

2006

## Finding the Watermark: A filmic response to domestic abuse within Australian film from 1970 - 2006

Erin Nichols  
*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses\\_hons](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons)



Part of the [Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons](#), and the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nichols, E. (2006). *Finding the Watermark: A filmic response to domestic abuse within Australian film from 1970 - 2006*. [https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses\\_hons/1286](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1286)

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.  
[https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses\\_hons/1286](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1286)

# Edith Cowan University

## Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author's moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).
- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

**Finding the Watermark:  
A filmic response to domestic abuse within  
Australian film from 1970 - 2006.**

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY

**Erin Nichols  
Bachelor of Communications (Film and Video)**

**This exegesis is presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Communications Honours (Film and Video).**

**Faculty of Education and Arts.  
Edith Cowan University  
20<sup>th</sup> November 2006**

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## Abstract

Due to various social, international and economic encumbrances, Australian film has made a limited foray into the representation of domestic abuse. A limited number of films have been made on this topic since the early 1970's, and even then, the depiction of this social issue has been watered down and sanitised for mainstream consumption. It is the author's belief that the filmmaker has an important and highly influential opportunity to present a social commentary on issues and must not shirk that responsibility.

The film project supported by this exegesis responds to the above concerns and the priority has been to create a film that is both stylistically interesting, and socially confronting. *Watermarked* combines 'classic' Western genre elements and a deliberately moulded mix of narrative and symbolism. Among other things, the film addresses two perceived flaws of the filmic treatment of this issue to date; namely convenient, uplifting endings and pallid representation of violence.

The supporting exegesis begins with a critical history of the depiction of domestic abuse in Australian cinema and how patriarchal structures, together with certain social and economic factors have contributed to what social theorist, Roland Barthes terms, an 'established order' (Barthes, 1972) which controls and perpetuates the situation. It then charts this project's attempt to highlight and subvert this established order through scripting and filming choices of content and style. The exegesis concludes by considering the input of a test audience as a means of measuring the effectiveness of the filmic portrayal.

**Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Signed:

✓

✓

.....

.....

Date:

31/05/07.  
.....

## Acknowledgements

The Author wishes to heartily thank the following people:

Keith Smith for *all* of his fantastic advice and guidance throughout the year.

Ian & Maureen, Sian & Cary, Jules & Aleisha for their ongoing support.

The Narrogin folk: Maureen & Andrew and the Short family for their above and beyond help and providing me with the best derelict house imaginable...

My wonderful crew - Nat & Jeremy, and brilliant actors, (Nick & Briony especially) for taking the time to go very much out of their way for *Watermarked* and being dedicated enough to shoot the 'hard stuff'.

Dustin for the great music...

## Contents

Abstract	2
Declaration	3
Acknowledgements	4
Contents	5
Introduction	6
A brief history of Australian film and Social recognition of Domestic Abuse	9
Australian social conditions and stereotypes represented in <i>Watermarked</i>	14
The lack of power that demonises the male iconic antagonist	
The stress of the male breadwinner	
Keeping family secrets	
The silent woman	
The powerless child	
Representation and Repression of Domestic Abuse in Australian film	20
The lack of nihilist endings and The Continuance of the established order	
The ending of <i>Watermarked</i>	
The lack and sanitization of graphic violence in portrayals of domestic abuse	
Filming graphic violence in ' <i>Watermarked</i> ': the bashing in the kitchen	
The Stylistic nature of <i>Watermarked</i>	28
Conclusion	32
References	36
Filmography	38
Appendix: The script – <i>Watermarked</i>	39



## Introduction

*“Perhaps the single most important thing we can do is to love our children without abuse.”*

*Rolf de Heer.*

My personal premise as a filmmaker has always been, and continues to be, that film is an important and highly influential means of presenting a social commentary in your own style on issues that you believe are crying out to be explored.

This creative projects stems from the premise that the family *should* be the very foundation of a person’s support structure, be it a traditional ‘nuclear’ family or otherwise. In a complex and difficult contemporary world families provide a fundamentally important level of unconditional love and care. However, family members also abuse each other and the ramifications carry on like the lapping of the tides for generations. And the structure that should be solid is in fact rotten in the middle. The rotting part is concealed however; it seems as though society still does not want to seek it out.

The topic of domestic abuse for a big budget, mainstream Australian filmmaker is a nightmare. Not only does it not involve big effect car crashes, but it raises censorship issues and funding bodies dry up at its mention. It conflicts with the traditional social structure and looks at the deep, dark, sensitive crevices in the family that are certain to be unpopular with an audience who would rather keep their money for a slice of pure escapism. As I’m not a big budget mainstream filmmaker (in fact, I’m an independent director working under the radar in the subversive medium of short film), I believe I have utilised an important opportunity to portray elements of domestic abuse within the medium of a short film entitled *Watermarked*, elements

that I have found to be lacking or sanitized in previous Australian film dramas.

*Watermarked* as a title relates to the scum left on the riverbank after an unusually high/violent tide. It also gives a feeling of the turn of the tides, the way that they wax and wane, very much like one generation after another. The metaphor correlates with my narrative. Ray and Carol arrive in the town of Watermark. Ray is drifting in a seemingly endless procession through one backwater town after another, Carol hanging on like a limpet to the man she left 'the good life' for. But Ray can't shake his miserable 'arsehole' persona. From birth his dad held him up and said that he looked like a 'real little asshole'. And who is he to argue with his father? In a rising tide of violence Ray ends up killing Carol, then himself. When the tide recedes, only rubbish, destroyed matter is left...

Through my research into the field of domestic abuse and Australian film from 1970 onwards, placed within the frame of a patriarchally dominant social structure, my exegesis has highlighted certain cultural, economic and social stereotypes and conditions. *Watermarked* incorporates what I have found in four distinct parts. The first relates to the research and scripting process. It ensures that I engaged accurately with those stereotypes abounding in society around me, and used them as elements of the characterisation and storyline in my film. The second part relates to the type of endings that films engaging with domestic abuse generate, and how I have subverted this 'happy' premise. The third part relates to the lack of, and sanitization of actual graphic violence in portrayals of domestic abuse and my process of producing a graphic scene in my own work. Finally, I will examine the stylistic nature of my *Watermarked*, together with the inherent aspects of blatant realism and more insinuated symbolism; and how these fit together to make a work that is both socially

confronting and of aesthetic value.

As with all filmmaking, there is the challenge of how positively you have got your message across and whether it is working for the audience, so the exegesis concludes with a brief analysis of a simple questionnaire aimed at evaluating the film as a social intervention.

## A brief history of Australian film and Social recognition of Domestic Abuse

I began my research from 1970 onward to coincide with two major events, one in the film world, and the other in the arena of the social recognition of domestic abuse.

It is commonly recognised that after 1970, the Australian film industry really took off (generally known as the 'Australian New Wave'). Australian film theorist, Tom O'Regan believes that the boom in Australian feature films began with the Whitlam government's interest and appropriation of funds into the film industry. O'Regan (1996, p. 13) cites Dermody and Jacka, (1988) as they reflect that, "Australian cinema's re-emergence has been dependent on a 'relatively sweet climate of government support". He further cites Bean and Court (1994), adding; "In 1995, David Stratton claimed the 'support system for film... was to 'many admirers' internationally the best in the world... The result... was 524 feature films being made between mid 1970 and mid 1993" (p. 13). O'Regan concludes: "On a feature score alone this is more than were produced in the preceding 70 years" (1996, p.13).

More recent commercial successes like *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) and *The Castle* (1997) has meant continuing international interest in Australia's film industry.

O'Regan and Venkatasawmy (1999) examine how collaborations with other countries i.e. Canada and France, have provided directors with far more opportunities than if Australia had remained 'closed at its borders', so to speak. "The internationalisation of [films,] does... bring with it great possibilities for growth and innovation" (p. 201).

