

# **Reflection Statement**

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*Suburban Badlands: Deconstructing Australian Identity on the Big Screen*

analytically explores contemporary Australian filmmakers' subversion of media-fuelled illusions of a wholesome national identity. By illuminating the unapologetic realism of an unconventionally bleak subgenre of suburban drama that has emerged since the late 1990's, my critical response aims to highlight and emphasise key didactic messages regarding the corruption, familial dysfunction and discrimination faced by many socio-economically disadvantaged individuals living on Australia's sprawling city fringes.

The conceptual evolution of *Suburban Badlands* transpired as I made progress in my independent research and classroom studies. Though initially exploring my passion for local film by broadly examining a trend of cynicism towards suburbia that I had observed across Australian film and television, with extensive independent research, I was able to hone in on this unusually grim portrayal which so starkly contradicted previous filmic illustrations I had seen of Australian culture. In addition to immersing myself in contemporary cinema, my research of the changing social and political landscapes of Australia and its films over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries allowed me to observe an acute paradigmatic shift in cinema around the rise of the 1996 Howard government. I was intrigued by the depiction of harsh realities faced by many socio-economically disadvantaged people in the outer-suburbs. I noticed this through changes in not only plot and setting, but in the emergence of distinctly bleak visual techniques, such as colour-saturation that enhanced the despondency of this culture. I had confirmed from my research that these subjects had been previously left untouched by filmmakers. This contemporary focus is the subject of my critical response as I examine and evaluate the bleak renderings of the suburbs in four

acclaimed texts: David Michôd's *Animal Kingdom* (2010), Ana Kokkinos' *Blessed* (2009) and Rowan Woods' *The Boys* (1998) and *Little Fish* (2005).

The primary purpose of my response is to expose the often depressing complexities of Australian identity, as I have discovered through my investigation, that inextricably linked social issues such as low-income, familial dysfunction, crime and discrimination are significant, yet largely ignored, aspects of Australian society. In the process of composition, my knowledge of film history and socio-political change gained from my research allowed me to evaluate various arguments put forward in opinion pieces to create my own original thesis and achieve this purpose.

Early research into Australian film, such as that from the book *The New Australian Cinema*<sup>1</sup> and article *Australian Film*<sup>2</sup>, expanded my knowledge on the common patriotic themes of local cinema to help me identify the shift in tone and setting to suburbia. The opinion article *Is Suburban Living a Neurotic Condition?*<sup>3</sup> and conceptual analyses such as *Reading the Production of Suburbia in Post-War Australia*<sup>4</sup> were crucial in developing my views towards the notion of a outer-suburbia. These texts question the validity of wholesome filmic representations of this quintessentially Australian paradigm. It was not, however, until feedback from my Viva Voce that I realised the importance of justifying my arguments with contextual reasoning. I assessed the core socio-political developments of the decade to discover that many issues addressed in my analysed films corresponded with governmental

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<sup>1</sup> Pike, A 1980, *The New Australian Cinema*, Scott Murray (ed.), Cinema Papers Pty Ltd, Melbourne, p20.

<sup>2</sup> Dermody, S & Jacka E 2006, 'Australian Film', accessed 27/11/2012, [www.darrenarcher.name/ftv/PDF's/Australian%20Film.pdf](http://www.darrenarcher.name/ftv/PDF's/Australian%20Film.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Davies, A 2012, *Is Suburban Living a Neurotic Condition?*, The Urbanist, Crikey Independent Media, 20 March, [www.crikey.com.au/2012/03/22/the-urbanist-is-suburban-living-a-neurotic-condition/](http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/03/22/the-urbanist-is-suburban-living-a-neurotic-condition/).

<sup>4</sup> Butler, C 2005, *Reading the Production of Suburbia in Post-War Australia*, Law Text, Culture, 9 (1).

change. Articles such as *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia*<sup>5</sup> and *Social Inclusion, National Identity and the Moral Imagination*<sup>6</sup>, as well as summaries of policy documents found online, all heightened my contextual knowledge on emerging economic rationalism and regression of multiculturalism, allowing for effective justification of my thesis.

