nevertheless, demonstrates a challenge to sex-violence-destruction nexus which has dogged the Italian-Australian both in the cinema and in her own narrative. Josie rejects the identity annihilation which has been the result of her mother’s and grand mother’s sexual experience, just as she rejects Sera’s suggestion in relation to John Barton, ‘Why don’t you just, you know, fuck the guy and get it over and done with!’ As Josie says early in the film:

\[
\text{Give me a few years and I’ll be running things - and it won’t be a small Italian family, either. I’m not going to be trapped like them.}
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While hardly a pregnancy threatening experience, nor an explicit rejection of Jake for ‘something better’, Joise’s decision not to have sex with Jake is a sign of her challenge. Josie has no intention of being trapped into a life of class and ethnic discrimination by the melodrama of hormonal imperatives. Hardly a prude, Josie’s choice to avoid what promises to be an experience interrupted by Jake’s premature ejaculation, if not by his father returning with cups of tea, is a sign of her empowerment and freedom from that destiny.

In terms of rebellion, sexuality and sexual oppression, Alibrandi thus reads very much like a more optimistic version of Fistful of Flies and Moving Out. The cost to Mars, in Fistful of Flies, is an experience, commonly represented in Italian-Australian cinema, of intense domestic violence at the hands of an ignorant and scared patriarch – a cycle of rebellion and punishment which inevitably will continue.\(^{22}\) For Gino, in Moving Out, the
rebellion implicit in his desire not to leave Fitzroy for Doncaster is only barely articulated and easily repressed within his ultimate conformity with the traditional notions of Italian life and his increasing sense of ambivalence towards Anglo-Australian culture. While no more or less accurate in its ethnography, and perhaps slightly fanciful, *Looking for Alibrandi* produces another option for the Italian-Australian character in the cinema and one which, in its lack of monolithic and predetermined cultural baggage, offers new possibilities, beyond the bi-polar cultural model for Italian-Australian sexual, class and cultural identity.

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1 Released in Italy as *Terza generazione*.
5 The nineteenth-century movement for Italian unification, culminating in the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in March, 1861.
6 Mangiamele’s film *Clay* (1965) was the first Australian film selected for competition at Cannes.
7 Kristeva, op. cit., p 9.
8 ibid., p 15.
12 Kristeva, op. cit., p 3.
13 ibid., p 7.
14 ibid., pp 6-7.
17 Palotta-Chiarolli & Skribis, p 270
19 ibid., pp 7-9.
21 Kristeva, ibid., pp 30-31.
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