There is strong contention however, that Australia has become a vehicle of exploitation for international profit using only those social 'ocker' stereotypes that have been found to be popular in international cinema. Collins and Davis (2004)

state:

By definition, these commercial- industrial films need to attract market interest... To increase the odds in favour of a profitable return on investment Australian films need to think global as well as local. What then are we to make of a persistent expectation, from the generic audience, of an Australian flavour in commercial-industrial films conceived with one eye on the international market? (p. 36)

A low budget film like *Fran*, made in 1984, shows by its straightforward approach to social realism, that it is not interested in gaining international momentum. The beauty of this simplicity is that the subject matter can be dealt with honestly and subversively. However, with continued outside influence films have pulled back from being social vehicles of confrontation and turned into stereotyped commercial money-makers for international consumers.

To gain success and recognition, Australian filmmakers are now encouraged to keep one eye on the monitor and one eye on the dollar. Whether this means that we only make industry supported 'clichéd' Australiana films or films only to be released in Australia with no marketing and little chance of recognition has yet to be seen.

However, what internationalization has done for 'opportunity', Australian censorship has done for individual expression.

Recent film bans have shed a certain amount of unwanted light onto Australia's restrictive and cloying censorship issues, especially regarding the depiction of any kind of domestic abuse. In 2005, there was a move to ban the American film *Mysterious Skin* (2005). It was argued that the film was a "how-to manual" for paedophiles... [and]...deals with child sex abuse" (ABC news online, 2005).

Fortunately *Mysterious Skin* slipped through with an R rating.

In 2002, *Ken Park*, an American independent film *was* banned in Australia because of its depiction of child sexual abuse. At an appeal review supporters of the film tried to get it reinstated. It was argued:

There's a very serious issue here for filmmakers and film lovers that if the law as currently defined says you cannot represent child abuse for fear that you're condoning it then that's a kind of black hole... What you get down to in the end is your judgement of what offends reasonable people in the community and that's not a guideline issue, that's a moral issue. (Senses of cinema, 2006)

Is it any wonder that recent Australian feature dramas, looking to work within Australian classifications are playing it safe, if this is the welcome they will receive? Fortunately, there is still a niche in which film makers can work without censorship - the non-funded, non commercial film, with an independent distribution network, and *Watermarked* fits this bracket and takes complete advantage of this.

Whilst the wagon of Australian film was rolling on, gathering momentum (and restriction), the world was discovering what goes on in the family behind closed doors. In 1969, domestic abuse became publicly recognised due to the innovative work of Dr. C. Henry Kempe and his associates on child abuse (Helfer & Kempe. 1974.). Kempe termed the phrase "the Battered child syndrome" and opened the door for modern definitions and the treatment of abused persons. Since this time, there has been a vast amount of research, both social and psychological, into domestic abuse.

For the purpose of this project I will define domestic abuse as being the occurrence of physical, sexual and psychological abuse within the realm of the home and family as perpetrated by the family members. The 'family', according to the latest Western Australian Domestic Violence student information kit (2006), is defined as 'Partners who are married, de facto or otherwise emotionally connected, the traditional 'ideal';

a husband, a wife and children, dating relationships or people who are in a relationship but don't live together'.

Two distinct themes within domestic abuse, which I will represent, are 'the generational pattern' and 'patriarchal dominance'. The 'generational pattern' refers to the cycle of abuse that continues over generations, from parent-perpetrator, to child victim. It continues to occur because parents tend to mirror their upbringing, inflicting it on their children as a model for parent-child relations. Neidig and Friedman (cited in Briggs, 1994, p. 133) believe that "When someone has experienced high levels of violence in childhood, there is a strong likelihood there will be a predisposition towards 'instrumental violence' against others".

The generational pattern of abuse forms a strong theme running throughout *Watermarked*. I have specifically included moments in the film which mirror the horrific childhood history of the character, Ray Ricketts. The clearest example of this is the eventual suicide of Ray. We find out that Ray's father Jerry committed suicide when Ray was still young, after his failure to cease his abuse. Ray reveals he was "just an arsehole for his dad", to which Jerry callously replies "it's the way it goes boy. You know I had to?" Jerry at this point is referring to both his suicide and his own systematic sodomy at the hands of his father revealing at least three generations of the Ricketts men's 'family curse'. This cyclical trap these men have fallen into ends with Ray. He is childless, meaning that the pattern cannot continue. However, it has taken death to end this. I wanted the audience to understand that, in some cases, generational abuse can be so horrific that the recipient cannot heal, and, in fact, becomes the next generation of abusers.

The second wave, or 'new wave', feminist movement has been an integral part of both the recognition and definition of domestic abuse and how the power structure of the family has evolved within society. From the 1970's new wave feminists have been committed to changing the patriarchal nature of society. They believe while there is an imbalanced distribution of power between men, women and children, there is the likelihood of the family having 'male' dominance and 'woman/child' subservience.

My project therefore, operates intrinsically within precepts which have been influenced by the work of feminist writers Hester, Kelly and Radford (1996, p.13). These precepts identify that: 'The 'nuclear' traditional family model is ideal in patriarchal society, which *is* the society we live in today. Women and children occupy a limited power position because of male dominance. Women still are expected to maintain the traditional nurturing mother figure that patriarchal society demands, which in a climate of domestic abuse within the family, leads to secrecy and acceptance.' To which I add, domestic abuse is a continual exertion of power in an unbalanced relationship and patriarchal family models put great pressure on men to live up to social expectation. Therefore, for the purposes of my project, I will use these precepts as guidelines for representation of Australian family values.



## **Australian social conditions and stereotypes represented in *Watermarked***

Social stereotypes and conditions are driven by these precepts. They may be so ingrained in present Australian society as to make them invisible. But I have attempted within *Watermarked* to illuminate some of these stereotypes. There is a bias of male characters in *Watermarked*, the ratio of male to female being 4 to 1. This ratio occurs because of the various aspects of patriarchy that I want to illustrate. The stereotypes I am examining are: 'the lack of power that demonises the male iconic antagonist'; 'the stress of the male breadwinner'; 'keeping family secrets'; 'the silent woman'; and 'the powerless child'.

### **The lack of power that demonises the male iconic antagonist**

Domestic abuse is perpetuated as a means of power control, or as a means to gain power. In his chapter, 'Perspectives on child molesters', Wallis (1995, p. 4) agrees that, "the majority of perpetrators perceive themselves as powerless".

The Australian man who commits terrible acts against more powerless members of society has a stereotype of the 'anti-hero' in Australian drama films. Often this character is thoroughly demonised until they are incredibly un-lovable in these films, and the audience has no trouble at all in feeling a vicious sense of satisfaction at their eventual demise. Ray embodies a lot of the characteristics of the anti-hero, as seen in the character of Brett Sprague in *The Boys* (1998), Hando in *Romper Stomper* (1992), and Richo in *Black Rock* (1996). He is surly and violent, and exudes the feel of an arsehole. He is typically downtrodden and suspects that everyone believes the worst of him, which they generally do. However, in *Watermarked*, I wanted the audience to specifically identify that Ray's 'anti-hero' arsehole persona comes directly from his

lack of power. He is, after all, the victim of his father's repeated attacks of psychological and sexual abuse.

Because of his father's suicide, Ray has grown up with the twisted ideal that death is the only way out if things get too bad, thus he states calmly at the beginning of the film, "every place I stay at, I put something somewhere, and so I can leave if I need to. This time I'm going to put something down by the river, something just for me because sometimes I don't understand what I'm doing 'til it's too late." That death is the ultimate gaining of self power through self destruction in Ray's eyes (a nihilistic choice) which should inspire pity in the audience, rather than a vicious sense of satisfaction.