The idea that texts respond to the context in which they are created is one which permeates all of my previous studies in Advanced and Extension English. The skills of deep textual analysis and comprehending contextual influence on ideas and representation, acquired through the study of Advanced *Module B: Critical Study of Texts*, have been extended in my composition through independent investigation into my own selected works. The conceptual backbone of my discussion has further been influenced by the Extension unit *Texts and Ways of Thinking*, which explores values, ideologies and context and how certain paradigms shape, or are reflected or challenged, in texts. I have extended my understanding of these ideas by applying them to my work as I explore the paradigm shift from romanticised ‘battler’ portrayals in film to the gritty realism of the contemporary genre I analyse. Highly valuable to my ability to formulate this discussion has been my study of Advanced *Module C: Representation and Text*, where I have employed techniques of my form to position responders to sympathise with my thesis.

Utilising my acquired skills from Advanced and Extension courses, I have employed a sophisticated use of formal, high-modality language and rhetoric in formulating ideas and textual analysis to sustain my thesis. Through persuasive diction I am able

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<sup>5</sup> Markus, A 2001, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

<sup>6</sup> Harris, P & Williams, V 2003, ‘Social Inclusion, National Identity and the Moral Imagination’, *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 3, p215, University of Sydney.

to position the reader to adopt my perspective, not only on the intent of the textual representations, but also on the realistic nature of what is shown. Sections such as this, I feel, achieve my goal;

*“By artfully structuring a balance of bleak visual illustrations and minimalist dialogue, these screenwriters present life in the outer-suburbs as a conundrum where stifled individuals, crippled by mortgages and dysfunctional families, cling to the myth of free will and self-determination.”*<sup>7</sup>

In this example, the use of high-modality, negatively connoted diction such as “crippled” and “myth”, in conjunction with the alliteration of “balance”, “bleak”, “conundrum” and “cling”, powerfully present my argument to persuade the responder of my critical stance.<sup>8</sup> I have been influenced to employ such techniques from reading educational resources such as *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*<sup>9</sup>, which taught me “the best compositions establish a sense of momentum and direction by making explicit connections... [that] set up what is to come” from my analysis. This notion served as a reminder to consistently link my textual discussion with my core and supplementary theses. Structurally, this unity is achieved through a three-chapter structure that divides my overarching thesis into separate, yet interrelated, and accessible points of discussion. The titles of these subheadings, “Mundane Evil”, “The Family Prison” and “Dream or Delusion?” are provocative and inform the responder of the key themes of banality, corruption and

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<sup>7</sup> My own Major Work, p2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Graff, G & Birkenstein, C 2007, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*, W. W. Norton & Company.

disadvantage which comprise my thesis.<sup>10</sup> By splitting up these associated concepts, I have created an easy-to-follow response which consistently supports my principal argument about the nature of Australian identity. The relationship between the sophisticated language, well thought out structure and intellectual nature of my critical response is one that is both appropriate and effective in achieving my purpose.

The primary audience for my Major Work is the readers of the international film journal, *Studies in Australasian Cinema*<sup>11</sup>. This tri-annual publication “*features academic articles focusing on current and historical trends, representations, themes, styles, debates and scholarly work from across the [Pacific] Region’s rich cinema culture.*”<sup>12</sup> Readers of this journal are undoubtedly passionate about film and its critique, and would be interested in my critical response as my topic and concept are original, interesting and pertain to the content’s desired features. Broader audiences suited to read my work are adult Australians living in both urban and suburban areas, as they may benefit from reading about the realities of certain socio-economically disadvantaged experiences which they may either identify with, or become better educated about. The presumed greater life experience of an adult responder, coupled with the mature themes inherent in these films, makes this group best suited to reading my critical response.

The product of this long journey of independent investigation and composition, though demanding at times, has been ultimately rewarding. Not only have I achieved my intended purpose, but I have also acquired keen knowledge about film as a medium for social reflection and change, and gained invaluable experience and

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<sup>10</sup> My own Major Work, p4, 7, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, Film Journal, Anthony Lambert (ed.), Intellect Books, UK.

<sup>12</sup> Intellect Books 2013, *Studies In Australasian Cinema*, accessed 20/05/2013, [www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/](http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/).

understanding of the scrupulous process of researching, formulating concepts, writing and refining to create a substantial piece of work. I have been forced to detach myself from my writing and learn to listen to other voices in order to achieve a greater degree of sophistication within my Major Work. I have expanded my appreciation of text types as a result of reading a myriad of critical texts and films alike, not all of which I would have had the chance to enjoy without the pressing requirements of my composition. Thanks to this substantial process, I have extended myself as a writer, and also strengthened my appreciation as a responder.