### **The stress of the male breadwinner**

Traditional patriarchal ideals of family roles continue to prevail. Chambers (2003, p. 12) points out, "the traditional notions of the nuclear family based upon heterosexual marriage remain the dominant discourse of the family currently circulating in the Australian cultural context". Wallis, (1994) adds:

The attitudes associated with patriarchy... [are] enforced by role bound obligations. The traditional family stereotype is headed by the *strong*, benevolent father and provider who is responsible for the material welfare of his family. (p. 4)

I wanted to show in *Watermarked* that the flipside of the dominant male husband/father figure is the impossibility of living up to the rigid expectations of the role. Patience (cited in Reddin & Sonn, 2003) described Australia's 'hard culture', suggesting that it "has encouraged homophobia, rigidity, gender ambiguity, and the underestimated difficulties associated with being male." Hearn (1999) believes there is an 'urgent need for men to reconcile their ideas about working and family life'. He

states, “it means men adjusting socially and psychologically to not necessarily being the ‘breadwinner’.”

Ray faces an all too familiar situation for the man who believes he must be the ‘breadwinner’. He is unable to find work, as he has no skills and an undesirable personality. He states, “I didn’t think it would be hard working in loser town, but obviously even losers won’t take arseholes.” The fact that he is socially failing in his perceived responsibilities towards his wife, even at times having to take money from her, makes his power in the relationship structure even more tenuous, and thus threatens his very masculinity. It is tragically ironic, that on the very day he finally finds work, he also finds out, or believes he does, that Carol is having an affair.

### **Keeping family secrets**

The Western Australian Family and Domestic Violence student information kit points out: “powerful myths in our society hide the true nature of family and domestic violence. These are reinforced by common sayings such as “a man’s home is his castle” (also quoted in the film *The Castle...*) and “[they] must have done to something to deserve it. These myths imply that what goes on in the home is a private matter” (2006, p.6). This shows a dangerous amount of tacit consent in society towards abuse in the family; and also means that the abuser can acknowledge the same myths and even excuse themselves.

It is telling that Ray, when, even though he has just murdered his wife, he still excuses himself by stating, “she was fucking another man.” Obviously in his mind Carol did something to deserve her violent death. In fact, Ray never found

out whether Carol was sleeping with Tim - the suspicion was reason enough. The fact that Ray can even justify killing his wife makes him indicative of the guiltless abuser; it is never their fault; the victim always does something to force the episode of violence.

### **The silent woman**

Australia is perceived by O'Neill (1994, p.126) as 'having a culture that has a very high toleration of violence'. This, and the traditional patriarchal family model, have had dire effects on women and children suffering abuse. Kelly and Radford state, "a central theme...is that as women we tend, and indeed are systematically encouraged, to minimize the violence we experience from men" (1996, p. 19). Wallis (1995) states that women are traditionally expected to, "[satisfy] the emotional needs of her husband and children while providing the logistic support at home to keep her husband functioning" (p. 4). Such stereotypes place the woman in an impossibly hard situation. She cannot talk of the violence she receives, as she will be 'encouraged' to stay silent so she can maintain the figure in the household that supports her man, who may well be the figure of abuse.

Carol embodies the stereotype of the silent woman. She finds out through blackmailing by the 'satanic larrikin' Tim, that her husband has a nasty vindictive violent streak as shown by his tracking down of Tim (after a playful heckling) and beating him severely. Tim blackmails Carol through the knowledge that she is without support in her surroundings. *Watermarked* implies that he forces her into clandestine meetings with him, threatening her with the fact that he will press charges against Ray for the beating. Carol has no avenue to turn to except her husband and he is, of course, the object of the blackmail. We see Carol utterly trapped. She is

suffering physical and psychological abuse at both the hands of Ray and Tim, and social constraints make her believe that silence is infinitely preferable. Had she spoken out against Tim at least it is probable that she would not have been killed in a fit of jealousy.

### **The powerless child**

Mark Brennan argues that in society childhood has become a place of limited power and over-riding helplessness. Brennan (1999) states, “children must be subordinated and stripped of their agency so as to ensure that custodial power and the right to subjugate lies solely with the adult population” (p.19). This would appear to be similar in the family setting where Briggs (1995) believes “children remain the unheard and unseen victims” (p. 2). Child Ray is the personification of powerlessness. I specifically wanted to show this in the flashback scene in which he appears. His body language suggests complete submission. He tries to hide his face as much as possible and resides on a lower plateau than Jerry, who looms over him with casually spread legs, and unconsciously threatens him with his tool of abuse, his groin area, which Child Ray has come to connect with complete humiliation and indescribable pain. He jumps up at Jerry’s call, more like a slave than a child.

The stereotypes above are so prevalent in society as to be perceived as the norm. As patriarchy is still considered the norm; and a bit of power on the man’s part seems entirely natural. Perhaps he needs that power to govern his wife and kids and put them in their place. But going down this traditional line of reasoning, does it then become entirely natural to beat those that you have control over to keep your own power? In any situation it is clear that, “domestic violence is an issue for the whole

community to address. It is a violation of human rights, not a private matter” (W.A. Domestic violence student information kit, 2006). And what better way to push this issue into the open than through the medium of film?

## **Representation and Repression of Domestic Abuse in Australian film**

I was unable to find a direct example of a 1970's film dealing with domestic abuse. McFarlane and Mayer state that the 1970's were more concerned with projecting "The more palatable national myths of mateship" (1992, p.182) or making period dramas, rather than focusing on the relatively new social awareness of domestic abuse. Although my analysis of Australian film history begins from 1970, my first film example was made in 1984. As I watched many, and any, Australian film that even slightly depicted domestic abuse, two distinct points stood out. The first was the endings of these films. In general, they end on a note of hope. There is the promise that things will get better now that the characters have weathered the emotional and physical storm. The second was the general lack of graphic and hard-hitting violence in scenes portraying domestic abuse.

### **The lack of nihilist endings and the continuance of the established order**

For the purposes of analysing and putting Australian film into a social context, I have taken semiotician Roland Barthes' chapter on "Operation Margarine", and applied it to Australian society and the films made within it. Barthes believed that society was operating on a kind of brainwashing technique that combined elements of 'dirty truth', that were only shown so as to make the eventual persuasion more effective.

He stated:

To instil in the established order the complacent portrayal of its drawbacks has nowadays become a paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting it. Here is the pattern of this new style demonstration: take the established value which you want to restore and develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices it produces... then at the last moment save it in spite of itself, or rather by the heavy curs of its blemishes (1972, p.41).

Barthes goes on to provide examples of 'established orders' in which this exaltation is

taking place, e.g. the army, the church, but I will consider the Australian patriarchal family power structure as my established social order, and the 'new-style demonstration' as the films chosen for my analysis. There is a clear similarity between the latter and the structure of my films. They may throughout thoroughly demonise the patriarchal structure of the family, showing how it can damage the individual family members. However, at the conclusion of the film, hope springs eternal and the 'established order' is saved and it is inferred that the notion of traditional family life is still worth all the grief that it 'naturally' incurs.

*Bad Boy Bubby*, (1994) a film about the horrors of a highly sexually and psychologically abusive childhood, is one of the most controversial films ever to come out of Australia. Director, Rolf de Heer (2001) states that, "perhaps the single most important thing we can do is to love our children without abuse. The film became, for me, a plea for childhood" (p.58). But de Heer finishes the film with a scene of seeming domestic radiance. Bubby, a man who hadn't even seen the light of day until his thirties, has managed to put his horrific childhood behind him and have children of his own; with whom he capers in the backyard with casual and loving abandon. This positive ending (although slightly ironic) enables society to give a sigh of relief, knowing that although they have just been subjected to highly confronting scenes of abuse, traditional family life remains dominant, winning through in the end. As Barthes cynically states, "what does it matter, after all, if Order is a little brutal or a little blind, when it allows us to live cheaply? Here we are, in our turn, rid of a prejudice which cost us dearly, too dearly, which cost us too much in scruples, in revolt, in fights, and in solitude" (1972. p.42).



*Swimming Upstream* (2002) has none of the confronting punch of *Bad Boy Bobby*, though it had the elements to be provocative in its own way. The story of a swimming champion who had to overcome the emotional and systematic denigration in his home life, does grip the viewer, right until the ending. One can even identify the exact place in which the story could have finished to make it subversive of the 'established order'. When Tony asks his father if there is anything he can do for him and his father callously replies, "No..." the audience could have been left with a feeling of hopelessness. Instead, there is a sequence of still images of the family members cataloguing the fairly fulfilling lives they have gone on to lead, even managing families of their own. Even the parents have come to reconciliation, and "remained friends until their deaths" (*Swimming Upstream*, 2002). This ending, though perhaps satisfying for audience members, renders the rest of the film as impotent, and *Swimming Upstream* feels like a flailing biographical film in which domestic abuse was simply added for spice.

Gillian Armstrong's *High Tide* (1987) goes out with the tide, never 'breaking a wave' - the narrative of mother/daughter reconciliation gives covert and sensitive signals that hint towards a history of abuse but are never realised explicitly. Specifically, the main character, Lilli, is assaulted but acts as though nothing has happened. This, and her lack of 'motherly' values, that is, her ability to care and nurture her daughter, hint towards a dark childhood. The film is very important, given the fact that it falls into the tiny bracket of Australian films that catalogue domestic abuse which are directed by women. Its original VHS cover (1987) states, "the term 'women's film' may have fallen into disrepute among feminist film critics, but *High Tide* especially given the predominance of women both in front of and behind the

camera – is an example of feminist film-making at its best.” However, the ending again lets the film down. Up to this point the film has been subversive, matriarchally dominant and presents a non-traditional family structure that contains no first generation parent figures. The end shot of the mother and daughter holding hands jars with a terrible clamour. It is not only clichéd; it glorifies the family. Had *High Tide* ended with no reconciliation, this film would have been truly subversive of the ‘established order’.

My earliest film example is the small low budget feature, *Fran* (1984). Strangely enough, it is also the only film I have seen that does present an ending of hopelessness, as the family portrayed remains in a downward spiral. The last shot symbolises the utter despair of the situation. Lisa, Fran’s oldest daughter stares sadly at herself in the mirror, unconsciously echoing her mother’s signature pose throughout the film. The choice of end shot reflects the film’s premise because although Lisa might be adjusted now; the future of living in foster homes, plus the sexual abuse which she has already faced, has set her up to follow in her mother’s footsteps, continuing the pattern of generational abuse to which the film suggests there is no end. The bravery of this film is paramount, and although its low production values make for un-inspirational stylistic values, it makes up for this with the singularity of its subversion.

### **The ending of *Watermarked***

My ending, in order to subvert the ‘established order’, was always going to be fairly tragically nihilistic. I had originally intended a far softer ending than what eventuated. But I decided that if I wanted to really subvert the ‘established order’, I should specifically represent the sodomy of Ray that I had been hinting at for the entire film.

After all, Ray believes his worth culminates in his being “just an asshole for his dad - an asshole on legs.” The final shot of the film shows Ray on his side twitching and crying from the drugs invading his body. However, in a darker sense it also looks as though he was simulating being sodomised from Jerry. In his mind, the pain of the drugs, becomes the pain felt at the hands of his father when he was a child. Even in his final moments, Ray is haunted by his past. This ending will not allow the audience to comfort themselves with the advantages of the family. They should leave the film feeling upset about the situation that has forced a man to take his wife’s life and then his own. Thus the ‘established order’ is not re-affirmed, but challenged. I am not expecting the audience to immediately start thinking about the Australian family structure, but if there is a sense of disquiet, disorientation or disgust as the audience finishes watching the film, this should cause at the very least some social reflection on the issue of domestic abuse.

### **The lack and sanitization of graphic violence in portrayals of domestic abuse**

Graphic violence in film, whilst it can be entirely gratuitous and unnecessary is, I believe, lacking in films that tackle domestic abuse. It is the unfortunate symptom of a very unpleasant problem and the problem cannot be fully exposed without seeing every aspect of it. As a comparison, anti-war films need to show violence as the symptom of war, and its negative effects. It is pretty clear that every film about domestic abuse will be ‘anti’, so the violence becomes no less important in its necessity on the screen.

*Australian Rules* (2002); a film which examines racism, abuse and despair in a subjugated small town is a perfect example of a film cut off at the legs by

consumer over-expectation. It is also a perfect example of an Australian film playing it 'safe' and not fully exposing the level of physical, emotional and sexual violence in the family home, in particular, the violence between the wife and husband. Collins and Davis (2004) expostulate on this lack.

The most disturbing and unresolved space in the film... is in Gary's family home. The off-limit space in the home is the parental bedroom where something violent and ugly is going on between the parents; the muffled sound of sexual and emotional violence (p.46).

To fully reconcile this 'off-limits space', director, Paul Goldman needed to go into the bedroom, and show what needed to be shown.

The climatic scene between Gary and his father is also handled carefully. The action taking place of Gary being punched down the stairs, could have been powerful.

However, the camera position and choice of shots in this scene takes away from its effectiveness. For example, as Gary falls down the stairs, the shot is an overhead long shot which distances us automatically, because of the space between us and the character, plus the fact we can't see his face. The next cut is to a shot of Gary curled in a ball. Again we can't see his face; we know he is in pain but we don't get to witness the anguish on his features. The shot choices are not only distancing, but they feel tentative, almost as though Goldman is turning his head away from the action, which works against the rest of the film, which tries to be confronting. Reviewer, Megan Spencer (2002) stated, "[it] relegates it to ordinary, and given *Australian Rules*' dramatic potential, and the themes in which it deals, perhaps it is a film that is more ordinary than it has a right to be."

*The Boys* (1998) is a bleak, realistic look at out-of-control suburban upbringings, and the horrific social consequences it produces, such as torture, domestic abuse and murder. *The Boys* could have been gripping in its intensity. However, it withdraws

from scenes of violence. For instance, the scene of sexual abuse between Michelle and Brett cuts away with a question remaining in the air. As Brett's mother asks, "what did you do to her?" so does the audience wonder; how far did Brett go? Similarly, director Rowan Woods never shows the murder the three men committed. The question arises, why does Woods make a film that is so in-depth and brutally realistic of every other facet of these boys' lives, and then pull back from showing the violence that the film seems to naturally recommend itself to? Reviewers Zubic and Phillips (1998) state, "the inevitable result is an insubstantial work with few, if any, intellectual or emotional demands. At best, no one is changed by the experience. At worst, the dominant and generally retrogressionist conceptions can be reinforced."

#### **Filming graphic violence in *Watermarked*: the bashing in the kitchen**

I incorporated three scenes in which violence is a major factor. The last and most important is the climactic moment of the film in which Ray bashes Carol into unconsciousness. It had to be entirely believable and graphic without being gratuitous. I specifically decided that I would use shots that showed the despair and blood on Carol's face, and the rage of Ray. Thus I got close to the action, using overhead close-up shots of Carol and point-of-view shots of Ray from Carol's perspective, never allowing the audience to feel distanced from the violence on screen. Planning was paramount in both the lead up and execution of the scene – in particular, getting the actors in the right mind space. Ray needed to be overwhelming in his aggression so we could feel his rage and be genuinely afraid for Carol's safety. Nick (Ray) likes to employ a method-acting approach and needed time to build himself up. Once he had harnessed his emotions I had to explain his character's initiative, which, as would be expected, was difficult as his focus was internalised. I

decided to film the scene in a build-up approach by starting small and less intensively and working the actors up to full outrage and terror. This gave them time to come to terms with their own emotions over the feelings that the positioning (e.g. Carol lies in a position of iconic sexual submission whilst Ray grips her neck) and the fairly violent action taking place creates.

What I didn't take into account was my personal reaction to viewing a scene of violence that I was in effect, making happen. Thus I had to come to terms with my own squeamishness and separate reality from representation. I was having an instinctive personal reaction to the loss of power by the woman in the shot, and the degree of betrayal that was felt as the two characters, who up to this moment had an onscreen loving relationship with each other, destroyed each other, physically and symbolically. I had to become estranged from my personal feelings and view the scene with a dispassionate eye. Barthes says the same for himself, the mythologist: "when a myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the mythologist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth" (1972, p. 157). What was clear after filming the scene of graphic violence is the deeply instinctive reaction to turn away from the problem of domestic abuse, as it bites deeply at our individual marrow and forces us to look at something that even if not experienced firsthand, is deeply disturbing.

## The Stylistic nature of *Watermarked*

A central feature of *Watermarked* is the use of water as a motif. As seen in the final shot of the film, the symbolic watermark left on the bank of the river by the 'storm of Ray's ire' is his dead wife, and the mess of bottles that he has overdosed from. Water signals moments of insight for the characters, as the intrinsic nature of water is to present a reflection, in its simplest sense, holding up a mirror to the character's face, and through their face, their inner intent. However, there is a second symbolic element to the reflection shots. They offer a deeper duality of reflection in which the character find out 'truths' about themselves. For instance, Ray looks into the outside trough and it is at this moment that he realises that the violence in him has taken control and from this point onward he is in danger of reverting to physical blows to keep control and power. At a later point, Carol looks down into the water and has an inexplicable coughing fit. She has however, just seen her own death, by being strangled at the hands of Ray, although this is never shown specifically in the film. Even if the audience never realises why she is coughing, her sense of extreme agitation, as well as the extreme likeness to the other shot involving Ray, should link the edge of violence that the couple excruciatingly hover on.

Stylistically, the approach to this film was to create something that looked haunting, remote and conveyed an extreme sense of isolation. With the theme of isolation, lending itself to a rural setting, we decided to enhance and stretch *Watermarked's* possibilities into the feel of a Western, particularly in the use of stereotypical Western genre shots. For instance, in the scene of climactic confrontation and eventual bashing of Carol by Ray; the choice of the main character waiting with a bottle of whisky inside the open doorway staring into the harsh wide landscape harks back to the

'open doorway shot' in such classic Westerns as Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1967) and *Once upon a time in the west* (1968). Ray, like Eastwood's 'Blondie' in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, sits with brooding sullenness inside the open door waiting to dispense violent retribution.

The fact that the main character is able to see their victims through the open door is a unique quality of Westerns and movies placed in an isolated setting. It effectively in one shot conveys the space occupied and controlled by the human (the inside of the house) and the vast 'wild' landscape waiting eerily right outside the door. This imagery reflects the strong theme of the Western perceived by Bordwell and Thompson as the "conflict between civilised order and the lawless frontier" (2004, p.118). This theme, embodied by Western films, is also prevalent in *Watermarked*. The narrative shapes the human being (shown by Ray) as being isolated in the landscape, losing his fight to retain civilised order, ('normal' standards of society) and reverting back to a socially lawless way of life; which enables him to commit the terrible bashing and eventual killing of his cherished wife.

Australian films have their own take on the cinematic style of the Western, e.g. *Backroads* (1977), *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986) and *The Tracker* (2002), but the film that was particularly inspiring stylistically is *The Proposition* (2005). *The Proposition* conveys a whole new feeling of the Australian outback, taking in its mysticism and depth in the form of beautiful panoramic shots and extreme long shots. For instance, the iconic shot of the film in which Charlie Burns stands on the cliff looking out over the panorama gives an extreme sense of perspective of just how small the human is in the landscape, and how large the Australian rural setting really is. For this reason, I have included various extreme long shots which show the desolate scenery around



Ray and Carol's house. It then becomes highly probable that a husband could bash his wife and murder her and then take her to the river and suicide, without ever coming across another person.

A mid-range colour palette is suited to the Australian outback with its reds, yellows and mid olive greens. We start the film with yellow hues that include pink and rose which symbolise the beauty and naivety of the situation. These pinks become muted as yellow takes over the palette throughout the film. Bellantoni considers the yellow spectrum as the "contrary colour": 'it has traditionally been the colour associated with happiness, however, it has been found that yellow creates anxiety and makes you more stressed out' (2005, p.41). Using the yellow spectrum in this way in *Watermarked* should give the audience a feeling of disquiet, even in the scenes in which the characters are operating towards each other normally. In the scenes of violence, the yellow 'anxiety' tinge will add to the 'squirm factor' already introduced. We are aiming, after grading, to have *Watermarked* feel as grainy as possible, as close to film stock without being film stock. We have incorporated some super8 footage filmed on Kodacrome stock which has a delightful 'aged' look to it which also helps with the flashback sequence being portrayed. The graininess adds to the general dirty-ness of the location and the harsh look of the characters, which all conjoin to present a gritty sense of pungent, low end realism. The texture is also a minimal homage to such films as *Bad Boy Bubby* which exudes a sense of ugliness in its dirty, black art direction.

For a short film *Watermarked* is lengthy, being 17 minutes long. However, the time is necessary to construct the feel of the film. As the film is character driven, I felt it was equally important to include various cutaway shots that explain the story symbolically

without the use of dialogue. For example, the purple crystal in the car symbolises naiveté. In the opening car scene it dangles with merry abandon, and by its very nature of annoying, plastic 'girly' kitsch-ness, it is clear that it has been put up in Ray's car by Carol. However, in a later scene, a hand pulls the crystal away. The hand is Ray's and signifies the end of naiveté, the end of trust between the two, and in the next scene Ray confronts Carol and violently bashes her. We had a fairly defined shot structure for most scenes (unless they were conjoined to a set of scenes that made up a whole scenario.) This structure was intended to give the audience clues as to when control was lost and passion rose. We began with a deliberate dolly shot that encompassed each setup and the character positioning in the shot. Then we used still tripod shots for character interaction. However, when violence rose, the camera was taken off the tripod and became handheld. The movement within the frame suggested agitation. The feel of each scene, the gradual build up of tension, established throughout the film gives a movement from scene to scene which is very much like that of the swell and recede of water against a bank, tying in with the overall water theme.

## Conclusion

With sensitive subject matter, problems arise within the acting and audience spectrum. With custodial power and subjugation, comes the protection of the weak, meaning that children are closeted. In this experience as well as past filming experience, I have found that child actors are closeted like royalty by their parents. Obviously with *Watermarked* I took this into account as I was scripting and purposefully didn't write in any scenes, which might be 'harmful' for a child to portray. However, even so, finding a child actor was incredibly difficult. Parents read the script and refused outright because of its content. They didn't even want their child involved with this sort of project. It was as though there was a taint in the air surrounding it.

However, my most difficult hurdle has been that of people's expectation. When they hear that I am making a film about domestic abuse and I am putting in graphic violence and a tragic nihilistic ending, the knee-jerk response has been that I have no right to make something like that if I have not actually experienced it firsthand, that graphic violence is not necessary on screen and that I am going to glorify death and exploit the nature of domestic abuse. When I first encountered these reactions, from complete strangers no less, it was upsetting because I was having a value judgement made of my character because of my choice of subject matter and modes of expression. However, I soon realised that this response was the very response that I was seeking to work against. It was in general, a 'fear and protection response' from the person and if I wanted to make people look at something that they were trying to turn away from, this was what I had to expect. The first point was the hardest hurdle for me to overcome because it was something that I also asked myself. What right did

I have to make something about a situation that I had not personally been involved in? But then I realised that knowing and caring about people who had been abused (particularly women) and to do nothing about it because of social convention and fear of censure was no excuse for avoiding this subject matter. Furthermore, being part of our current Australian patriarchal society, a damaging power system, is personal responsibility enough to promote and try and generate audience response to domestic abuse.

At a screening of the preliminary cut to my peers I received feedback in the form of a questionnaire and a discussion after the film. The first question I was asked during the discussion was whether I had personal experience of domestic abuse in my own family background. I expected this question and the fact that it was asked first, made me realise that the audience were following on a similar path to my own when I questioned my authority on this subject. I sensed that people really wanted to be sure that I came to this project with a sense of respect and knowledge. In response to the questionnaire I received generally positive, but very mixed feedback.

1. What reaction did you have towards the violence in the film?

The place of the violence in the film had mixed reactions. However, all agreed that it was disturbing, “nauseating” and “cringe-worthy”. One particular audience member drew a diagram of the way that the violence made him shrink back in his seat. Some members believed that implied violence would have been better, but in general audience members believed that the violence was “justified”.

## 2. What was your response to the ending of the film?

The ending was received far more favourably than I would have expected. Most members felt that it was “appropriate for the character who perceives his problems”, but were saddened by the fact that it had to finish with such nihilism. Some wanted more ambiguity- they didn’t want to be given the meaning with such clarity, but it was the general consensus that the ending fitted the nature of the film.

I was extremely pleased as to the depth that people wanted to consider the ideology behind the making of the film. My intention for audience participation seemed to be realised as people reacted strongly to the themes of *Watermarked*. The audience screening heightened my awareness of the sensitivity of domestic abuse. People react strongly and instantaneously to graphic and tragic representation of domestic abuse, and won't tolerate anything that could be considered exploitative. However, thankfully, in general the response indicated that the audience didn't believe I employed exploitative measures, despite the graphic portrayal and tragedy *Watermarked* evokes.

*Watermarked*, being an unfunded, unpublicized short film, could never seek to have the same kind of widespread impact that a feature length, funded mainstream film could receive. However, by its grassroots nature and content, it is my hope that it shows what could be if the Australian censorship and funding boards gave a little leeway and let Australian directors make what was in their hearts instead of in their pockets. There are so many issues left unfiled because there has been a dictatorial, social, international and financial choice made that Australian society should not see them. Domestic abuse is one of these.

It is enough for anyone; male, female, adult or child, who has felt some form of powerlessness at the hands of another to feel compassion towards sufferers of domestic abuse. I believe that *Watermarked* inspires this compassion for the sorry state of the doomed husband and wife, and through these stirrings of pity and compassion, an awareness of the problem. I would like wider audiences to counter the easy relaxation that the spoon-fed nature of the established order provides; and question the patriarchal ideal of the traditional family structure that society still represents as the natural and best alternative. It is a difficult thing to overcome personal feelings of revulsion at exposing the damaging and depressing aspects of such a sensitive subject as domestic abuse. But the sooner the slimy stone is flipped over and the slugs wriggle out, the sooner the problem can be correctly identified by *all* of society as one that needs our attention.

## References

- ABC News online. (2005). *'Mysterious Skin' R rating to be reviewed*. Retrieved November 3, 2006, from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200507/s1419618.htm>
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Norwich: Granada Publishing Ltd.
- Brennan, M. (1999). *Child abuse: Creating the public in the public service advertisement*. Honours dissertation, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.
- Briggs, F. (1995). *From victim to offender: How child sexual abuse victims become offenders*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. (2004). *Film Art: An introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Chambers, Z. (2003). *A study of the representation of marriage and the family in the film Muriel's Wedding*. Masters dissertation, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.
- Collins, F. & Davis, T. (2004). *Australian cinema after Mabo*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Department for Community Development. (2006). *The Western Australian family and domestic violence student information kit*. Perth: Family and Domestic violence planning unit.
- Hearn, J. (1999). *A crisis in masculinity or new agendas for men?* Retrieved November 3, 2006, from [http://www.europofem.org/02.info/22contri/2.04.en/2en.masc/01en\\_mas.htm](http://www.europofem.org/02.info/22contri/2.04.en/2en.masc/01en_mas.htm)
- Helfer, R. E. & Kempe, C. H. (1974). *The battered child*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hester, M., Kelly, L. & Radford, J. (eds.) (1996). *Women, violence and male power: Feminist activism, research, and practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- High Tide*. [VHS Cover]. (1987). Melbourne: Hemdale Releasing corporation & Tri Star Pictures.
- Malone, P. (2001). *Myth & Meaning: Australian film directors in their own words*. Sydney: Currency Press.
- McFarlane, B. & Mayer, G. (1992). *New Australian cinema: Sources and parallels in American and British film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- O'Neill, M. J. (1994). Dangerous families. In Briggs, F. *Children and families: Australian perspective* 1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 126-141. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

O'Regan, T. & Venkatasawmy, R. (1999). A tale of two cities: Dark city and babe: Pig in the city. In Verhoeven, D. (ed.) *Twin peeks: Australian and New Zealand feature films* 1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp.187-204..St Kilda: Australian Catalogue Company Ltd.

Phillips, R. & Zubic, M. (1998). *Two Australian films*. Retrieved November 3, 2006, from <http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/jun1998/film-j06.shtml>

Reddin, J. & Sonn, C. (2003). *Masculinity, social support, and sense of community: the men's group experience in Western Australia*. Retrieved November 3, 2006, from <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&se=gglsc&d=5001918300&er=deny>

Senses of cinema. (2006). *Censorship forum at the Sydney film festival*. Retrieved May 18, 2006, from [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/03/27/censorship\\_forum.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/03/27/censorship_forum.html)

Spencer, M. (2002). *Australian Rules*. Retrieved November 3, 2006, from <http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/review/film/s666220.htm>

Wallis, K. (1995). Perspectives on child molesters. In Briggs, F. *From victim to offender: How child sexual abuse victims become offenders*. 1st ed., pp. 4-11. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.



## Filmography

- Araki, G. (Dir.) *Mysterious Skin*. [film] (2004). Los Angeles: Antidote Films, Desperate Pictures, Fortissimo Films
- Armstrong, G. (Dir.). *High Tide*. [film] (1987). Melbourne: Hemdale Releasing corporation & Tri Star Pictures.
- Beresford, B. (Dir.). *The Fringe Dwellers*. (1986). Sydney: Fringe Dwellers Productions.
- Clark, L. (Dir.). *Ken Park*. [film] (2002). California: Busy Bee Productions, Cinea, Marathon International, Lou Yi Inc., The Kasander Film Company.
- De Heer, R. (Dir.). *Bad Boy Bubby*. [film] (1994). Sydney: Bubby Fandago SLR.
- De Heer, R. (Dir.). *The Tracker*. [film] (2002). Sydney: Vertigo Productions Pty Ltd.
- Goldman, P. (Dir.). *Australian Rules* [film] (2002). Adelaide: Adelaide Festival of Arts, Australian Film Finance Corporation, SBS independent, Showtime Australia.
- Hambly, G. (Dir.). *Fran*. [film] (1984). Perth: A Barron Films Production.
- Hillcoat, J. (Dir.) *The Proposition*. [film] (2005). Sydney: First Look Pictures.
- Hogan, P. J. (Dir.). *Muriel's Wedding*. [film] (1994). Melbourne: House & Moorhouse Films, Film Victoria, Peter Szabo and Associates.
- Leone, S. (Dir.). *Once upon a time in the West*. [film] (1968) Italy: Paramount Pictures, Rafran Cinematographica, San Marco Production.
- Leone, S. (Dir.). *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. [film] (1967) Italy: Paramount Pictures, Rafran Cinematographica, San Marco Production
- Mulcahy, R. (Dir.). *Swimming Upstream* [film] (2002). Sydney: Crusader Entertainment LLC.
- Noyce, P. (Dir.). *Backroads*. [film] (1977). Sydney: Scala Productions.
- Sitch, R. (Dir.). *The Castle*. [film] (1997). Sydney: Working Dog.
- Vidler, S. (Dir.). *Blackrock*. [film] (1996). Sydney: Palm Beach Pictures.
- Woods, R. (Dir.). *The Boys*. [film] (1998). Sydney: Arenafilm.
- Wright, G. (Dir.). *Romper Stomper*. [film] (1992). Sydney: Seon Films.

**Appendix: The Script - *Watermarked***

**Watermarked.**

2006 ©

Erin Nichols



## Synopsis:

Ray and Carol arrive in the town of Watermark; Ray drifting in a seemingly endless procession through one backwater town after another, Carol hanging on like a limpet to the man she left 'the good life' for. But Ray can't shake his miserable 'arsehole' persona. From birth his dad held him up and said that he looked like a 'real little asshole'. And who is he to argue with his father? But it is alright, he hides a present at every town he visits, an 'outer' - so to speak. The only problem is Carol... Carol, truly the only love of Ray's life is his catalyst, but she doesn't know it.

She soon will...

FLASHBACK:

1. EXT:                                    ON THE RIVER:                                    LATE AFTERNOON:

The tip of a canoe nudges its way sedately down a calm river.

The point of view is from the person sitting in the front and doesn't change.

This person is CHILD RAY.

CHILD RAY giggles suddenly.

JERRY laughs after a minute.

JERRY (V.O.)  
You sound like a little girl son.  
You sure you're not little  
Raylene Rickets instead?

CHILD RAY giggles even more.

CHILD RAY (V.O.)  
Da-ad!

JERRY (V.O.)  
Come on, paddle hard son, we've  
lost the others.

There is the sound of messy splashing as CHILD RAY attempts his earnest paddling.

He makes small sounds of effort, whilst JERRY starts emitting grunts with each stroke of the paddle.

END FLASHBACK:

2. INT:                                    CAR:                                    LATE AFTERNOON:

A purple hanging crystal sways to the rhythm of a bouncy car.

Below the hanging crystal, CAROL, with her face turned towards the driver, sleeps with a contented expression.

RAY looks over at CAROL with a stern face, stares at her for a lengthy period, then sighs and looks back towards the road.

CAROL turns in her sleep to face the window. Her eyes slowly open to a panorama of images.

A desecrated sign.

A freshly killed animal.

Houses in various states of disrepair.

Wide open paddocks.

A sign proclaiming - WATERMARK.

CAROL turns and faces RAY.

CAROL

We're here...

RAY turns and smiles at her.

3. INT: HOUSE - KITCHEN: NIGHT:

CAROL runs through the door.

RAY follows carrying all the bags.

CAROL stops in the middle of the room. She turns to RAY and grabs him round the waist.

RAY gives her a kiss and strokes her ponytail.

CAROL

Who did you say used to live here?

RAY

Oh, my uncle.

CAROL

Pretty great uncle, just to give it to you.

RAY

Yeah he was. He didn't want hardly anything for it.

CAROL

You're lucky! Free house and a beautiful wife to go in it!

RAY

And so modest too! But you're right.

CAROL

Mmm, I am aren't I!!

She giggles and RAY drops the bags and lunges at her.

4. INT: OUT LAUNDRY ROOM: MORNING:

RAY is washing his hands in an outside trough.

Sunlight filters into the water, giving the trough an added depth and beauty.

RAY puts his hands on the edge of the trough, and stares at his reflection with a growing expression of horror. He sighs shakily and runs his hands through his hair.

5. EXT: BACKYARD/PADDOCK: MORNING:

RAY walks out of the shed and down into the paddock. He carries a plastic bag as he walks into the distance.

RAY (V.O.)

Every place I stay at, I put something somewhere, so I can leave if I need to. This time I'm gonna' put something down at the river. Something just for me because sometimes I don't understand what I'm doing 'til it's too late. We men are like that. It's our family curse. I'm an asshole, been told that since the day I was born, apparently dad held me up and said -he looks like a real little asshole, Anyway, I know it, my parents both knew it. The only one that doesn't know is Caro. And so I stole her from her nice home and took her to Watermark. It's a real hole -perfect for me... Not so good for her...

6. EXT: DUSTY STREET: MIDDAY:

CAROL and RAY are walking down a dusty road.

A work Ute comes zooming down the road behind them.

TIM leans out of the window.

The Ute slows down to a crawl.

RAY looks at him suspiciously.

CAROL looks away, pretending he's not there and grabs RAY'S hand.

TIM

Hey, you comin' into town? Do  
youse need a lift?

CAROL replies without looking over.

CAROL

No thanks.

TIM

Hey come on, you're too good  
for that asshole. Get in.

Ray suddenly turns and begins to stride over to the Ute.

RAY

Get the fuck away before I  
smash your face in!!

TIM waits till RAY is almost at the door then speeds  
away.

RAY is left swearing impotently in the middle of the  
road.

CAROL walks over and pulls him to the verge, under the  
shade of a tree.

RAY slumps down at the base of it.

CAROL squats in front of it. She puts her hand on RAY'S  
knee.

CAROL

Ray? He's a dickhead. Don't let  
em' get to you.

RAY (sighing.)

Yeah.

CAROL stands.

CAROL

Well then...

CAROL extends her hand to RAY.

After a long moment, RAY stands up and puts his hand in hers.

They continue walking.

7. INT: KITCHEN: AFTERNOON:

CAROL stands at the pantry putting shopping away.

RAY stomps into the room.

RAY

Hey honey, I'm goin' back into town, forgot to look at the job ads.

CAROL

Ok.

8. EXT: PUB ALLEY: NIGHT:

Ray stands over someone in the shadows.

It is TIM; RAY has pinned him against the wall and is smashing his face in.

RAY (V.O.)

I lied to Caro. I didn't care that this guy was only saying what me and everyone else knew. I only wanted to hear the sweet sound of cracking gristle and feel the blood pouring from his nose. Once you've paid for it, both of you feel better.

RAY lets TIM go and he slides to the ground. His face is a mangled mess.

9. INT: CANOE IN THE RIVER: LATE AFTERNOON:

FLASHBACK:

The canoe continues placidly down the river.

Instead of river ambience, the sound of CHILD RAY crying and JERRY breathing heavily fills the air.



JERRY roars at CHILD RAY.

JERRY (V.O.)  
Tell me! You little shit.

CHILD RAY starts to cry.

JERRY (V.O.)  
Don't cry like that, you little  
girl! Talk, you little bastard!

CHILD RAY (V.O.)  
I took Debbie's necklace!!!

There is the sound of a scuffle and JERRY making laboured  
panting noises.

CHILD RAY whimpers.

JERRY (V.O.)  
Right, it's time to pay for it.

JERRY grunts and CHILD RAY squeals.

FLASHBACK ENDS:

10. INT: BEDROOM: NIGHT:

With a muffled cry, RAY twitches violently and opens his  
eyes.

CAROL rolls over and puts her hand on Ray's face.

11. INT: KITCHEN: MORNING:

CAROL is at the sink doing the dishes.

There is a sudden loud knock at the door.

CAROL jumps violently, then walks over to the door and  
opens it hesitantly. She gasps as she sees TIM standing  
there.

He pulls his cap off and reveals his battered face.

CAROL gasps and tries to slam the door.

Tim stops the door and leers his face into CAROL.

TIM  
Your old man did this...

CAROL puts her hand over her mouth.

TIM walks past her into the house.

12. INT: KITCHEN: LATE AFTERNOON:

RAY shuffles through the door, carrying a folder and wearing a shirt, but no tie. He chucks the folder on the ground, and the papers scatter out.

CAROL is sitting at the table with her hands round a cup of tea. She jumps and looks up as RAY walks in.

RAY flops into a chair.

RAY  
Those bastards, they take one look at me and say - oh, sorry, we filled the position this morning. Thanks for your time. That's the third time this week! I didn't think it'd be hard working in this loser town but obviously even losers won't take arseholes!

CAROL sighs in annoyance.

CAROL  
Do you really think I'd hang around with an arsehole? Give me a little credit!

RAY looks irately at CAROL and stands up.

RAY  
Maybe you just don't know it! Everyone else will tell you what I am.

CAROL walks over to RAY.

CAROL  
Ray I know what you are. I know there's been some problems for you...

CAROL puts a hand on RAY'S shoulder but he slaps it away.

CAROL steps back and looks angry.

CAROL

Okay, now you are being an  
arsehole!

RAY grabs CAROL by her ponytail shakes her head  
violently.

CAROL slaps RAY across the face, startling him so he  
loosens his grip on the ponytail.

CAROL, grabs her hair, wrenches it out off RAY'S hand and  
runs out the front door.

RAY stands, panting for a second, then bolts after her.

FLASHBACK:

13. EXT: ON THE RIVER: LATE AFTERNOON:

The Canoe propels through the water slowly.

Again, river ambience is misplaced for the sound of CAROL  
running and RAY pelting after her.

RAY (Despairingly.) (V.O.)

Caro, please.

The footsteps falter and CAROL begins to cry great  
wracking sobs.

After a moment, RAY also starts to cry softly.

SCENE fades to black:

SOUND Continues:

Suddenly the crying of RAY is interspersed with the  
crying of CHILD RAY.

There is an abrupt set of footsteps. It is JERRY.

JERRY

Don't cry you fuckin' little  
girl!

There is the sound of a slap, followed by a shrill scream  
from CHILD RAY.

END FLASHBACK:

14. INT: KITCHEN: MORNING:

CAROL and RAY are sitting down to breakfast.

RAY takes a huge bite of toast.

RAY

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you,  
this farmer guy came into the  
pub last night. He wants pickers.  
He told me to come out to his  
place today.

CAROL looks up from a book she is reading in surprise.

CAROL

Great! See I knew if you gave it  
a bit of time something would come  
up!

RAY grins and gets up.

RAY

Yeah, I mean it wont pay much, but  
it's better than nothin'.

CAROL

Yeah it is! I'll wait for when you  
get home to see how it goes. Do you  
need money for the car?

RAY

No! I'm not taking your money!

RAY looks through his wallet and frowns.

RAY

Actually, yeah, a twenty would  
be good.

CAROL gives him three five dollar notes and some gold  
coins out of her bag.

RAY gives her a kiss on the cheek and holds her face  
gently for a moment.

CAROL smiles at him.

RAY gets up and walks out the door.

After a short time, CAROL goes over to the phone and dials a number.

CAROL  
Yes. Alright.

She puts the receiver down and walks slowly out of the house.

15. EXT: ORCHARD: MIDDAY:

RAY shakes hands with a rough looking FARMER.

FARMER  
Have you ever done any picking before?

RAY  
No but I'll be here at whatever time you want me to be and I'll work any hours.

FARMER  
All right. I'll give you a try, I mean, you look like a bit of an...

RAY  
An asshole - I know...

FARMER  
Well, you know what you are, And I'm the boss - so we should get along all right...

The FARMER walks away, leaving RAY with a triumphant grin on his face.

16. EXT: RIVERSIDE: LATE AFTERNOON:

CAROL and TIM stand by the river.

CAROL stares out over the river.

After a minute, TIM laughs, patting CAROL on the bottom. She ignores him, so he walks away.

The sound of a Ute starting, revving and driving away briefly disrupts the air, then all is still again.

CAROL sits down and puts her hands over her face. Her shoulders sag. She gets up and kneels over the river. She splashes some water over herself, but leaves her hands over her face. Suddenly she begins to choke and holds her throat in panic. After a moment, she takes her hands away and stares at the river.

17. INT: KITCHEN: NIGHT:

RAY is sitting in a chair, watching the door.

CAROL walks through the door tentatively.

RAY holds a bottle of scotch in his hand and waves it towards her.

RAY

Darlin' I got a job today! And  
I came home to celebrate... and  
you weren't here.

CAROL stops and looks at him in distaste.

CAROL

I'm not going to talk to you  
while you're drunk.

CAROL starts to walk past RAY but he stumbles up and grabs her round the waist. He tries to force the bottle up to her mouth.

RAY

Drink with me.

CAROL

No.

CAROL pushes him away and continues to walk away.

RAY

Where were you?

CAROL keeps walking.

RAY weaves after CAROL and grabs her again. He stumbles and they both fall.

The bottle of scotch falls out of RAY'S slack hand and makes a puddle around CAROL'S head.

RAY licks at the puddle playfully.

CAROL looks at him in disgust.

CAROL  
Get off me Ray.

RAY looks at CAROL, suddenly serious.

RAY  
Aren't I good enough for you  
anymore? That's it isn't it?  
My own wife doesn't want me  
anymore! Fuckin' around with  
someone else aren't you?

CAROL tries to push RAY off, frightened by the look in his eyes.

CAROL  
Let me go...

RAY punches his fist on the ground next to CAROL'S face.

She cries out and starts to struggle violently.

RAY  
Stop it!

He grips CAROL round the neck.

CAROL (Choking)  
Ray! Don't!

RAY begins to slap and punch CAROL in earnest, his face screwing up into a devilish contortion.

18. EXT: BACKYARD/PADDOCK: NIGHT:

RAY sits on a stump, feeling his hands. He has raw skin on the back of one hand where he punched the floor.

RAY (V.O)  
She stopped crying after a  
while... I hit her... hard, I  
shook her like a little rat.  
When she wakes up, she's gonna  
leave me, for sure, for certain.  
I can't stand it. There's nothing  
I can do except sort this out.  
I think I need my present from

the river. I should let her go..  
but I'm not going to. Yep, she's  
mine now.

FLASHBACK:

19. EXT: JERRY'S BACKYARD: AFTERNOON:

JERRY and CHILD RAY sit, JERRY in a chair, CHILD RAY on  
the ground.

JERRY is swilling beer.

CHILD RAY holds another beer in his hand which after a  
moment, JERRY grabs off him.

JERRY  
You're my little barman son! Keep  
the drink comin'!

CHILD RAY leaps up to grab another beer.

JERRY grabs him and pulls him close to him so they are  
face to face.

JERRY  
I don't mean right now! Jesus,  
keep your pants on. When I tell  
you, that's when you'll get it.

END FLASHBACK:

20. INT: BATHROOM: MORNING:

CAROL slowly opens her eyes with a groan. She is lying in  
the bath. She gasps as she sees RAY leaning in the  
doorway. She shrinks down.

RAY (Gently)  
Come on little girl.

CAROL just stares at RAY.

RAY (shouting)  
Get up!

CAROL gets up slowly.

RAY walks over and lifts her out of the bath.

CAROL whimpers fearfully, involuntarily.



RAY croons to her.

RAY  
It's alright, I won't do  
anything like that ever again.

CAROL starts to cry.

CAROL  
Ray? I love you, let me go.

RAY continues walking.

RAY (surprised)  
I love you too.

21. EXT: RIVERSIDE: LATE AFTERNOON:

RAY is curled up in a ball, sobbing like a little child.

CAROL lies next to him, dead.

On his other side, an empty bottle lies next to a mound  
of freshly dug earth.

RAY puts his face into his hands and laughs, twitching a  
little. Suddenly he hears someone say his name. He looks  
up.

JERRY is sitting next to him, looking out over the water.  
His face is grey.

RAY stares at him in astonishment.

JERRY  
Raymond, what have you done?

RAY looks at him strangely

RAY (Confused.)  
I've taken my present.

JERRY shakes his head and looks towards CAROL.

RAY follows his glance and starts to sob.

RAY  
She was fucking another man.  
And she found out about me,

dad. About the family curse - how we're all arseholes. Just an arsehole for their dad. Why would she want an arsehole on legs when she could have a man who was whole? She wouldn't have been mine anymore.

JERRY sighs and looks over the water.

JERRY

It's the way it goes boy. It was bound to happen sooner or later. It's the family curse. You know I had to?

RAY looks at him, he has stopped crying and his face is firm with resolve.

RAY

I want to...

JERRY smiles.

RAY'S face twinges in agony and he starts to spasm and groan. His body jerks up and down; mimicking a sexual act. He looks around wildly and sees that he is alone. His spasms intensify. He cries heartbreakingly.

The river is serene and calm, its waters only broken by ripples made by RAY, but even these recede too, leaving the water smooth and untroubled.

The end.